

Interview with Bryan Palmer, biographer of James P. Cannon, founder of American Trotskyism—Part 2

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This is the second 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. Part 1 of the interview was published on September 28. The book 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: How do you respond to the claim that Cannon's action in 1928 was a kind of "career move"? That his faction had reached a dead-end inside the CP and he was motivated by a search for personal power?

BP: I have heard this charge, and I am astounded by it. It appears to me one of the more idiotic assessments that I've ever heard, because it assumes that for a person of Cannon's abilities, which were many and varied, life as a professional revolutionary was a "career." It was a commitment, and it was not a well-remunerated one. Moreover, to suggest that to become a Trotskyist on the revolutionary left in the late 1920s was to take a calculated move into career betterment is really a reach. If this was a career move, it was one into Hell.

Life was very difficult for Cannon after his expulsion from the Communist Party. Rose Karsner, Cannon's companion, had what I'm convinced was a breakdown in the immediate aftermath of their expulsion from the Communist Party. They were both professional revolutionaries, they were employed by the party and they weren't paid their back wages. They lost contact with most of their friends, and were vilified by old comrades. They lived in Spartan conditions, with almost no comforts or material possessions, and Rose and Jim had three children between them to look after and they could barely make ends meet. Their time, their money, their energy—it all went into building Trotskyism: publishing a paper; putting into print translations of Trotsky's work; corresponding with potential recruits.

Cannon went from being a major figure in a fairly large organization to being a leader of 100 supporters who had to beg an old Wobbly printer to put out the first issue of their newspaper, the *Militant*. They were scraping for pennies, they didn't have two nickels to rub together. To say that this was a career move is ludicrous. The first years of the Trotskyist movement were, as Cannon later described them, the dog days.

FM: Did Cannon anticipate a better response from the ranks of the CP when he was expelled?

BP: I think he definitely did. This is why, for a number of years, the

American Trotskyists called themselves the Communist League of America (Opposition). They continued to make their appeal almost exclusively to the ranks of American Communism. They tried to sell their press to the membership. Cannon genuinely believed that there would be a response from the ranks and even from some of the leaders, that they were revolutionaries who could be won over to the rebirth of the revolutionary program. He felt that their eyes were closed but not welded shut.

A lot of Trotsky's programmatic critique was simply not known by the ranks. And members also didn't know about the growing numbers of revolutionaries inside the Soviet Union who had already been subjected to physical assault and worse. Cannon was confident that the truth about Trotsky's critique, as well as other developments coming to be known, would find an audience within the ranks of American communism.

And, indeed, it looked at first as if this might be true. When Cannon and a handful of others were first expelled it was possible for a brief period to sell the *Militant* to the Communist Party ranks. The Lovestone leadership didn't know how to respond.

Then the additional expulsions began. Cannon and his closest cothinkers won over only a handful politically. Others were expelled from the CP because they refused to denounce Cannon. They didn't at first understand the issues, but they were thrown into the Opposition. The Stalinists didn't use gangster tactics immediately. They expelled those who did not line up with them, but they didn't try to beat them up, or physically intimidate them. But this lasted only a while.

Then the Communist Party leadership turned to the brass knuckles and knives. In Chicago and Minneapolis gangs of thugs were sent in to physically break up meetings of the Opposition. Cannon and others then saw it was going to be a much tougher fight. You couldn't fault him, because all of this was new territory in the United States and none of it was immediately evident.

The Opposition made some pretty important recruits during these first days, especially in Minneapolis and in Chicago. The former saw the development of oppositional cadre in trade union circles, where the Dunne brothers (not, unfortunately, Bill, who remained with the Stalinists) and others rallied to Cannon. In Chicago, important recruits in the youth sector included Albert Glotzer.

FM: How did Stalinism seize on the weaker sides of American radicalism?

BP: There is no question in my mind - nor was there in Cannon's, after he went through the experience — that one way Stalinism operated from the mid-1920s on was to work to weaken the leaderships of the national parties. It was actually beneficial to Stalin and Stalinism to have an American Communist Party leadership that was factionally split, always off balance, and where no leadership could emerge as dominant. Even when one of the factions indicated it would go along with the Comintern

line, Stalin always kept the other in reserve, as a card to play in the event someone got out of line.

This was the experience with Foster, Lovestone and Browder. Browder turned out to be the greatest beneficiary, from a personal standpoint. If you looked at who should have been leading, Foster had the greatest public prominence among the leaders, the greatest authority in a number of different circles. Basically, however, the Comintern under Stalin in the late 1920s and early 1930s destroyed him. Of all the leaders in the 1920s, Browder was probably the weakest, which is precisely why Stalin and the Comintern eventually promoted him. In the end, however, Browder too had to be disciplined.

