

Interview with Bryan Palmer, biographer of James P. Cannon, founder of American Trotskyism—Part 1

Fred Mazelis

28 September 2007

This is the first part of a two-part interview conducted by Fred Mazelis of the Socialist Equality Party with Bryan Palmer, the author of James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928, the first volume of a new biography of the pioneer American communist and later the founder and leader of the American Trotskyist movement. His work was reviewed by the World Socialist Web Site on September 18. (See "A fighter for Marxism in America")

Palmer will be speaking about his book and the life of Cannon at 6:30 p.m. on Friday, October 12, at an event in New York City hosted by the Tamiment Library at New York University. The meeting will be held on the 10th floor of Bobst Library, which is located at 70 Washington Square South.

FM: Could you tell our readers how you came to write this book?

BP: I'm an academic, at least in terms of how I make my living. I've always been somewhat outside of the conventional box of university life, however. On one level, which I think is a pretty routine level, I am a bit on the margins because of my subject of interest, which is labor history. More particularly, I became an academic in the 1970s because I thought it afforded me an opportunity to apprentice myself as a Marxist. I became an historian precisely because it allowed me to look at what happened in the past and to learn from that with respect to my interest in the Left and in the prospects for working class revolution. I have always written about labor struggles.

What really puts me outside of most academic convention, however, is that my own background has been one of, not just sympathy with, but commitment to, the Trotskyist movement and its interpretation of history in terms of the revolutionary movement since 1917 and the Russian Revolution. And so, as much as I have been a professor, teaching students labor and social history, I have also felt the need to study the fundamental contributions of Trotskyism to struggles in North America.

I had known about Cannon's presence since I began studying labor history in the 1970s. His writings were familiar to me, as was the fact that he represented a kind of living continuity, a red thread that ran from the World War I period into the 1940s, 50s and 60s. And I wanted to deal with this history. I had wanted to work on it for quite some time, but I knew it was going to be very difficult. In many ways it was a daunting task. I remember getting in my car and setting out to drive to Wisconsin to look at the massive collection of James P. Cannon Papers. Sitting in the Wisconsin State Historical Society, opening file folder after file folder, and later, when I was able to obtain some of these and other records on microfilm, and turning those reels frame by frame—there were days when I wondered if it would ever end. Not only was there a plethora of sources that had to be consulted. There were also minefields of different political perspectives.

The project therefore lay dormant for a while, in part because of the

challenge it raised. But I grew increasingly discontented with the understanding of the Communist Party in the historiography as it had developed up until the early 1990s, and this deepened my conviction that this history had to be tackled.

FM: Could you discuss the different approaches that have been taken to the American Communist Party, and your own conception in this context?

BP: By the 1980s, the historiography had developed into two warring camps, more or less. On the one hand, you had the works of Theodore Draper, in particular. His two volumes, dating from 1957 and 1960—*The Roots of American Communism* and *American Communism and Soviet Russia*—these were in my view incredibly rich in information, but also deformed by Draper's liberal Cold War view that you could sum up the American Communist movement as simply the creature of Moscow and Moscow domination.

The interesting thing about Draper is that he knew a lot about communism. He had an insider's "feel," because he himself had been involved in the movement in the late 1930s, and he clearly knew the terrain in ways that those who had never been involved could not. I was impressed by this feel for the subject, despite Draper's interpretive drift into purely negative assessment. Also, Draper was careful about doing research meticulously. Of course, he made errors, but by and large he did get things right, and he had an amazing commitment to research and even to preserve the record of the communist past. He worked closely with Cannon, and had the greatest respect for him, for his integrity and truthfulness.

Draper made the well-known comment, flowing out of their correspondence over a number of years, as well as meetings that the two regularly had in New York, that Cannon "wanted to remember" precisely because the past lived for Cannon in an ongoing political engagement. If you look at Earl Browder's papers, which are archived at Syracuse University, things appear very differently, at least to me. Browder is not concerned with getting things "right"; in contrast, he always wants to put himself in the right. Browder has this large unpublished manuscript which I was able to read, and it is an amazingly self-serving document. It drips with this capacity to always place Browder at the center of everything, someone who is always doing the best thing. But when you check this memoir against other documents, you find that it is factually incorrect, and it does this over a wide historical period—from the antiwar movement of 1917, the underground movement of American Communism, and all the way up to the period when Browder was a major figure, on his way to becoming the leader of the American Communist Party.

There is no doubt that Browder influenced Draper, for he too was interviewed extensively for Draper's two volumes. But Draper, as I have said, has a lot to tell us. The flaw in his work, and what makes Draper ultimately misleading, is that Stalinism was a particular development in

the Soviet experience that Draper never explains. Unfortunately, Draper just takes for granted a slippery slope reaching from the Russian Revolution of 1917 to the atrocities of Stalinism. This has become something of a conventional wisdom of our time. Without really probing a history of immense difference, Draper saw Lenin as equal to Stalin and equal to Moscow domination. This is a position that I reject.

