Almost 60 years ago in the United States, in 1941, there took place in Minneapolis ... the most famous political trial of the wartime period. Twenty-eight socialist and union activists were charged with plotting the violent overthrow of the US government.

Most of those indicted were members of the US Trotskyist organization, the Socialist Workers Party, including its national secretary, James P. Cannon. The party had a long history of militant and effective work in the Minneapolis labor movement. It used its positions there to conduct a forceful campaign against the war drive of US imperialism. Through the trial, the government aimed to silence the most radical and determined antiwar voice.

“Socialism on Trial”, Cannon's verbatim courtroom testimony, is a clear and inspiring exposition of the Marxist view of capitalism, war and revolution – all the more remarkable for the circumstances in which it was given....

Q: Give us the meaning of the term socialism.
A: Socialism can have two meanings, and usually does among us. That is, socialism is a name applied to a projected new form of society, and it is a name also applied to the movement working in that direction.

Q: What is the nature of that projected society?
A: We visualize a social order that would be based on the common ownership of the means of production, the elimination of private profit in the means of production, the abolition of the wage system, the abolition of the division of society into classes.

Q: With reference to any government for the purpose of instituting such a society, what would you say is the purpose of the Socialist Workers Party?
A: We have set as our aim the establishment of a workers’ and farmers’ government, in place of the existing government which we term a capitalist government. The task of this government would be to arrange and control the transition of society from the basis of capitalism to the basis of socialism.

Q: When you say “capitalist government” what do you mean?
A: We mean a government that arises from a society that is based on the private ownership of the wealth of the country and the means of production by the capitalists, and which in general represents the interests of that class.

Q: And in contradistinction to this government you propose to establish a workers’ and farmers’ government?
A: Yes, we propose in place of the capitalists’ a workers’ and farmers’ government, which will frankly represent the economic and social interests of the workers and the producing farmers.

What Socialism Means

Q: Well, what would happen to the capitalists?
A: Under the workers’ and farmers’ government, the main task of the government will be to carry out the transfer of the most important means of production from private ownership to the common ownership of the people.

Q: Well, what would happen to the individual capitalists who would lose their wealth?
A: What do you mean, “happen to them”, in what way?

Q: Would you kill them or put them to work or what?
A: Well, under our theory, citizenship participation in the benefits of society would be open to everybody on a basis of equality. This would apply to former capitalists as well as to workers and farmers.

Q: When you use the term “productive wealth”, do you mean any property that an individual owns?

A: No – when we speak of the means of production, the wealth of the country, we mean that wealth which is necessary for the production of the necessities of the people. The industries, the railroads, mines, and so on. We don’t propose – at least, Marxist socialists have never proposed anywhere that I know – the elimination of private property in personal effects. We speak of those things which are necessary for the production of the people’s needs.

They shall be owned in common by all the people.

Q: What would happen to small businesses, the owners of which do not have labor to hire?

A: Well, the best Marxist authority since Engels is that small proprietors, who are not exploiters, should be in no way interfered with by the workers’ and farmers’ government. They should be allowed to have their farms, their small possessions, their small handicraft shops, and only insofar as they become convinced, by the example of socialized collective farming and voluntarily would agree to pool their land and their resources in a collective effort, only to that extent can collectivization of small farming enterprises take place.

In the meantime, it is a part of our program that the workers’ and farmers’ government should assist such enterprise by assuring them reasonable prices for their implements, for fertilizers, arrange credits for them, and in general conduct the government as a government which is concerned for them and wants to represent their interests.

I am speaking now of small producing farmers, not of big landowners and bankers, who exploit a lot of people, or who rent land out to sharecroppers. We certainly intend to socialize their land in the very first stages of the workers’ and farmers’ government, turn it over to the administration of the people who actually till the soil. That also, I may say, is the standard Marxist doctrine since the earliest days, and the doctrine of Lenin and Trotsky in the Russian Revolution.

Q: How will this socialist society be controlled and directed?

A: Well, socialism naturally would have to grow out of the new situation. After the social revolution has been effected in the political arena, and the capitalist government has been replaced by a workers’ and farmers’ government, which proceeds to the socialization of the industries, the abolition of inequalities, the raising of the level of the income of the masses of the people, and the suppression of any attempts at counterrevolution by the dispossessed exploiters, the importance and weight of the government as a repressive force would gradually diminish.

