

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Notebook of an Agitator by James P. Cannon

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**James P. Cannon, Notebook of An Agitator. Pathfinder Press:
New York. 3rd ed.: 1993, ISBN 0-87348-770-2. £13.95**

It is one of the ironies of the Cold War - one which would not have been lost on the late James Cannon - that the current healthy financial status of the Socialist Workers Party is almost entirely due to the damages awarded to the party for violation of its constitutional rights by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. As a result of the FBI's abuse of power, J. Edgar Hoover has helped to make possible this new edition of Cannon's collected editorials for various radical newspapers from 1926 until 1954.

The effect of poverty on the party and its members is captured in the 1952 editorial in *The Militant* after the loss of Grace Carlson from the party to 'sanctuary in the rich and powerful Catholic Church...' According to Cannon it was not the loss of faith in socialism but 'only the final effect of many successive blows of persecution, poverty and discrimination which had been inflicted upon her...' which led her to leave the party she had served for sixteen years. Although Cannon denies the fact that Dr Carlson may have acted out of faith, he is honest about the situation of the party describing it as 'the numerically small and persecuted Socialist Workers Party...'

Why, when we are told that it is 'the end of history' and that the Cold War has ended in the triumph of liberal capitalism, should anyone bother to spend £13.95 on the reprinted editorials of the late James Cannon? For this reviewer there are several good reasons why most libraries should have this book. First, the consensus school of historians which has dominated the writing of United States history for so long, has denied the existence of a radical left in the United States. Second, the collection gives easy access to the writings of James Cannon and make fascinating reading for students of American radicalism; third, Cannon deals with wider cultural issues such as race, religion and even prize fighting. There is an especially moving tribute to the 20-year-old Georgie Flores who was killed in the ring at Madison Square Garden on 29 August 1951, entitled 'Murder in the Garden' and first published in *The Militant* on 17 September of that year.

The SWP was small but it was articulate. Cannon's career from the Socialist Party of America, to the Industrial Workers of the World, and then to

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Leninism and finally Trotskyism is a path followed by many on the left in the United States. It is a pity that the press has failed to include in this Notebook any of the writings of Cannon during his early years as a socialist, and in the IWW. His writings for the Communist Party of the United States are focused on his leadership of the International Labor Defense from 1926-28, and especially on the Sacco and Vanzetti case. There are occasionally glimpses of his earlier career as in editorial tributes to Frank Wright, Eugene Debs and Big Bill Haywood. But the tone is not as sympathetic as it is for the dead young fighter. Writing in the Daily Worker, prior to his expulsion from the Communist Party. Cannon comments on earlier figures in the struggle for a socialist America.

Haywood's syndicalism was the outcome of his reaction against the reformist policies and parliamentary cretinism of the middle class leaders of the Socialist Party - Hillquit, Berger and Company. But syndicalism, which in the final analysis, is "the twin brother of reformism", as Lenin has characterized it, was only a transient theory in Haywood's career. (p. 60).

Although he exempts Haywood from criticism that he levels at other IWW leaders, Cannon's attack on the former Wobblies is one that has frequently been made (with telling effect) against all radical left wing groups in the United States. To use Cannon's words, radical groups (such as the SWP?) were like: 'many leaders of the I.W.W. [who] had encased themselves in a shell of dogma to shut out the realities of life.'

Perhaps this 'shell of dogma' enabled many radicals to survive the persecutions following the two world wars, but with the collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe, which would have delighted James Cannon as much as it delighted George Bush, the radicals in the United States and Europe need to rethink the dogma or perhaps the end of Stalinism may end in the defeat of Trotskyism.

What ever the future holds for the party, it is important that scholars of the American scene should not neglect the contribution of radicals to the history of the United States. One way to discover and appreciate this role can be found in reading this Notebook of An Agitator.

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