Whatever Foster's problems, and they were legion, he was capable at times in the mid-to-late 1920s of challenging Moscow—for example in his abhorrence of Pepper, who functioned in part as an emissary of Moscow. But opposing Stalin was, by the time of Cannon's expulsion in 1928, no longer really possible for United States communists. You had to line up behind the Comintern's positions, and if you did not, you would pay a great price. Foster is a case in point, for while he could not break decisively from Stalinism, he also found it difficult to live under its weight. He wound up having something of a nervous breakdown in the early 1930s.

FM: Could you comment on this issue by discussing the American radical and labor traditions themselves, their weaknesses in terms of provincialism and nationalism?

BP: That is a very good question, and a difficult one. I think it requires a lot more research and probing inquiry into the early American Bolsheviks and what their shortcomings were. Certainly such shortcomings existed. One area where this is evident, for instance, relates to the early United States communists and the importance of African-Americans, both in terms of black labor but also with respect to the significance of racial oppression in the United States. This was of course not a new question. It had been around for generations, and Marx himself understood well, on the eve of the American Civil War, that labor in the white skin would never be free as long as labor in the black skin was branded. Still, the American left prior to the formation of the communist movement in the 1920s had a pretty awful record in terms of its positions on African Americans, what was in the parlance of the times known as "the Negro Question." The Socialist Party harbored racists, for instance, and even an esteemed figure such as Debs had backward views on race. Trade unions that many socialists worked within often had lily white exclusion clauses. The notion that African Americans were not merely another section of an exploited working class, and that Marxist revolutionaries needed to address the specific and special oppressions of black America was seldom addressed in the early twentieth century socialist movement.

And here, it needs to be pointed out, is where the Comintern, in its healthy early days, guided American communists into understanding the importance of addressing African Americans generally and black labor in particular. They impressed on Cannon and other United States communists that this was a critical area where revolutionaries needed to expend theoretical and practical effort. And some steps were taken in the early-to-mid 1920s to do just this, but the gains that might have been registered were also soon subject to be squandered as communist work among blacks became a factional football, pressured by Stalinism in specific directions. This was quite evident in terms of programmatic lapses as Stalinism promoted the "black belt nation thesis," which collapsed American communism's approach to African Americans into a nationalist cul-de-sac. Cannon and other Trotskyists, schooled in the racial blindspot of the socialist and IWW traditions, were slow to critique this black belt nation thesis, but eventually, in 1933, developed a trenchant argument against it.

There were of course other limitations as well. One reason that Cannon was so slow to develop a critique of Stalinism was that, for much of the

1920s he was wrapped up in seeing the problems within American communism as *purely and simply* American problems. There were reasons this was so. As Cannon was fond of saying, looking back on this period, his factional opponents in the American communist movement were very tough sons of bitches. And those opponents often drew on the slick cosmopolitan pseudo-revolutionary doubletalk of Comintern agents like John Pepper. When you stacked up Pepper's capacities alongside of those double-dealing and back room maneuverings of someone like Lovestone, you had a problem. Cannon ended up immersed in these problems, and he likely paid too little attention to what seemed distant difficulties in terms of the Comintern's work in Germany in 1923 or in China in 1926. Assimilating the lessons of those defeats was central to an appreciation of where the Comintern was going wrong, and Cannon and so many others in the United States movement simply did not grasp this. In not being able to see the forest of Stalinization for the trees of American communism's highly personalized factional battles, Cannon and other revolutionaries inside the United States Workers (Communist) Party no doubt limited their vision.

This, then, was a provincialism that was pressured. Whether it was nationalism or not is something I am not sure of. When one considers, for instance, the agitational work that Cannon and his allies did in the International Labor Defense organization, it is difficult to see some kind of retrograde nationalism at work. The ILD was arguably the American communist movement's most successful united front organization, and it defended all political prisoners victimized by the state. Much of its greatest work was done on behalf of immigrant workers, many of whom were threatened with deportation back to European nation states where the rule of reaction would have dictated their deaths.

Some early communists, especially those attracted to the clandestine underground of the pre-1921 years, did feel Cannon was chauvinistic in his critique of the foreign language federation leaders, especially the Russian contingent. But in my view Cannon was absolutely right in trying to win these 'fireeaters' in the federations away from their position that there was no need to build an above ground, legal communist party and movement in America. If these federation leaders were indeed well versed in Marxist theory and had a fundamental role to play in the making of American communism, they nevertheless cultivated an isolating undergroundism that was at odds with building communism in America. Cannon knew this well, and eventually the Comintern heads, including Lenin and Trotsky, concurred.

FM: Could you say anything about the economic and political situation in the United States at this time, in the decade when the Communist Party was going through these very difficult times?

