




*Why I am a
Communist*

BENJAMIN J. DAVIS

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P R E F A C E

This pamphlet is a reprint of my article—entitled “Why I Am A Communist”—which appeared in the June, 1947, issue of *Phylon*. The magazine, a quarterly “Review of Race and Culture,” is published by Atlanta University, Atlanta, Ga., one of the three largest Negro institutions of higher learning in the country. No changes have been made in the text.

Much water has run under the bridge since the original article was written last Spring. But I venture to say that the main approach and perspectives set forth remain valid and, indeed, have been increasingly confirmed by life itself. In any event, a wider circulation of the article will help to answer many questions about the Communist Party which is today vilified and misrepresented by Jim-Crow capitalist reaction more than any other American organization. It seems to me that the pamphlet can be particularly useful in discussing the Communist Party and the struggle for the free and equal citizenship of Negro Americans.

I express my deep personal appreciation to the editors and publishers of *Phylon* for their generous courtesy in permitting this reprint—and to New Century Publishers for making it available in this pamphlet.

BENJAMIN J. DAVIS.

December, 1947

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BENJAMIN J. DAVIS, the author of this pamphlet, is one of the foremost leaders of the Communist Party, a member of its National Board and Chairman of the Harlem Division of the Party's New York State organization. He is also President of the Freedom of the Press Company, publishers of the leading labor newspapers in the United States, *The Worker* and the *Daily Worker*.

He is a member of the Council of the City of New York, having been elected in 1943, and re-elected in 1945 to a four-year term with one of the highest votes achieved by any candidate.

Formerly a defense attorney in the Scottsboro and Angelo Herndon cases, his active participation and leadership in the labor and the Negro people's movement started in the South in 1933, and he has since become a national figure, particularly in the field of struggle for Negro rights and advancement.

Mr. Davis' latest pamphlet, *The Path of Negro Liberation*, was published by New Century Publishers.

WHY I AM A COMMUNIST

By Benjamin J. Davis

When, a few weeks ago, *Phylon* invited me to write an article on "Why I am a Communist," I accepted with pleasure and humility. It is not often that one has the opportunity to contribute to a publication that stands its ground for the good old American principle of free speech against the present reactionary storms that threaten to obliterate this and all other democratic liberties.

In the midst of the basest campaign of calumny against the Communist Party—which is, by no means, directed exclusively at the Communists—this is as good a time as any to recall once more the truths about the Communists, even though these truths are evident in the deeds of the Communists, as well as in their publicly accessible literature and program. In fact, the drive against the Communists is aimed, above all, against the labor movement, against all anti-fascists, liberals and progressives, against democracy—and against truth itself. Whether one agrees with the Communist Party or not, one must at least know the truth about it. One must not permit his ideas to be shaped by the hysteria which now passes as a "crusade against Communism."

Everywhere one turns today—over the big business-controlled radio and the monopoly press—it is “Communist this” and “Communist that.” In most cases, it is neither “this” nor “that.” Quite the contrary. The big gobs of mud thrown in the direction of the Communist inevitably splash their filth upon everything else decent and forward-looking in American life. This, of course, is not difficult for the Negro people to understand. For, of all the minority groups in the United States, none has been splashed with more mud than the Negro, at the hands of the monopoly press and other big-money controlled avenues of propaganda and information.

Anti-Communism has its source in the ruling circles of Big Business and domestic fascism within our country. But it would be a major error to identify with these sinister circles the millions of workers and common people—Negro and white—who are not Communists or who do not accept the Communist program. For they are, like the Communists, victimized by these same groups. Their failure to accept or to know the truth about the Communist is due to honest misconceptions, lack of information and serious questions which they have not yet been able to answer to their satisfaction. This is true even though the contributory conditions of their misconceptions are created by the high-powered anti-Communist campaign of reaction.

It is not the purpose of this article to answer seriatim all the assaults upon common sense and upon the Communist Party, which are being feverishly promoted by reaction. There is no space for that. Besides, to attempt to reply to some of the unbelievable accusations against Communists would be an insult to the average American's

intelligence. We are being deluged with the teachings of the "Hitler Big Lie." For example, the canard that every Communist has his pockets lined with "Moscow gold." If that were true one could be sure that there would scarcely be any room in our party for workers. The capitalists, to whom gold is god of the universe, would crowd them out. Of all the weaknesses that the Communist Party possesses, and we have our share, that of being a haven for the lords of the monopolies and trusts is not one of them.