Then as classes are abolished, as exploitation is eliminated, as the conflict of class against class is eliminated, the very reason for the existence of a government in the strict sense of the term begins to diminish. Governments are primarily instruments of repression of one class against another. According to the doctrine of Marx and Engels and all of the great Marxists who followed them, and based themselves on their doctrine, we visualize, as Engels expressed it, a gradual withering away of the government as a repressive force, as an armed force, and its replacement by purely administrative councils, whose duties will be to plan production, to supervise public works, and education, and things of this sort. As you merge into socialist society, the government, as Engels expressed it, tends to wither away and the government of men will be replaced by the administration of things.

The government of a socialist society in reality will be an administrative body, because we don’t anticipate the need for armies and navies, jails, repressions, and...
consequently that aspect of government dies out for want of function.

**Capitalism’s Internal Contradictions**

Q: What is the Marxian theory as to the social forces making socialism inevitable?

A: Capitalism is a state of society that did not always exist. Like preceding social systems, it went through a period of gestation in the womb of the old feudal society. It grew and developed as against feudal society, eventually overthrew it by revolutionary means, raised the productivity of mankind to undreamed of heights –

Q (By Mr. Goldman): Well, as briefly as you can, describe the social forces –

A: I did not want to make a speech. I wanted to say in a few words what are the social forces that are pushing capitalism to bankruptcy. The laws by which –

Mr. Schweinhaut: That was not the question that was asked you, Mr. Witness. You were asked what were the social forces that would make socialism inevitable, or some such thing. Well, I give up. Go ahead.

The Witness: I assure you that I am anxious to compress the explanation as much as possible.

Capitalism operates by certain internal laws which were analyzed and laid bare for the first time by Karl Marx in his great works, first in the Communist Manifesto and then in Capital.

Now, the two internal laws of capitalism which are making inevitable its decline and its replacement by socialism are these:

One, the private ownership of the means of production and the employment of wage labor at wages less than the value of the product produced by the wage laborer. This creates a surplus which the capitalist proprietor has to sell in the market. It is obvious that the wage worker, who receives for his labor less than the total value of his product, can be a customer only for that amount of the value that he receives in the form of wages. The balance is surplus value, as Marx explained it, for which the capitalist must find a market.

The more capitalism expands within a given country, the more productive becomes the labor of the worker, the greater is this surplus, which cannot find a market because the great mass of the people who produce the wealth do not receive enough wages to buy it. And that leads capitalism into periodic crises of what they call overproduction, or as some popular agitators call it underconsumption, but the scientific term is overproduction.

Capitalism from its very inception, for more than a hundred years, pretty nearly two hundred years, has gone through such crises. Now, in the past, capitalism could solve these crises eventually by finding new markets, new fields of investment, new fields of exploitation, and as long as capitalism could find new areas for the investment of capital and the sale of goods, the capitalist system could extricate itself from this cyclical crisis which occurred about every ten years, and go on to new heights of production. But every time capitalism experienced a new boom, and began to develop some new territory, it narrowed down the world. Because every place that capitalism penetrated, its laws followed it like a shadow, and the new field of exploitation began to become also surfeited with a surplus.

For example, the United States, which was a great reservoir for the assimilation of surplus products of Europe and gave European capitalism a breathing spell, has itself developed in the course of one hundred and fifty years to the point where it produces an enormous surplus and has to fight Europe for a market in which to sell it. So this tremendous contradiction between the private ownership of industry and wage labor presents capitalism more and more with an insoluble crisis. This is one law of capitalism.

The second law is the conflict between the development of the productive forces and the national barriers in which they are confined under
capitalism. Every country operating on a capitalist basis produces a surplus which it is unable to sell in its domestic market for the reasons I have given you before.

What, then, is the next step? The capitalists must find a foreign market. They must find a foreign market in which to sell their surplus and a foreign field in which to invest their surplus capital. The difficulty confronting capitalism is that the world doesn’t get any bigger. It retained the same size, while every modern capitalist nation was developing its productive forces far beyond its own domestic capacity to consume. Or to sell at a profit. This led to the tremendous explosion of the World War in 1914. The World War of 1914 was, in our theory and our doctrine, the signal that the capitalist world had come to a bankrupt crisis.

Q: What would you say about the law of competition working within the capitalist system?

A: The law of competition between capitalists results inevitably in the bigger capitalists, the ones with the more modern, more efficient, and productive enterprises, crushing out the small ones, either by destroying them or absorbing them until the number of independent proprietors grows continually less and the number of pauperized people increases by leaps and bounds, until the wealth becomes concentrated in the hands of a very few people, and the great mass of the people, especially of the workers, are confronted with ever-increasing difficulties of an economic and social nature.