BP. Absolutely, this was crucial. In a way, my own study of Cannon understandably accents the subjective dimension of struggling to create a communist party. This is what Cannon was doing, after all. And it is why I think he is important. We know that errors were made, that Cannon had strengths, but also weaknesses.

What must not be forgotten was how decisively difficult the times in which Cannon lived were. Just consider what the negatives were: 1) the climate of war and rabid hostility to the Russian Revolution in the immediate years prior to the formation of the Workers Party in 1921 unleashed a vicious xenophobia attacking enemy aliens and Bolsheviks; 2) this culminated in the Red Scare of 1919-1920, which saw deportations of revolutionaries and immigrants; brutal vigilante suppression of strikes, some of them General Strikes, and radical organizations such as the IWW; a judicial campaign of terror against the left, targeting especially the underground communist movement; 3) as this original Red Scare wound down, the post-war period reaching into the 1920s produced an economic decade of imbalance that left trade unions in decline and the hegemony of US capital strengthened considerably. Communism grew in the 1920s in a climate of the generalized retreat of the American left. The broad culture

of radicalism associated with the Socialist Party in the electoral field and the IWW in the mass strikes, free speech campaigns, and other initiatives of the 1905-1915 years had waned, and if some of this produced a clarity of programmatic commitment to class struggle, it also led to difficulties for the communists. On the one hand, the very creation of a communist party and its programmatic identification with the Russian Revolution was an immense step forward for the United States working class. On the other, the decade of the 1920s in which this took place was, in general terms, one of advancing capitalist hegemony, which registered in rising profits, intensification of exploitation, and consolidation of political authority in the hands of opponents of Revolution. The Klan was on the march again, racist lynchings were on the rise, and Sacco and Vanzetti, in spite of mass mobilizations of protest led by Cannon and many others, were sent to the electric chair by the state. Elections saw the tally of votes for dissident candidates of all stripes drop, and up until 1929, when the economy crashed, the ideological view was that America was on a roller coaster ride to riches for all.

So the gains that Cannon and others registered were, I think, monumental. And they prove that even in the most reactionary of political climates, revolutionaries guided by a political program can swim successfully against the tide. Undoubtedly the single most important event that showed the way forward in this period was the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

FM: What kind of difficulties did you come up against in the course of this project?

BP: As I said, it was a huge and daunting task. Getting through the material was not an easy task. And addressing complicated contexts, in which Cannon and the communist movement's positions were always balanced on complex interplays of relations that included Comintern influence, American Communist Party relations, and the political state of trade union struggle and other matters, was never simple. Moreover, writing all of this up, when I knew publishers would be reluctant to include the detail I thought necessary, was not an easy task.

I conducted many interviews, and they will be of greater use in the second volume than the first. Of course the memories of people in their seventies, eighties, and nineties for events of many decades ago are far from perfect. I always used the documentary record to go back and check these issues, and thus doing interviews depends on knowing the context. The interviews were often useful and supplementary to the documentary record, but it was the documentary record that I found most important to address. Yet I have to say that doing the interviews was also a highpoint. I met a lot of seasoned Trotskyists who were wonderful people, and most were very generous in letting me use the material in their attics and basements. I cannot express adequately my gratitude to these people.

One problem is that there is so much archival material spread across the United States as well as in the Comintern archives. At a certain point you must eventually sit down and write, otherwise the research can continue indefinitely, and not always with worthwhile results. One difficulty I had was determining when to end the archival search. After a time it became apparent to me that I was, in pursuing more archives, simply seeing the same documents again and again. Cannon and his allies did not live in an era of photocopies and emails. But they did use, to great proliferation, typed onionskin carbon copies, and I was amazed at how many of these copies did go out to various comrades.

I began the research for this book in 1993. I spent a solid seven years in research, and have completed the research for both volumes. Then I began writing. The first draft of the first volume was written in 2002-2003. The University of Illinois press, a major university press in the field of labor studies, expressed interest, but there was a problem, as I always knew there would be, about the manuscript's length. I had to cut about 60,000 or 70,000 words, perhaps 20 percent of the book, including a lot of the endnotes. Negotiating that 'trimming' was, I think, for me the most

difficult part of this project.

FM: What are your future projects?

BP: My position at Trent University in Canada is a Canada Research Chair. I am therefore expected to do some research on Canada! Not that I am resistant to this. So I am working on a book on Canada in the 1960s. It deals with much, but included will be discussions of the New Left of Quebec, and the emergence of radical nationalism, and on the birth of Red Power and Aboriginal militancy. I want to get this book out, and then I will sit down and write the second volume on Cannon, which is tentatively titled *Soldier of the Revolution: James P. Cannon and American Trotskyism, 1928-1974*.



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