The choice invective being hurled upon the Communist Party by the reactionaries and the home-grown Hitlerites constitutes one of the many sound reasons why I am a Communist. After all, is it not an honor—better still, isn't it a sign of treading the correct path—to be assailed by the two most notorious un-American characters in political life, Bilbo and Rankin? In fact, those upholders of American democracy who, for one reason or another, have never been assailed by Bilbo or Rankin or have never been called a Communist had better self-critically examine the quality of their pro-democratic activity.

There are many approaches to answering the question of "Why I am a Communist," all of which are interconnected and which enter into my convictions. Obviously, one cannot go into the whole range of them here. For purposes of this paper, I shall limit myself principally to explaining briefly, why, as a Negro American, I am a Communist.

Negro Americans Want First-Class Citizenship

As a Negro American, I want to be free. I want equal opportunities, equal rights; I want to be accorded the

same dignity as a human being and the same status as a citizen as any other American. This is my constitutional right. I want first-class, unconditional citizenship. I want it, and am entitled to it, now.

I want to be free of discrimination, Jim Crow, segregation, lynch law; I want to be free of second-class citizenship. In short, I want, as an American citizen, to enjoy the four freedoms which were proclaimed by the late Franklin D. Roosevelt, and which the State Department is interested hypocritically in prating about for every place except America.

This is the deepest and most determined desire of the fifteen million Negro citizens of America. All Negroes, in one form or another—or to one degree or another—are affected by Jim Crow, segregation and discrimination. The Negro workers, that is, the great mass of Negroes, bear the heaviest brunt of the national Jim Crow system. But the relatively tiny Negro upper class, as well as the middle class, are also hit by discrimination. They have neither political, social nor economic equality, and they are confined almost exclusively to the Negro market, which they must share with the white ruling class, without being able to share equally the general market of white consumers over which Wall Street maintains undisputed sway.

On the elementary issues of democracy in the deep South, where the great majority of the Negro people live, the white primary, injustice in the courts, lynch terror, lack of educational facilities, Jim Crow are endured by the Negro from top to bottom. I, for example, through no virtue of my own, was born into a middle class family, and received essentially the same educational advantages of one from a white middle class family. But when I board

the trolley in Atlanta or Birmingham, I am not asked my class origin among the Negroes, nor are my university degrees inquired about. I must still sit in the Jim Crow section of the car. Discrimination cuts across all sections and classes of the Negro people. So with other walks of life. The white citizen of any class does not have that additional indignity to undergo, even though he may be exploited as a worker.

The Jim Crow system has its sharpest expressions in the South. But it spreads its tentacles all over America, including New York, where I share in common with all other Negroes the denial of my constitutional right to live, for example, at 72nd Street and Fifth Avenue, an exclusive, lily-white area. The restrictive covenant, against which the Negro people, their labor and progressive white allies are fighting, makes quite immaterial any Negro's ability to pay the high rent at 72nd Street. That, too, is Jim Crow *à la* New York, and it works its ways not only in housing but in jobs, civil rights, the slum-infested ghetto, education and in other fields—sometimes covertly and subtly, but, nevertheless, it is there.

My personal daily experience with Jim Crow—which experiences need no detailing, because they are universally recognized as the basic experience of the Negro people—confronted me all the way from my native state of Georgia to Massachusetts, where I attended Amherst College and Harvard Law School.

It is certainly ludicrous to observe the imperialist troubadours of a World War III—together with the monopoly press and radio—attacking the Soviet Union by referring to an “iron curtain” allegedly maintained by the Soviet against the world. For the real “iron curtain,”

which becomes at times cruelly literal, is the one maintained in our country, separating the Negro Americans from their birthright—their constitutional rights as free and equal citizens. Such is life for the Negro people in the United States — such are the facts — without any “if’s,” “and’s” or “but’s” or so-called “political propaganda.”

I am a typical American, who loves liberty and freedom—the same liberty and freedom that a Dewey and a Truman would sacrifice to the golden altar of American imperialism, in the name of “fighting Communism.”

Out of my personal experiences as a Negro American, and in quest of the liberty, freedom and equal rights proclaimed in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence, I, like thousands of other Negroes—and white citizens—joined the Communist Party.