What followed Draper's work was that of people like Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, who began to pick up his approach, but they have been a rather pale reflection of Draper. This is not to say they have not contributed something to our knowledge of communism. Haynes, in particular, has done wonderful bibliographic compilations, and I can attest to the extent to which he aids scholars of communism, even as he is well aware that they might have very different views than his own. But I think that if you read Klehr and Haynes, from the vantage point of someone sympathetic to the original Bolsheviks in Russia and America, it is apparent that they have no empathy for the revolutionary project of the period, and their scholarship, as a consequence, does not have the depth of Draper's researches, nor does it have Draper's capacity to locate people in the struggles of their time in ways that bring to life what was happening.

In any case, Draper and his followers were one side of the writing on American communism. The other side was taken up by New Left historians whose research and writing postdated the 1960s. This "school" of historiography challenged Draper, but in a way it also suffered from an inability to grapple with Stalinism. If Draper simply ignored Stalinism because it did not seem to matter in ultimate realization of Moscow domination of the American communism movement, the New Left writers whose scholarship started to appear in the 1970s and 1980s also sidestepped Stalinism, but for different reasons. The New Left tended to want to see in American Communism an indigenous radicalism that it could hold up as an alternative to capitalist hegemony. It often reveled in the post-1935 Popular Front period in America. One should remember that, as these historians wrote, the 1960s mobilizations that many of them had participated in had subsided, and they were searching for examples of mass radicalizations in their historical research. They could say, here was a time, the 1930s, when we had a mass movement. They couldn't critique the mass movement, however; only in a sense celebrate it.

So, for Draper American communism was a Moscow caricature, while for the New Left it was an indigenous radicalism we could celebrate. Both of these camps missed the opportunity to interrogate this history in ways that can give us lessons for today. They didn't analyze the history in terms of its strengths and weaknesses, and what we could learn from it. Draper insisted that American communism was made in Russia, and that communism was inevitably a dictatorial foreign import. He could not see that Stalinism was a particular variant of communism being politically defeated within the Soviet Revolution, and the accomplishments of 1917 being overturned as a consequence. The New Left insisted that what American communists did was largely of their own making, and managed to sidestep the extent to which a thoroughly Stalinized Comintern, by 1930, set so much of the stage on which radicalism played out, and did so in politically problematic ways.

I wanted to chart a new interpretive path, through James P. Cannon and his development as a Bolshevik. I thought this could tell us much about what the Communist experience in America was really all about. I wanted to uncover what was truly revolutionary in the origins of American communism, and how that experience was then transformed by Stalinism. Cannon lived this history, he learned from it, and he struggled to translate those lessons to future generations of American revolutionary communists, building a party committed to the realization of workers' emancipation and power.

What was amazing to me was that Cannon had never seriously been written about. He had written about his political times, in books such as

The History of American Trotskyism and of course *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, which consists primarily of his correspondence with Theodore Draper. People in the Trotskyist movement had known about these writings, but they were hardly treated all that seriously in other quarters. And the New Left showed little interest in overcoming this disinterest. Leaders of American communism were much studied in the post-1990 years. There were two biographies of William Z. Foster, as well as treatments of Jay Lovestone, of Max Shachtman, and of Earl Browder. But Cannon had no biography.

I felt you could not grapple with Stalinism by looking only at American Communist leaders who never broke from it. And other than Shachtman, none of the above named figures did. You needed a Cannon who went through it, who for some years himself didn't criticize Stalinism, but was increasingly ill at ease until the lights began to go on, so to speak, when Cannon read Trotsky's critique in Moscow in 1928.

FM: What prepared Cannon for his decision in 1928 to support Trotsky and the Left Opposition? What in his background and experience predisposed him to make this decision, in contrast to people like Foster and Browder?

BP: That is a very interesting question. It's really a twofold issue. I think what prepared Cannon for Trotskyism was the same set of things that, in many ways, also inhibited him from coming to Trotskyism earlier in the 1920s. In a sense Cannon's strengths were also his weaknesses.

On the one hand, Cannon represented the best that the American working class was able to produce at a particular moment of its development. From an early age, he embraced the fundamental tenets of the revolutionary working class movement as expressed in the Industrial Workers of the World, the Wobblies. He believed in the emancipation of labor, and he believed this would be accomplished by the working class, although he recognized that there were powerful capitalist interests in the United States that would do everything in their power to block such liberation.

What motivated Cannon above all, I think, was the concept that an injury to one is an injury to all. And he saw this question of injury, of injustice, in a broad political way, not just at the point of production. He saw how the state and the legal system could move against dissidents and put them in jail. In the Haywood-Moyer-Pettibone case in 1906, when workers' leaders were threatened with being railroaded to prison, the American working class rallied to the cause of defending these men. The great socialist leader Eugene Debs spoke across the land and publicized in other ways the fundamental injustice that was being perpetrated against all workers. Cannon was 16 at the time, and becoming involved in this movement of mass protest was fundamental to his political development.

