

West Coast Impressions

By

HERBERT APTHEKER

ON THE conclusion of a hectic ten-day speaking tour through a dozen cities and towns in California, and in Seattle—sponsored by the *Daily People's World*—I would like to share with the readers of *M & M* some of my major impressions.

The trip confirmed what has been apparent all about us for the past six or eight months: the tide is turning against reaction; increasing numbers of people are fed up with the witch-hunt and the Red hysteria; there is a universal turning away in horror from war-mongering and H-bomb experimenting.

I heard one Negro youngster say to another: "Don't Bandung me." When I asked him about that word, he said, "Don't you know what Bandung means?—That means: Stop pushing me around!" And he wasn't more than ten years old. Millions of our compatriots, Negro and white, feel that they have been pushed around, sold a bill of goods, made to look like chumps, and they are fed up. There is a new boldness in the air; doors are opening; windows, too, and plenty of fresh air is blowing through the corridors of American homes.

One store-keeper in a little California town north of San Francisco was asked to sign a petition against war and against the use of atomic weapons. He read the petition, signed it, asked if he might have some forms, and in three days brought in **FOUR HUNDRED** signatures from friends and neighbors! Another man went into a general store in a city of about 75,000 and asked the owner to sign. He did. Would the owner mind if the clerks were canvassed? No, he said, go ahead. Every worker in that store signed for peace.

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Folks arranged for me to be interviewed over the radio in Berkeley. I was, and the point of the interview (I went into it cold) was: "What makes you a Communist and what is it you believe?" All asked in perfect honesty, in sincere curiosity. The questions that followed reflected the level of the misinformation handed out by the commercial press, but they were *questions*, and my *opinions* were solicited. Wasn't I really a conspirator? Hadn't all Communists been locked up or weren't they all in hiding? How many were in jail? What kind of people were those in jail? What did I think of free enterprise? And so on—the interview lasted an hour.

At the conclusion, the interviewer wanted to know if I would be interested in doing a monthly 15-minute commentary for the station. Seeing my incredulity (I also, of course, am way behind the times) he assured me he was serious, and he was, and it is arranged and I hope I am not too bad as a radio "commentator"! He said he disagreed

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with my views, but he found them interesting and thought I was honest and felt that the 40,000 people who regularly tune in to that radio station would be interested in hearing those views, especially since they do not get much of an airing.

THE day before my arrival in Seattle, friends in that city called the History Department of the University of Washington, told the people there that I was coming and would the Department like me to speak to some of their students. In an hour it was arranged, and when I arrived I learned that the next morning I would be instructing a class in history at the University, and that a Professor there had indicated his pleasure in this arrangement. So I was at the university at 7:45 in the morning (the class started at 8, reflecting an extraordinary thirst for learning) and the professor introduced me to his class and said I was an advocate of Marxism-Leninism, and an historian, and that he thought it would be useful for his students (about 60 people were in the room) to get a presentation of some historical area by an advocate of this system of thought.

For forty minutes I tried to do justice to the significance of American Negro history, and then for twenty minutes there were questions. Of the eight people who questioned me in the time remaining, only one was of the loutish, baiting type (of course, his question was totally irrelevant) and the professor apologized to me for this character's behavior. Otherwise, the questions varied from the frankly friendly to the guardedly hostile, but the point is that people were asking for my views—that is, for the views of a Communist and they were weighing these views as those of a person who had studied a particular subject and therefore might really have some in-

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formation—even if he was a Communist!

This University had recently fired two distinguished professors—Joseph Butterworth and Herbert J. Phillips—because they were Marxists; the reason I was invited to take over a regular class at the university, for one hour, was because I *was* a Marxist. And this university had just recently banned Professor Oppenheimer. In light of these facts, it is clear, I think, that the invitation to me was, in part, at least, a demonstration of protest against thought-control.

I should add that I spent a delightful two hours later with five members of the history department, discussing matters of common interest in the field of American history, and met nothing but respect and cordiality, especially apparent when, as often happened, our opinions clashed. Nothing but a civilized conversation among half a dozen people, and yet heartening news, I think.

I WOULD, of course, not exaggerate. The tide is turning, but it has not altered so much as to warrant complacency; yet the change certainly makes defeatism out of place. In any case, faced by the dangers of complacency and of defeatism, we find one cure, just as both result in the same evil. That is, the complacent and the defeatist both end up in a shell and remote from and contemptuous of the masses of American people. Therefore, busting out of the shell and ridding ourselves of remoteness and getting among those masses is the surest cure for both ailments.

The forward march is forming; and some folks who have doubted the possibility of ever going forward again in this country are going to wake up after the whole parade has passed them by. The thing to do is

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to join up and get out there in front if possible, to help find the way—but in any case, to join up and add a little momentum to the march that *is going on*. Efforts at deflection and at obstruction are not wanting and will be increased. The outcome depends upon each and everyone of us.

The need is boldness, and again boldness. My warmest thanks to the friends on the West Coast for sharing with me their vigor and freshness, their verve and confidence.

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