I Joined in the Heat of Battle

I became a member of the Party in January, 1933, in the heat of battle. At the time, I was serving as defense attorney for Angelo Herndon in Atlanta, Georgia, where Herndon, an eighteen-year-old Negro youth, had been framed on a charge of inciting to insurrection—a charge based on an antiquated and outmoded statute. The charge carried with it the death penalty, but the jury “mercifully”—as I was given to understand by the judge—recommended twenty years for young Herndon on the Georgia chain-gang! Such “mercy,” of course, meant a living death instead of an instantaneous death in the electric chair.

Of what was Herndon “guilty”? He had led a demonstration of unemployed Negro and white workers to City Hall, had been found with a couple of Communist pam-

phlets in his possession, and possessed a firm and inspiringly defiant advocacy of the freedom of Negroes and of the liberation of the white masses from exploitation. The "dangerous" policy he then espoused as a Communist, was the unity of the Negroes in the South with the impoverished white workers and poor farmers. His sentence was so raw that, after an extended campaign of mass pressure and public opinion led principally by the Communist Party and International Labor Defense, he was finally freed.

My direct participation in the Herndon case came upon seeing a brief callous news account of his indictment in the *Atlanta Constitution* and I offered my legal services gratis, so intense was my outrage and indignation. In the course of my association and discussion with the Communists, I found the only rational and realistic path to the freedom which burns in the breast of every Negro. It required only a moment to join, but my whole lifetime as a Negro American prepared me for the moment.

Credit for recruiting me into the Communist Party goes to Judge Lee B. Wyatt, who had been summoned from the backwoods hinterland of the state to hear the case. So crude and viciously unconstitutional and anti-Negro were his rulings (rulings which were negated when Herndon was freed), that my instant joining of the Communist Party was the only effective reply I could give. It is fashionable among the lunatic elements of the domestic fascists to say that "the long arm of Moscow reaches into America and does the recruiting." But Judge Wyatt came from LaGrange, Georgia. He would resent, I am sure, any imputation that he came from Moscow and his resentment would be exceeded only by the protestations

from Moscow. (As for me, I've never been to the Soviet Union, but I'm looking forward with great eagerness and pleasure to that experience.) The point is that the Communist Party arises out of the conditions of life in the country where it exists and the struggle for a better life.

In joining the Communist Party, I was first impressed with the militant, uncompromising fight of its members for the freedom and equal rights of Negro Americans, with its devoted conduct of this fight in the Southern heart of Jim Crowism, with its practice of the equality it preaches, with its policy of unity between Negro and white on the lowest economic level, and with its scientific program of struggle for the immediate needs of the people, while simultaneously pursuing the goal of Socialism. It is folly to assume that either of the two major parties could make such an impression on an average Negro. My impression of the Communists was formed during the period of Scottsboro—the case which epitomized in all its horrible completeness the plight of the Negro and at the same time symbolized the zealously-executed and correct policy of the Communist Party, in the struggle for the full political, economic and social liberation of the Negro people.

My first impression was correct; but it didn't go far enough. Like the thousands of other members of the Communist Party, I was to learn further through activity, struggle and personal application to the study of Marxism-Leninism as it relates to the specific conditions and historical development of our country. Above all, Communists learn from the people, of whom they are flesh and bone.

The struggles of the Negro people are an inseparable,

part of the struggles of the working class of America, and of the workers, common people and colonials all over the world. We Communists agree with Abraham Lincoln that "the strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations and tongues and kindreds." If that is "subversive," then the Communists are in mighty good company.

Capitalism is the main and root cause of the discrimination against Negroes, Jews, the foreign-born, Catholics and other minorities. Under capitalism, a tiny minority of the population—the capitalist class which owns the country's basic means of production and natural resources—operates the social system for its profit which it takes out of the hides of the working class, the source of all the country's wealth. The working people, for their very existence, are compelled to struggle against the capitalist class. The basic contradiction between these two classes under capitalism, is known as the class struggle, which neither Marx, Engels, Lenin nor Stalin, invented or created, but which existed prior to them in former societies and takes place irrespective of them. The conclusions and principles which they drew and developed from capitalist development constitute the fund of the science known as Marxism-Leninism, the only social science known to man. The only solution to the class struggle is the establishment of socialism, the highest form of democracy, which entails the common ownership and operation of the national economy under a government of the people led by the working class. Since the working class constitutes the overwhelming majority of the people, when it achieves its own liberation, the masses of people will be liberated and a

classless society can be established, with free and equal citizenship to all Americans regardless of race, color, creed, birth or political affiliation.