Cannon never lost his deep-seated rage about this—how the full weight of the state could be used against the working class. He saw both sides of labor's subordination: the exploitation at the point of production, but also the political repression. He blended the political and economic at a very early age. He could never become a pure and simple trade unionist like Gompers, only interested in trade unions as institutions to get workers more money in wages. Cannon sensed that there had to be more to working-class life than this. He was very close to the working class, a great defender of unions, but also a very political figure who understood that more was at stake than any simple business unionism could provide.

Cannon gravitated toward the IWW as his first entrée into the movement because he saw the Socialist Party as somewhat limp and compromised. The Wobblies' revolutionary determination appealed to him, in contrast, but in the back of his mind he sensed that something was missing. He saw the need to fight politically, even if, for a time, he did not quite grasp how that might be done. In the meantime, Cannon gravitated to the soapbox and the front lines of the class struggles as a Wobbly. It was the Russian Revolution that woke him up to the necessity of a political party of the working class, a Leninist party to challenge capitalism politically.

Together with the kind of industrial militancy expressed by the Wobblies and Marxist theory as an explanation of reality and a guide to how to struggle, all of this, in 1917-1920, seemed to Cannon to offer a way forward. The Bolsheviks represented a kind of unbeatable combination of these strengths and potential advances of the working class that many Wobblies couldn't understand.

So Cannon went back into the Socialist Party, into the Left Wing, and then he helped to found the Workers Party, the legal communist party, in 1921. His project was to build a revolutionary party in the United States—this is what he learned from the Russian Revolution.

It was an incredibly difficult task, as he was well aware. The early movement was a very uneven formation, even in its leading cadre. They came from so many different streams. There were the foreign language federations, composed as they were of a plethora of Old World migrants to America: Finns and Jews, Ukrainians and Poles, Germans and Russians. Native radicals spoke the same language, to be sure, but they were individuals from very different backgrounds: New York and Kansas were worlds apart. Miners in semi-rural sections of the Midwest and craft workers in the trades in Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Chicago. Workers who were white, and workers who were not, and workers who were not black, but who were hardly perceived as “white.” Radicals whose schooling in dissident thought included Kautsky as well as Henry George. All of these revolutionary workers needed to be brought into a single organization of class struggle, and educated in the program of revolutionary communism.

What Cannon brought to this project was a kind of political intuition, the blend of the political and economic approach that I spoke of, but what he lacked was a deep grounding in Marxist theory. Many of the European Marxists had a much greater facility in this regard.

As he struggled between 1921 and 1928, Cannon often relied on the skills he had developed out of his American experience, his skills as an orator, as a synthesizer. He was sometimes denigrated as a kind of Tammany Hall politician. Benjamin Gitlow, eventually a supporter of Lovestone, said that about him, but this was always unfair. In an unpublished memoir of Alexander Bittelman, a major figure in the Jewish Socialist Federation, and later to be William Z. Foster's main theoretical adviser, Bittelman talks about Cannon moving through the various layers of the party in the 1920s like a mechanic. He means this as a compliment: the craftsman building an organization, using skills necessary for building a revolutionary movement, melding different layers together and seeing to it that they function as they should.

Cannon spent so much time on this that it was difficult for him to stop and ponder and educate himself further. He didn't have some of the language skills or flair for conceptualization that his younger colleague Max Shachtman had, or that characterized the Canadian Maurice Spector. But Cannon could always see that the skills that these kinds of individuals possessed could be harnessed to the needs of the revolutionary party. Cannon's strengths in building such a party meant that he saw that his limitations as a leader could always be supplemented by the skills of others, overcoming collectively what might be lacking in an individual.

He could be and he was won to Trotskyism, then, but it took him longer because he didn't have certain of these skills that might have allowed him to see earlier and more clearly how Stalinism was undermining the revolutionary program of the Russian Bolsheviks and how, in turn, through the Comintern, Stalinism was constraining revolutionary developments around the world, including inside the American Party. And Cannon was not alone in this plus/minus make-up. Other United States communist leaders, like the early Jay Lovestone, or the party leader until his death in the 1920s, C.E. Ruthenberg, were also marked by their strengths and weaknesses, as was one of Cannon's closest allies in the early-to-mid-1920s, William F. Dunne.

If Cannon was thus inhibited somewhat from grasping Trotskyism's

critique of Stalinism in the mid-1920s, what eventually opened him up to see the correctness of Trotsky's position? I would argue that Cannon's strength eventually prevailed over his weakness. His strength, ultimately, was that he wasn't capable, as some others were, of closing his eyes to what was going wrong in the party. He might have retired into the International Labor Defense as a kind of factional fiefdom, but in the end he did not. As a revolutionary, he wasn't satisfied with that kind of politically constrained life. He was able to see that there was a problem, and if he could not quite put his programmatic finger on it with a deft immediateness, he was, when finally confronted with a well-developed argument and criticism, incapable of ignoring it. Trotsky opened his eyes to the nature of the problem, to its source, to the fact that what was wrong with the Communist International, and with its affiliates around the world, was not simply a series of petty power struggles by individuals. Rather, what was at stake was a broad programmatic deviation from essential communist principles.

To be continued



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact