

LIBERALS AND REALITY

by SUMNER ROSEN

A shorter version of this essay originally appeared as an article in LIBERATION.

Sumner M. Rosen is professor of Economics at Simmons College in Boston. He is Vice-chairman of Massachusetts Political Action for Peace(PAX).

published by:

STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY
119 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK 3, NEW YORK

Ideologues of today's labor movement are not easy to find. A generation ago they wrote abundantly, nourishing the dreams of a deprived and disillusioned intelligentsia with visions of a new birth of social movement and political dynamism. Some served doctrinaire ideologies; when these failed to capture the masses many of them deserted the labor movement in wrath or despair. Others persevered and fell, victim of the purge or Coventry. A goodly number, while remaining in harness, retreated to a private vision, turning their visible selves into technicians or idea men, ghosts in more than one sense.

Only a few have managed to preserve for themselves the role for which they were originally cast. Of these, one of the most influential and important is Gus Tyler. He combines solid power in an important union with the willingness to put his ideas about the labor movement in print. Now he has written a rebuttal to those who have taken pen, in recent years, to read a requiem for the labor movement. It appears in the November 1963 issue of the official journal of the AFL-CIO, The American Federationist, and is titled "The New Challenge to Liberalism." Its ideas provided George Meany with the material for a vigorous attack on these same critics at the AFL-CIO convention last November.

Tyler sees labor at the center of the liberal coalition, arrayed with the civil-rights organizations and the liberal intellectuals in the major political struggle of our time: to save the "liberal trend that has characterized America since the first Hundred Days of the New Deal" from the attack of the Right, and to lead it to new victories, beginning with the next Presidential election. He has hard words for the "newly invigorated conservative coalition," but saves his heavy artillery for "a small though highly publicized coterie of liberal intellectuals who are making a career out of fostering friction and schism among the great liberal movements." Though their numbers are few, they pose "a real danger that this coalition will be disrupted, even impaired." They are mostly just ignorant, but some are angry because the masses refuse to "follow the teacher," so take out their anger in attacks on labor. Others have had a brief sojourn in the labor movement which, in some unexplained way, gives them "a sense of guilt" which, in turn, leads them to "justify their AWOL by denouncing either the old general or the old cause." Still others are simply seeking "to rediscover the kicks of youth."

Is this a real description of those who have said a few hard and simple truths about the labor movement in recent years? Tyler does not name those whom he is attacking, but it might be such people as Dan Bell, Herbert Hill, Paul Jacobs, or Sid Lens, four of labor's most articulate and telling critics. None correspond to the caricature which he offers. Tyler's petulance is revealing; his recent exchange with Hill in the pages of New Politics reveals a strain of paranoia, combined with a wilful distortion of fact which leads him to label as "enemies" those who seek, not to attack the labor movement but to open the eyes of labor leaders to new facts and new priorities which they ignore at their peril. The ranks of the labor movement itself are full of men ridden by these fears and unable to find in today's movement any real hope of curing them.

Tyler's defense can be paraphrased this way: A liberal trend has characterized the United States since 1933. Its core is a coalition of labor, the intellectuals, and the civil-rights organizations, with

labor its major strength. Despite serious problems, labor has shown its capacity to survive and to adapt itself to the new demands of a new era. Its bargaining has become inventive and sophisticated; its permanent entry into national politics shows that labor has recognized that some important issues cannot be solved at the bargaining table. Its organizing potential is as great as ever; give the new elements in the labor force—Southern industrial workers and white collar workers—enough time and experience and "eventually...they will organize to advance their interests." If existing techniques do not work, these groups "will find their own leaders and their own methods." Their organization is "inevitable." Labor's needs and those of the civil-rights movement—jobs and freedom—converge so closely that the groups themselves are natural allies in a common struggle. Articulating the terms of this alliance is the work of the intellectuals; united, this liberal coalition can beat off the reactionary threat and lead the country to new liberal victories.

This argument is wholly in error. In its logic, and in such details as Tyler offers, it is a generation behind the realities of our time and our society. The alliance Tyler seeks to evoke is a myth.

It will not do simply to assert a unity of goal and method when the evidence is so visible that—between labor and the civil-rights movement, for example—a gulf has widened. It was the attack on his won union and the labor movement by the NAACP last year that embroiled Tyler in a series of exchanges with Hill; since then, in a dozen cities, the exclusion of Negro workers from the crafts has been amply demonstrated, along with the determination of craft unions to concede as little as possible as slowly as possible. It was only last August that the AFL-CIO executive council turned its back on the March on Washington, when every major religion and every other major liberal group joined in with enthusiasm. Individual unions, to their credit, participated wholeheartedly; they recognized a moral imperative that they could not bypass, and welcomed an opportunity to share with the marching Negroes a historic witness. But even for them it is late in the game; the contemporary phase of the Negro struggle began in Montgomery, and reached a climax last spring in Birmingham, but no national labor leader has joined King, Wilkins, Farmer, or Lewis in demonstrations in Birmingham or any other Southern city. It is ludicrous, a shameful evasion, an insult to our Negro leadership to attribute the distrust which so many of them feel for today's labor leadership to the machinations of a handful of disgruntled intellectuals. Tyler quotes Martin Luther King's speech before the 1961 AFL-CIO convention as evidence that "responsible Negro leadership" recognizes the community of purpose between the two movements. The speech is more properly read as an appeal to labor to recognize a community of purpose which its actions, attitudes, and complacency have led it for so long to ignore or to dismiss with lip service and a contribution. Nor is such "responsible" leadership as King's always the most accurate reflection of Negro sentiment, particularly among Northern Negro masses; we may not like what is being said by men like Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, or Conrad Lynn (not that they all say the same things) but we ought not to pretend that the Negro does not listen. The growing radicalism and impatience of Negroes suggests that leadership will have to move fairly fast to keep from being shouldered aside.

Tyler stresses labor's steadily increasing recognition of the key role of political action, and points to developments since the CIO first established the Political Action Committee to document the record of "labor's politicalization." Since the struggle for jobs and freedom is a political struggle, it follows, says Tyler, that labor has by these steps acquired the basis for waging and winning this struggle, and with the help of the other elements of the "coalition." The struggle to which he summons this alliance is against the reactionary Right. Its task is to elect a liberal Democratic President in 1964, with a majority of Congress behind him. From this—automatically, it would seem—a resumption of social and economic progress can be expected under the banner of the Democratic Party. Elsewhere Tyler has argued that "realignment" to shed the Democrats of their Southern incubus in part of the liberal politics in which he believes. Presumably, then, such a victory in 1964 is the first step along this road.

THE PARTY OF COMPROMISE

Ask any Negro leader what he thinks of this as a prediction or prescription; you will find the deepest skepticism and cynicism that any plausible Presidential candidate has either the will or the hope of achieving this result, which cannot be achieved without leadership from within the major parties, or irresistible pressure from without. While they know that such a realignment is required if we are to achieve any substantial measure of equality and social justice, their view, like that of the intellectuals whom Tyler attacks, is that such a realignment must be forced on the existing parties by presenting them with unacceptable alternatives. One such would be the withdrawal of the automatic endorsement in the big cities, which has enabled all three successful Democratic candidates for President in our time to accommodate the Southern reactionaries, at election time and in between. The scandal in the Negro community today is the failure of the FBI to solve a single act of violence against Negro civil-rights workers in recent years, the failure of the late President to lend his full moral weight to the simple quest for the right to vote and protection from police brutality, the refusal of the administration to risk a head-on collision on civil rights with any Southern Senator on any issue. Negroes who have watched this spectacle will not easily swallow sweet talk about a community of purpose between themselves and the one major liberal force in this country which has yet to break with the President on any key question. They believe that each step which the administration has taken toward support of civil-rights legislation has been in response to inescapable pressure; they see no alternative, if further progress is to be made, to maintaining that pressure, making it credible with the possible threat of direct action, political reprisal for failure to act, or both. Tyler's case that labor and Negro, because they need each other, ought therefore to make common cause politically, accepting the "liberal" strategy which he outlines, has no validity.

Tyler gives less attention to the intellectuals' role in the coalition; in fact only the penultimate paragraph is addressed to them. As teachers and as technicians of the social science, their job is to draw the blueprints which are then to be translated into political and legislative programs. They are also welcome as "constructive

critics," provided that they do not go as far as the negative voices against which his piece of writing is directed. Be helpful and do your job, says Tyler, but if the search for truth and insight (presumably the intellectual's single overriding responsibility) leads to fundamental criticism of the society or its institutions—those, that is, in the "liberal coalition"—this is going too far.

Intellectuals have heard this kind of advice before; it comes often from businessmen who serve on university boards. They know that it is the voice of self-serving expediency masquerading as sound, practical advice. Labor once used to defend intellectuals from just such a squeeze, when the intellectual spoke up for social change or union rights in the heat of political controversy, but it seldom does so now, when intellectuals speak up for peace, or the right to dissent from the Cold War. Intellectuals will therefore be surprised and wary when they hear the advice Tyler has to offer; they will believe, correctly, that such advice reveals a fundamental cynicism and distrust of the role of disinterested scrutiny. The attitude that leads to such advice is likely to emerge in any group in our society, once it has acquired sufficient history to possess a record not all parts of which are equally honorable or immune to criticism, and a sufficient stake in "things as they are" to fear the losses involved in any real change in the distribution of power and privilege. Labor is such an institution, often more concerned these days with its image than with the reality which the image must ultimately reflect. Tyler's attack is at root a failure to understand or accept the idea that intellectuals worth the name are beholden to no one. The fact that labor and the liberal intellectuals share a common past, full of significant achievement and honorable memories for both, cannot impose on intellectuals an obligation to keep silent when they see before them the gradual transformation of the labor movement from a social force in which they could believe into a stagnating institution devoid of commitment and unable to find new ways of understanding the present and future. It is no coincidence that, as Tyler correctly states, many of labor's critics are veterans of service in union work. It is precisely because the reality so cruelly refuted the myth which Tyler seeks to propagate that they have become so critical; theirs, though, is the criticism of loving despair, not the sectarian hostility which Tyler denounces. They have been, in a word, betrayed.

Intellectuals have been involved, over the past decade, in three major struggles. The first was the struggle to preserve the elements of academic freedom—in the press, the movies, and television, as well as in the universities—against the know-nothing destruction of the McCarthy period. The role of many of our powerful and articulate national leaders in that struggle was far from unequivocal. So was that of the labor movement, and the intellectuals have not forgotten this. The second was the struggle to alert the nation to the immense dangers of thermonuclear war and the urgency of a search for alternatives. Here labor has consistently backed the doctrine of maximum deterrence, never deviating from a line common to Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Goldwater, until the events of the past year—notably the Sino-Soviet rift—altered the official definition of the national interest to favor a limited test ban. Then, and only then, did labor discover that nuclear war is indeed a mortal threat and that new policies are necessary to avert it. Here too intellectuals will not

soon forget. The third struggle, for Negro rights, engaged the intellectual community—teacher and student alike—in the kind of all-out commitment which we still must await from the labor movement, though not, be it said, from individual unions and individual leaders. It is an ironic and revealing footnote to this discussion to recall that the most serious rift between Meany and Reuther involved the latter's attempt to have elected to the executive council the leader of the one union in the AFL-CIO which has carried the civil-rights struggle all the way—Ralph Helstein of the Packinghouse Workers.

Enough has been said to demonstrate how little substance, how much wishful thinking, there is in Tyler's analysis. It is interesting that it appeared, not in one of the "liberal" magazines where those to whom it is presumably addressed would be likely to see it, but in the house organ of the AFL-CIO itself. It makes one think that labor leaders, even those as gifted and articulate as Gus Tyler, have been reduced to talking to themselves.

The irony of this denouement lies in the fact that political struggle—and with it the rebirth of something which we must call ideological conflict—is about to recapture the center of the American stage from which the peculiar history of the post-war period has virtually excluded it. Daniel Bell proclaimed the "End of Ideology" four short years ago; no obituary was ever more elegant, persuasive, or premature. But the terms of the new struggle, and its stakes, are not those so familiar to the aging generation which looked to Walter Reuther (and still do, lacking an alternative) for both slogans and troops. The task of tomorrow's politics is to measure the achievements and failures of our economic and social system in terms even more rigorous than those of the depression years. The war ended that inquisition before it could reach a verdict. The TNEC began an exposé of the concentration and abuse of economic power as the first step towards establishing democratic and effective controls. It ended as a series of recommendations on how to harness economic power to win the war. In a fundamental sense, the work which the TNEC began still waits to be concluded. The serious problems which were its raison d'être are almost all still with us. Why?

For almost a generation our vital energies have been spent on Cold War priorities; we were too busy, too frightened, too prosperous to notice either the phoniness of what passed as ideological and economic debate, or the fortuitous circumstances which enabled us to overlook what mattered. Yet beneath the surface, all was not well. Herman Miller and Gabriel Kolko have shown that the trend toward greater equality in income distribution—so central in the official celebration of the American economic "miracle"—ceased a decade ago, and has not resumed. Michael Harrington and Leon Keyserling have exposed the ugly face of permanent poverty, untouched by the "miracle." The urbanizing Negro has forced Americans to reckon the accumulated costs of a century of neglect and exploitation. The spectre of permanent unemployment spreads steadily and yields to no combination of treatments. The quality of urban life decays before our eyes. And the power of the great corporate complexes which have dominated this economy for sixty years or more continues to increase, unchecked, unchallenged, virtually unnoticed.

None of these is a partisan issue to which "liberal" or "conservative" offer meaningful choices or solutions. They are structural, almost characterological in nature. They are the end results of a long historical process not easily understood—particularly in a culture which frowns on historicisms—and certainly not amenable to political tinkering. The props which have served so long to keep things rolling are disappearing fast. The victims are no longer silent; their acquiescence was a prop. And the magic of the federal budget no longer works. Even without a détente with the Soviets, the arms budget lost its ability to keep down the level of unemployment over two years ago, though the futility of this approach to the responsibilities of the Employment Act has yet to be adequately documented. Invigorate our "conventional" and "anti-guerilla" war capacity as much as he likes, no President can avoid facing permanent bankruptcy of the fiscal palliatives on which our post-war Presidents relied.

If we put on the same scale the magnitude of our domestic needs and problems, and their deep-rooted character, and the complete failure of the "liberal" politics of our time to create an armory of weapons to deal with these problems by government action—we can see what the struggle of the next decade is really about. Next to it, Tyler's invocation of the liberal coalition and his assertion that today's labor movement is ready and able to lead it is reduced to the level of nostalgic fantasy.

- - -