Capitalism Breeds Racial Hatred

Racial, religious and other discriminations are weapons of capitalism to intensify its exploitation of certain sections of the population, to keep down the wages and working conditions of the working class, and to prevent the working people from uniting against the common foe—capitalism. Against the Negro people, capitalism has developed the so-called theory of “white supremacy” and “racial inferiority,” against the Jews “anti-Semitism” on account of their religion, against Catholics “taking orders from Rome” on account of the central head of their church in the Vatican—and so on. Systematically, capitalism breeds and fans in Hitler-like fashion religious, national, and racial antagonisms because these antagonisms can be used to coin gold. The Negro people constitute the most oppressed section of the population, and in the Black Belt of the deep South, where they're in the majority, they constitute a source of super-profits for Wall Street—the brain center of American capitalism. The Negro's oppression, which is double—both as a worker and as a Negro—is also more intense in the northern Harlems and Southside ghettos than that of the whites.

In order to achieve its historic destiny, the working class of America needs its own political party—which is the Communist Party. For both of the two major parties are today dominated by the exploiting class—that is, Wall Street—although there are many leaders in both parties

who oppose the more pro-fascist sections of Wall Street.

When capitalism is abolished—as it will be when the majority of American people so decide—the basis will have been laid for the real brotherhood of man, implicit in the Declaration of Independence. The only place where there is such brotherhood is in the Soviet Union, which, in 1917, abolished capitalism, and now more than 50 nationalities, many of them darker peoples, live in freedom and equality. Can there be any wonder that political minions of Wall Street rave against the Soviets? And is there a sounder reason for the closest collaboration between the United States and Russia?

The basis of the special, double exploitation of Negro Americans all over the country is the intense lynch-oppression of the Negro people in the Black Belt area of the South where they constitute a numerical majority and are the foundation of the Wall Street-plantation owner economy of the South. From here, capitalism has constructed an elaborate, barbarous and unscientific myth of “white supremacy” and “racial inferiority.” This false ideology is an attempt by capitalism to give a theoretical basis to the vicious oppression of the Negro. But in constructing this Frankenstein monster of super-exploitation and racial hatred—which will help destroy the Jim Crow system—the capitalists have created a condition of life that also has given rise to the development of the Negroes as a people—having all the essential characteristics of nationhood. These people are moving in the direction of full consciousness of their nationhood and will, side by side with the poor white workers and sharecroppers, demand the right to determine their own destiny, thus establishing the highest guarantee of the development of their freedom

and culture. The white masses will support them, because they, for the first time, will have thrown off their backs the Wall Street-plantation owner combine. The Negro people will then realize their age-old unfulfilled dream, and we shall thus have a higher level of democracy than this country has ever known.

The issue of the Negro people determining their own destiny in their heartland in the Black Belt is not now the order of the day. The immediate issues in the South are the right of the Negro people to vote, equal justice in the courts, adequate housing and educational facilities, abolition of semi-feudal peonage and lynch-discrimination, and land reform—all of which are to the highest benefit of the white southern working people.

What then is the major all-inclusive issue before the American people in the present post-war period? Democracy and progress, on the one hand, versus imperialist reaction and fascism, on the other. In the foreign field, it means that our country should throw its weight, within the framework of the United Nations, on the side of the democratic anti-fascist forces, for the purpose of extirpating the remnants of fascism and securing freedom for colonial and semi-colonial peoples, and establishing international security and an enduring peace.

At home, the issue is to check and defeat the ever-growing menace of fascism in our country (which has already witnessed its first pro-fascist coup, namely, the thuggish, if abortive, seizure of power by Talmadge in Georgia). Positively, the issue before the American people is to advance the cause of democracy and progress in all walks of life, against the pro-fascist monopolists who would take the country down the ruinous and bloody path of

Nazi Germany. First swallow of the drive toward fascism in the United States is the unprecedented and multiple campaign of Big Business (principally the National Association of Manufacturers and the U. S. Chamber of Commerce) against the Communist Party, the trade unions, mass living standards and political liberties, against minority groups, among whom the Negro bears the heaviest blows of reaction. The impending economic crisis—a natural concomitant of the capitalist system—will intensify every one of the political, economic and social ills from which the American people suffer today. Unless cushioned by advancing the interests of labor and the people, a great deterioration of conditions for the majority of the people will result that will put the Hoover days “in the shade.”

Democracy in Danger

The issue is not Communism versus capitalism or fascism. The fascists use this posing of the issue in order to confuse the people and to extinguish democracy, whether capitalist, as in our country, or the higher socialist form as in the Soviet Union. Hitler's anti-Communist crusade was a smokescreen behind which he extinguished democracy in the seventeen countries conquered by Nazism. None of these countries was Communist or Socialist. On the international front, the Soviet Union—because Wall Street, through the Truman Administration and its Republican backers, insists on bolstering world reaction as in Greece, Turkey and China—is now leading the camp of democracy.

The Communists, in America, as all over the world, who gave their lives for the independence of their countries

against the Hitler conquerors, are among the staunchest defenders of democracy in the present postwar period.

The terrifying experience of minority groups under fascism, all over the earth, is but a comparatively mild example of what would happen to the Negro people in America, where capitalist reaction has already given fascism a head start by spawning the national system of Jim Crow and "white supremacy" upon the entire body politic of American democracy. The uprooting of the Jim Crow system is a part of the battle to turn back the danger of fascism in America. Conversely, the rights of the Negro people are the acid test of democracy.

Within the framework of the overall issue of democracy versus fascism, the character of the struggle for the full citizenship of the Negro is the defense and extension of their gains over the last years, particularly during the Franklin D. Roosevelt era. Principally, the major issues of this moment are jobs and the establishment of an effective F.E.P.C.; the right to vote, abolition of the poll tax and the white primary; anti-lynching legislation, and the outlawing of the Ku Klux Klan.

How is this urgently necessary and minimum program of action to be achieved? First, there must be struggle, resolute and unflinching, because American imperialism is the most powerful in the world. And struggle there is and will be among the Negro people, who will find at their side increasing thousands of white workers and progressives in their own self-interest—a repetition of the Fred Douglass-Abe Lincoln Negro and white unity in modern America. The Negro people are a people of struggle, having shed their blood, sweat and tears for every gain. And struggle is the tradition of America, from the time of its birth.

In these critical times, struggle, in order to be effective, cannot be blind, but must be united and based upon correct policy, the necessary prerequisites for success. The Communist Party, with an increasingly large section of white workers and progressives, as well as with a considerable proportion of the Negro people, advocates that this struggle must take place principally against the lily-white trusts, monopolies and big corporations—and their political hirelings—on every front, international and domestic.

Labor Is the Negro People's Ally

Essential to the struggle for Negro rights is the fact that it must be based first of all upon the alliance of the Negro people with the organized labor movement. During the whole Roosevelt era, this alliance, now under serious attack, was the very basis of the limited gains by the Negro people. The Negro people are an indispensable and long-term ally of the labor movement. Conversely, the Negro people must defend, build and strengthen the labor movement as the apple of their eye; for the trade unions, the organized symbol of the working class, are the staunchest supporter and backbone of the struggle for Negro rights. No section of the population has a greater interest in seeing one united labor movement in America than the Negro, who, like labor itself, has been constantly victimized by this split. While labor has the responsibility of taking the lead in wiping the stench of the slave market out of American life, the Negro workers have the job of combating the forces of disunity among certain Negro circles and winning the Negro people to a closer solidarity with labor. "Negro and white, unite and fight the common

oppressor" must be transformed into reality wherever man is exploited or oppressed.

Simultaneously, the broadest unity of the Negro people's movement on a local and national scale, is not only crucial, but it is the deepest desire of the Negro people. What a more powerful force the Negro people could become if their major people's organizations—the half-million strong and anti-fascist National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Negro Congress, the National Urban League, the National Council of Negro Women, the national church bodies and faiths, the United Negro and Allied Veterans, the fraternal and Greek letter groups and, above all, the Negro workers—could move together on a minimum program to advance the free and equal citizenship of the Negro people! Just as oppression of the Negro people cuts across their political faiths and religious convictions, so should the Negro people unite—Republicans, Democrats, Laborites, Communists, Socialists and Independents—to press, with the support of labor and white progressives, for constructive, progressive legislation in Washington and the states and cities to promote equal rights for the Negro, defense of the trade unions, and the democratic welfare of the American people.