I mentioned the World War of 1914 as the signal that capitalism on the world scale wasn’t able to solve any of its problems peacefully before. They had to kill eleven million men, and then make a peace and prepare to do it all over again the second time. That, in the view of the Marxian socialists, is the sign that capitalism has outlived its possibility to solve its own problems.

Q: What would you say, then, with reference to the relative importance of the economic factor moving toward socialism, and the agitation for socialism of the various parties, including the Socialist Workers Party?

A: Well, now, if I could just explain here, Marxian socialism is distinct from what is known in our terminology as utopian socialism – that is, the socialism of people who visualize a better form of society, and think that it is only necessary to see that a better society could exist, and to persuade the people to adopt it and solve the problem. Marxian socialism proceeds from the theory that the very internal laws by which capitalism operates drive society to a socialist solution.

I mentioned the war – I mentioned the conflict between the various capitalist nations which are always now in either a state of war, or of an armed truce preparing for war. I should mention also the experience of the 1929 depression, as it is called, with its fifteen million able-bodied American workers who were willing to work unable to find employment. That was another sign of a terrible unhealthiness in the social organism called capitalism; and the unemployment scourge operated on a world scale.

Now, these are the forces that are driving society to a rational solution, in our opinion, by the nationalization of industry, the elimination of competition, and the abolition of private ownership. Our agitation could never effect the transformation of one social order to another unless these powerful internal economic laws were pushing it.

The real revolutionary factors, the real powers that are driving for socialism, are the contradictions within the capitalist system itself. All that our agitation can do is to try to foresee theoretically what is possible and what is probable in the line of social revolution, to prepare people’s minds for it, to convince them of the desirability of it, to try to organize them to accelerate it and to bring it about in the most economical and effective way. That is all agitation can do.

Q: What role does the factor of fascism play?
A: Fascism is another sign that unfailingly appears in every capitalist society when it reaches that period of decay and crisis and isn’t any longer able to keep an equilibrium of society on the basis of democratic parliamentarism, which has been the governmental form of rule of capitalism in its heyday. Fascism grows, becomes a terrible menace to mankind, and a terrible warning to the workers that if they don’t bestir themselves and take things in their own hands, they will suffer the fate for years that has befallen the people of Germany and Italy and other countries now in Europe.

Q: What is meant by “social revolution”?

A: By social revolution is meant a transformation, a political and economic transformation of society.

Q: And the nature of the transformation is what?

A: Is fundamental and affects the property system, affects the method of production.

Q: Is there a distinction between political and social revolution?

A: Yes.

Q: What is the distinction?

A: Well, a political revolution can occur without any radical transformation of the underlying economic structure of society, the property basis of society.

A social revolution, on the other hand, affects not only the government, but affects the economic system.

Q: Can you give us any examples of both the social and political revolutions?

A: Yes. The great French Revolution of 1789 –

Mr. Schweinhaut: Was that a political or social revolution?

The Witness: That was a social revolution, because it transformed the property basis of society from feudal property to capitalist property.

Q (By Mr. Goldman): What do you mean by “feudal property”?

A: That was the whole economic system of society that was based on rights and privileges and restrictions, and serfdom, and so forth. Capitalist private property, which transformed the farms into privately owned enterprises of individual farmers, eliminated entirely all vestiges of serfdom and substituted wage labor, made a fundamental change in the economy of France.

Q: And can you give us an example of a political revolution?

A: Two of them occurred in France subsequent to the great social revolution, they occurred in 1830 and 1848 – that is, revolutions which were designed merely to change the ruling bureaucracy of the country and without touching the property system...

Q: Can you give us any examples of political revolutions?

A: We consider the American Civil War was a social revolution because it destroyed the system of slave labor and property in slaves, and replaced it by the complete domination of capitalist enterprise and wage labor.

**Conditions for a Socialist Revolution**

Q: Enumerate the conditions under which, according to Marxist theory, the social revolution against capitalism will occur.

A: I can give you quite a number.

The first one is that the existing society must have exhausted its possibilities of further development. Marx laid down as a law that no social system can be replaced by another until it has exhausted all its possibilities for development and advancement. That is, you may say, the fundamental prerequisite for a social revolution.
Then I can give a number of collateral prerequisites which have been accepted by our movement.

The ruling class must be unable any longer to solve its problems, must have to a large degree lost confidence in itself.

The misery and desperation of the masses must have increased to the point where they desire at all costs a radical change. Unemployment, fascism and war become problems of increasing magnitude which are patently insoluble by the existing ruling class. There must be a tremendous sentiment among the masses of the producers for socialist ideas and for a socialist revolution.

And, in addition to these prerequisites I have mentioned, it is necessary to have a workers’ party that is capable of leading and organizing the movement of the workers in a resolute fashion for a revolutionary solution of the crisis.

Q: Now, what would you say as to the actual existence at the present time of the factor of the decline of capitalism and the fact that it has exhausted the possibilities of further growth at the present moment, as far as the United States is concerned?

A: Taken on a world scale, capitalism had exhausted its possibilities of further development by 1914. On a world scale, capitalism has never since that time attained the level of productivity of 1914. On the other hand, America, which is the strongest section of world capitalism, experienced an enormous boom in the same period when capitalism as a world system was declining. But American capitalism, as was shown by the 1929 crisis, and now by the war preparations, has also definitely entered into the stage of decay.

Q: And what are the symptoms of that decay?

A: The symptoms were the army of fifteen million unemployed, the decline of production from 1929; the fact that the higher productive index of the present day is based almost entirely on armament production, which is no possible basis of permanent stability.

Q: What would you say as to the existence at the present time of the second factor that you enumerated as a prerequisite to a revolutionary situation, namely, the inability of the ruling class to solve their problems?

A: I do not think it has by any means yet reached the acute stage in this country that it must necessarily reach on the eve of a revolution. They can’t solve their problems here, but they don’t know it yet.

Mr. Anderson (Prosecutor): What was the last of that answer, Mr. Reporter?

The Witness: I say, the American ruling class cannot solve its problems, but is not yet aware of it.

Mr. Anderson: I see.

The Witness: I didn’t mean that as a wisecrack, because as I stated previously, the ruling class must lose confidence in itself, as was the case in every country where a revolution occurred.

Q (By Mr. Goldman): What is the position of the party on the attempt of Roosevelt to improve the social system in this country?

A: How do you mean, “improve the social system”?

Q: To set capitalism into motion again, after the depression of 1929.

A: Well, all these measures of the New Deal were made possible in this country, and not possible for the poorer countries of Europe, because of the enormous accumulation of wealth in this country. But the net result of the whole New Deal experiment was simply the expenditure of billions and billions of dollars to create a fictitious stability, which in the end evaporated.

Now the Roosevelt administration is trying to accomplish the same thing by the artificial means of a
war boom; that is, of an armament boom, but again, in our view, this has no possibility of permanent stability at all.

Q: With reference to the misery and suffering of the masses, what would you say as to the existence of that factor in the United States?

A: In our view, the living standards of the masses have progressively deteriorated in this country since 1929. They haven’t yet reached that stage which I mentioned as a prerequisite of an enormous upsurge of revolutionary feeling, but millions of American workers were pauperized following 1929; and that, in our opinion, is a definite sign of the development of this prerequisite for the revolution...

Q (By Mr. Goldman): Calling your attention to that factor that you enumerated as a prerequisite for the social revolution here in the United States, namely, the one of acceptance by the majority of the people of the socialist idea, what would you say with reference to that factor at the present time within the United States?

A: Somewhat lacking, I would say.

Q: Well, explain that.

A: The great mass of American people are still unfamiliar with socialist ideas. That is shown in various ways – by our election results, by attendance at our meetings, circulation of our press, and so on. It is shown that a very small percentage of the American people are interested in socialist ideas at the present time.

... Q (By Mr. Goldman): I call your attention to the condition which you mentioned as a prerequisite for a social revolution in the United States – that is, the one dealing with a party, and ask you whether that exists at the present time in the United States?

A: No, a party sufficiently influential, no, by no means.

Q: What function does the party play prior to the transformation of the social order?

A: Well, the only thing it can do, when it is a minority party, is to try to popularize its ideas, its programs, by publishing papers, magazines, books, pamphlets, holding meetings, working in trade unions – by propaganda and agitation.

The Class Struggle Under Capitalism

Q: Will you tell the court and jury what is meant by “class struggle” as used by Marx?

A: I can’t do it in two sentences, of course. Do you refer to the class struggle in present society?

Q: Yes, confine yourself to the class struggle in present society.

A: Marx contended that present day society is divided into two main classes. One is the capitalists, or the bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie is a French designation which is used by Marx interchangeably with the expression “the modern capitalist.”

The other main class is the working class, the proletariat. These are the two main classes in society. The workers are exploited by the capitalists. There is a constant conflict of interests between them, an unceasing struggle between these classes, which can only culminate in the eventual victory of the proletariat and the establishment of socialism.

Q: Whom would you include under the term “working class”?

A: We use the term working class, or proletariat, to designate the modern wage workers. Frequently it is broadened in its application to include working farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, real dirt farmers, and so on, but that is not a precise, scientific use of the word as Marx defines it.
Q: What other classes, if any, are there outside the working class and the capitalist class, according to Marxian theory?

A: Between these two main powerful classes in society is the class which Marx describes as the petty bourgeoisie – that is, the small proprietors, the small operators, people who have their own little shops, small stores, the farmer who owns a small farm – they constitute a class which Marx called the petty bourgeoisie.

Q: What would you say with reference to the professional classes?

A: Yes, roughly they are included also in this petty-bourgeois category in Marxian terminology.

Q: And what is the attitude of the party towards this middle class?

A: It is the opinion of the party that the wage working class alone cannot successfully achieve the social revolution.

The workers must have the support of the decisive majority of the petty bourgeoisie and, in particular, of the small farmers. That, reiterated time and time again by Trotsky on the basis of the Russian and German experiences, is an absolute prerequisite for success in a revolution – that the workers must have the support of the petty bourgeoisie.

Otherwise, the fascists will get them, as was the case in Germany, and instead of a progressive social revolution, you get a reactionary counterrevolution of fascism.

Q: Define the term “dictatorship of the proletariat”

A: “Dictatorship of the proletariat” is Marx’s definition of the state that will be in operation in the transition period between the overthrow of capitalism and the institution of the socialist society. That is, the workers’ and farmers’ government will, in the opinion of the Marxists, be a class dictatorship in that it will frankly represent the workers and farmers, and will not even pretend to represent the economic interests of the capitalists.

Q: What form will that dictatorship take with reference to the capitalist class?

A: Well, you mean, what would be the attitude toward the dispossessed capitalists?

Q: Yes, how will it exercise its dictatorship over the capitalist class?

A: That depends on a number of conditions. There is no fixed rule. It depends on a number of conditions, the most important of which is the wealth and resources of the given country where the revolution takes place; and the second is the attitude of the capitalist class, whether the capitalists reconcile themselves to the new regime or take up an armed struggle against it.

Q: What is the difference between the scientific definition of dictatorship of the proletariat and the ordinary use of the word dictatorship?

A: Well, the popular impression of dictatorship is a one-man rule, an absolutism. I think that is the popular understanding of the word dictatorship. This is not contemplated at all in the Marxian term dictatorship of the proletariat. This means the dictatorship of a class.

Q: And how will the dictatorship of the proletariat operate insofar as democratic rights are concerned?

A: We think it will be the most democratic government from the point of view of the great masses of the people that has ever existed, far more democratic, in the real essence of the matter, than the present bourgeois democracy in the United States.

Q: What about freedom of speech and all the freedoms that we generally associate with democratic government?

A: I think in the United States you can say with absolute certainty that the freedoms of speech, press,
Capitalists Responsible for Violence

Q: Now, what is the opinion of Marxists with reference to the change in the social order, as far as its being accompanied or not accompanied by violence?

A: It is the opinion of all Marxists that it will be accompanied by violence.

Q: Why?

A: That is based, like all Marxist doctrine, on a study of history, the historical experiences of mankind in the numerous changes of society from one form to another, the revolutions which accompanied it, and the resistance which the outlived classes invariably put up against the new order. Their attempt to defend themselves against the new order, or to suppress by violence the movement for the new order, has resulted in every important social transformation up to now being accompanied by violence.

Q: Who, in the opinion of Marxists, initiated that violence?

A: Always the ruling class; always the outlived class that doesn’t want to leave the stage when the time has come. They want to hang on to their privileges, to reinforce them by violent measures, against the rising majority and they run up against the mass violence of the new class, which history has ordained shall come to power.

Q: What is the opinion of Marxists, as far as winning a majority of the people to socialist ideas?

A: Yes, that certainly is the aim of the party. That is the aim of the Marxist movement, has been from its inception.

Marx said the social revolution of the proletariat – I think I can quote his exact words from memory – “is a movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority”[2] He said this in distinguishing it from previous revolutions which had been made in the interest of minorities, as was the case in France in 1789.

Q: What would you say is the opinion of Marxists as far as the desirability of a peaceful transition is concerned?

A: The position of the Marxists is that the most economical and preferable, the most desirable method of social transformation, by all means, is to have it done peacefully.

Q: And in the opinion of the Marxists, is that absolutely excluded?

A: Well, I wouldn’t say absolutely excluded. We say that the lessons of history don’t show any important examples in favor of the idea so that you can count upon it.

Q: Can you give us examples in American history of a minority refusing to submit to a majority?

A: I can give you a very important one. The conception of the Marxists is that even if the transfer of political power from the capitalists to the proletariat is accomplished peacefully – then the minority, the exploiting capitalist class, will revolt against the new regime, no matter how legally it is established.

I can give you an example in American history. The American Civil War resulted from the fact that the Southern slaveholders couldn’t reconcile themselves to the legal parliamentary victory of Northern capitalism, the election of President Lincoln.

Q: Can you give us an example outside of America where a reactionary minority revolted against a majority in office?

A: Yes, in Spain – the coalition of workers’ and liberal parties in Spain got an absolute majority in the elections and established the People’s Front government. This government was no sooner installed than it was confronted with an armed rebellion, led by the reactionary capitalists of Spain.
Q: Then the theory of Marxists and the theory of the Socialist Workers Party, as far as violence is concerned, is a prediction based upon a study of history, is that right?

A: Well, that is part of it. It is a prediction that the outlived class, which is put in a minority by the revolutionary growth in the country, will try by violent means to hold on to its privileges against the will of the majority. That is what we predict.

Of course, we don’t limit ourselves simply to that prediction. We go further, and advise the workers to bear this in mind and prepare themselves not to permit the reactionary outlived minority to frustrate the will of the majority.

Q: What role does the rise and existence of fascism play with reference to the possibility of violence?

A: That is really the nub of the whole question, because the reactionary violence of the capitalist class, expressed through fascism, is invoked against the workers. Long before the revolutionary movement of the workers gains the majority, fascist gangs are organized and subsidized by millions in funds from the biggest industrialists and financiers, as the example of Germany showed – and these fascist gangs undertake to break up the labor movement by force. They raid the halls, assassinate the leaders, break up the meetings, burn the printing plants, and destroy the possibility of functioning long before the labor movement has taken the road of revolution.

I say that is the nub of the whole question of violence. If the workers don’t recognize that, and do not begin to defend themselves against the fascists, they will never be given the possibility of voting on the question of revolution. They will face the fate of the German and Italian proletariat and they will be in the chains of fascist slavery before they have a chance of any kind of a fair vote on whether they want socialism or not.

It is a life and death question for the workers that they organize themselves to prevent fascism, the fascist gangs, from breaking up the workers’ organizations, and not to wait until it is too late. That is in the program of our party.

Q: What difference is there, Mr. Cannon, between advocating violence and predicting violent revolution?

Mr. Schweinhaut: I object to that.

The Court: Is this man qualified to answer that question? Is that a question for him to answer?

Mr. Schweinhaut: It is for the jury to determine.

Mr. Goldman: I will rephrase the question.

Q (By Mr. Goldman): What is the attitude of the Socialist Workers Party as far as advocating violent revolution is concerned?

A: No, so far as I know, there is no authority among the most representative teachers of Marxism for advocating violent revolution. If we can have the possibility of peaceful revolution by the registration of the will of the majority of the people, it seems to me it would be utterly absurd to reject that, because if we don’t have the support of the majority of the people, we can’t make a successful revolution anyhow.

Q: Explain the sentence that I read from page 6 of the Declaration of Principles, Government’s Exhibit 1:

“The belief that in such a country as the United States we live in a free democratic society in which fundamental economic change can be effected by persuasion, by education, by legal and purely parliamentary method, is an illusion.”

A: That goes back to what I said before, that we consider it an illusion for the workers to think that the ruling-class violence will not be invoked against them in the course of their efforts to organize the majority of the people.
**Attitude to the State**

Q: What is meant by the expression “overthrow of the capitalist state”?

A: That means to replace it by a workers’ and farmers’ government; that is what we mean.

Q: What is meant by the expression “destroy the machinery of the capitalist state”?

A: By that we mean that when we set up the workers’ and farmers’ government in this country, the functioning of this government, its tasks, its whole nature, will be so profoundly and radically different from the functions, tasks, and nature of the bourgeois state, that we will have to replace it all along the line. From the very beginning the workers’ state has a different foundation, and it is different in all respects. It has to create an entirely new apparatus, a new state apparatus from top to bottom. That is what we mean.

Q: Do you mean that there will be no Congress or House of Representatives and Senate?

A: It will be a different kind of a Congress. It will be a Congress of representatives of workers and soldiers and farmers, based on their occupational units, rather than the present form based on territorial representation.

Q: And what is the meaning of “soviet”?

A: Soviet is a Russian word which means “council”. It is the Russian equivalent for council in our language. It means a body of representatives of various groups. That is what the term meant in the Russian Revolution. That is, the representatives – they called them deputies – I guess we would call them delegates. The delegates from various shops in a given city come together in a central body. The Russians called it the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.

Q: Now, what is meant by “expropriation”?

A: Expropriation we apply to big industry, which is in the hands of private capitalists, the Sixty Families – take it out of their hands and put it in the hands of the people through their representatives, that’s expropriation.

Q: Is it a question of principle that there should be no compensation for property expropriated from the Sixty Families?

A: No, it is not a question of principle. That question has been debated interminably in the Marxist movement. No place has any authoritative Marxist declared it a question of principle not to compensate. It is a question of possibility, of adequate finances, of an agreement of the private owners to submit, and so forth.

Q: Would the party gladly pay these owners if they could avoid violence?

A: I can only give you my opinion.

Q: What is your opinion?

A: My personal opinion is that if the workers reached the point of the majority, and confronted the capitalist private owners of industry with the fact of their majority and their power, and then we were able to make a deal with the capitalists to compensate them for their holdings, and let them enjoy this for the rest of their lives, I think it would be a cheaper, a cheaper and more satisfactory way of effecting the necessary social transformation than a civil war. I personally would vote for it – if you could get the capitalists to agree on that, which you couldn’t.

Q: What attitude does the party take toward the ballot?

A: Our party runs candidates wherever it is able to get on the ballot. We conduct very energetic campaigns during the elections, and in general, to the best of our ability, and to the limit of our resources, we participate in election campaigns.

Q: What campaigns do you remember the party having participated in in the last few years?
A: ... In general, it is the policy of the party to have candidates everywhere possible.

Q: Does the party at times support other candidates?

A: Yes. In cases where we don’t have a candidate, it is our policy, as a rule, to support the candidates of another workers’ party, or of a labor or a farmer-labor party. We support them critically. That is, we do not endorse their program, but we vote for them and solicit votes for them, with the explanation that we don’t agree with their program. We support them as against the candidates of the Republican and Democratic parties.

For example, we have always supported the Farmer-Labor candidates in Minnesota in all cases where we didn’t have a candidate of our own party. We supported the candidates of the American Labor Party in New York in similar circumstances.

Q: What is the purpose of the party in participating in these electoral campaigns?

A: The first purpose, I would say, is to make full use of the democratic possibility afforded to popularize our ideas, to try to get elected wherever possible; and, from a long range view, to test out the utmost possibility of advancing the socialist cause by democratic means.

Q: What purpose did you and associates of yours have in creating the Socialist Workers Party?

A: The purpose was to organize our forces for the more effective propagation of our ideas, with the ultimate object that I have mentioned before, of building up a party that would be able to lead the working masses of the country to socialism by means of the social revolution.

Q: What is the attitude of the party, and the opinion of the party, with reference to the government, as it exists now, being capitalist?

A: Yes, we consider it a capitalist government. That is stated in our Declaration of Principles; that is, a government which represents the economic interests of the class of capitalists in this country, and not the interests of the workers and the poor farmers; not the interests of all the people, as it pretends, but a class government...

Internationalist to the Very Core

Q (By Mr. Goldman): What is the position taken by the party on the question of internationalism?

A: The party is internationalist to the very core.

Q: And what do you mean by that?

A: We believe that the modern world is an economic unit. No country is self-sufficient. It is impossible to solve the accumulated problems of the present day, except on a world scale; no nation is self-sufficient, and no nation can stand alone.

The economy of the world now is all tied together in one unit, and because we think that the solution of the problem of the day – the establishment of socialism – is a world problem, we believe that the advanced workers in every country must collaborate in working toward that goal. We have, from the very beginning of our movement, collaborated with like-minded people in all other countries in trying to promote the socialist movement on a world scale. We have advocated the international organization of the workers, and their cooperation in all respects, and mutual assistance in all respects possible.

Q: Does the party have any attitude on the question of racial or national differences?

A: Yes, the party is opposed to all forms of national chauvinism, race prejudice, discrimination, denigration of races – I mean by that, this hateful theory of the fascists about inferior races. We believe in and we stand for the full equality of all races, nationalities, creeds. It is written in our program that we fight against anti-Semitism and that we demand full and unconditional equality for the Negro in all avenues of life. We are friends of the colonial people, the Chinese, of all those that are victimized and treated as inferiors.
Q: What is the position of the party on socialism as a world system?

A: We not only stand for an international socialist movement but we believe that the socialist order will be a world order, not a national autarchy which is carried to its absurd extreme by the fascists, who have tried to set up a theory that Germany could be a completely self-sufficient nation in an economic sense, that Italy can be, and so forth. We believe that the wealth of the world, the raw materials of the world, and the natural resources of the world are so distributed over the earth that every country contributes something and lacks something for a rounded and harmonious development of the productive forces of mankind.

We visualize the future society of mankind as a socialist world order which will have a division of labor between the various countries according to their resources, a comradely collaboration between them, and production eventually of the necessities and luxuries of mankind according to a single universal world plan.

... 

Q (By Mr. Goldman): Mr. Cannon, will you tell us the position of the Socialist Workers Party on the causes of modern war?

A: Modern wars, in the opinion of our party, are caused by the conflict of imperialist nations for markets, colonies, sources of raw material, fields for investment, and spheres of influence.

Q: What do you mean by “imperialist”, Mr. Cannon?

A: Those capitalist nations which directly or indirectly exploit other countries.

Q: What is the party’s position on the inevitability of wars under the capitalist system?

A: As long as the capitalist system remains, and with it those conditions which I have mentioned, which flow automatically from the operation of the capitalist and imperialist system, wars, recurring wars, are inevitable.

Q: And can anybody’s opposition, including the opposition of the Socialist Workers Party to war, prevent wars under the capitalist system?

A: No. Our party has always stated that it is impossible to prevent wars without abolishing the capitalist system which breeds war. It may be possible to delay a war for a while, but eventually it is impossible to prevent wars while this system, and its conflicts of imperialist nations, remains.

Q: Then is it true that the party is of the opinion that wars are caused by international economic conflicts, and not by the good will or bad will of some people?

A: Yes. That does not eliminate the possibility of incidental attacks being caused by the acts of this or that ruling group of one country or another; but fundamentally wars are caused by the efforts of all the capitalist powers to expand into other fields. The only way they can get them is by taking them away from some other power, because the whole world has been divided up among a small group of imperialist powers. That is what leads to war, regardless of the will of the people.

We do not maintain that the ruling groups of any of the imperialist powers now at war really desired the war. We have stated many times that they would have been glad to have avoided it; but they could not avoid it and maintain the capitalist system in their country.

Q: What is the attitude of the party towards a war which it designates as an imperialist war?

A: Our party is unalterably opposed to all imperialist wars.

Q: And what is meant by opposition to imperialist wars?

A: By that we mean that we do not give any support to any imperialist war. We do not vote for it; we do not vote for any person that promotes it; we do not
speak for it; we do not write for it. We are in opposition to it.

Q: How does the Socialist Workers Party oppose the idea of the United States entering into the war?

A: We do it as every other political party promotes its ideas on any foreign policy. We write against it in the paper; we speak against it; we try to create sentiment in any organization we can approach, to adopt resolutions against the war. If we had members in Congress, they would speak in Congress, in the Senate, against it. In general we carry on public political agitation against the entry of the United States into war, and against all measures taken either by the Executive or by Congress which in our opinion lead towards active participation in the war.

...

Q: Will you state the reasons why the party would not support a war conducted by the present government of the United States?

A: In general, we do not put any confidence in the ruling capitalist group in this country. We do not give them any support because we do not think they can or will solve the fundamental social problems which must be solved in order to save civilization from shipwreck.

We believe that the necessary social transition from the present system of capitalism to the far more efficient order of socialism can only be brought about under a leadership of the workers. The workers must organize themselves independently of the capitalist political parties. They must organize a great party of their own, develop an independent working-class party of their own, and oppose the policy of the capitalist parties, regardless of whether they are called the Democratic or Republican, or anything else.