Finally, it is essential that the Negro people take their place on the basis of equality in the growing movement in America for independent political action—for the creation of a national third party, based upon the labor movement, the poor farmers, the middle class and the anti-fascist majority of the American people. It is quite clear that the coalition of the Roosevelt era, in which the administration in Washington was a part of the people's coalition, no longer exists. President Truman is not just

yielding to the Hoover-Dewey-Taft Republicans but is seeking to outstrip them in reaction. Truman has completely betrayed the Roosevelt program. It is almost Republican tweedle-dee, and Democratic tweedle-dum.

What this country needs is a new political party in which labor and the people—Negro and white—will be the dominant force in its policies, instead of the National Association of Manufacturers and the U. S. Chamber of Commerce and assorted Wall Street pirates. Not only can the Negro people make a vital and necessary contribution to such a new party, but only such a party, projected for the 1948 elections, can give full hope of fulfilling some of the promises which the Republican and Democratic national leadership has been hypocritically making since the Civil War.

The Communist Party Fights for Negro Rights

It would be impossible to conclude this article without mentioning a couple of the main characteristics of the Communist Party itself in its structure and operation. First the Communists fight for the political, economic and social equality of the Negro people now in all aspects of American endeavor. The Party's great contribution to American democracy was first dramatized in the celebrated Scottsboro case, where it not only burned the plight of the Negro into the conscience of America for the first time since the Civil War, but it did something entirely new. It brought for the first time the struggle for Negro rights to the labor movement, and gave flesh and blood to the Marxist classic that "labor in a white skin can never be free while labor in a black skin is branded."

On a thousand fronts the Communists at the side of the Negro people have battled and do battle daily for equal rights. The Communist Party places upon its white members, and seeks to convince all white workers, that they should be in the front ranks against white chauvinism, the main ideology and practice of the monopolist class, not only for enslaving the Negro people, but for exploiting the white masses. White chauvinism is not tolerated in the Communist Party. This makes it possible for the Negro Communists, and other advanced forces among the Negro people, to combat the reactionary nationalism, espoused often by certain Negro leaders, to prevent the unity of the Negro people with their natural white allies in the labor and progressive movement.

The Communist Party recognizes Negro ability and uses it. No other political party in America, while prating about Negro rights in words, has seen fit to elevate a Negro to such a post of honor and responsibility as that held by the young Negro veteran and leader, Henry Winston, Administrative Secretary of the Communist Party. On the 12-man national board of the Communist Party are three Negroes; and on the national Committee of the Communist Party, Negro men and women are in larger proportion than the Negro membership. The Communist Party is the Party of the Negro people, which it must, and can only, be by virtue of being the Party of the white workers. Examples of equal rights for the Negro set by the Communist Party inspire emulation among all organizations in the country. Communists are modestly proud of the warm regard of the Negro people, and seek always to be ever more worthy of this honor.

Can the struggle for peace, democracy, freedom and

security, be won in the postwar world? Can the battle for the Negro's full citizenship be won? To be sure! and this requires, besides struggle, unity and correct policy, an abiding faith in the people of America, Negro and white, and of the world. It is the fear of this victory of the people that causes the frightened men of the trusts to wallow in an orgy of Red-baiting, labor-baiting and Negro-baiting. They see the forces of democracy—of labor and the people—growing all over the world, including our own land.

The future belongs to the people. Whether one is a member of the Communist Party or not—or agrees *in toto* with it—one must recognize that the future is not assured without a strong and ever-expanding Communist Party here, as in the other countries of the world. I want that future as quickly as possible—that's why I am a Communist.

MORE ABOUT COMMUNISM

THE PATH OF NEGRO LIBERATION by Benjamin Davis	\$.05
THE COMMUNIST POSITION ON THE NEGRO QUESTION	.25
SOCIALISM—WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU? by A. B. Magil	.10
THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND YOU by Betty Gannett	.10
IS COMMUNISM UN-AMERICAN? by Eugene Dennis	.05
WHAT DO COMMUNISTS REALLY WANT?	.01
WHAT PRICE PROFITS? by Max Weiss	.15
THE MEANING OF THE 9-PARTY COMMUNIST CONFERENCE by William Z. Foster	.05
THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels	.05
SOCIALISM, UTOPIAN AND SCIENTIFIC by Frederick Engels	.10