Book to Remember

John Newsinger

A. Fenner Brockway, *Will Roosevelt Succeed? A Study of Fascist Tendencies in America*, Routledge, London, 1934, 248 pp.

In the early 1930s there was a fear among many on the British Left that the United States was in danger of going Fascist. Jennie Lee, a regular visitor to the country, wrote in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) newspaper, the *New Leader*, in April 1934 that 'it is Fascism, not Socialism, which is most likely to overtake the American masses'. The following year, Stafford Cripps made clear that he thought that 'short of some miracle, the triumph of Fascism must be expected'.[1] Another visitor to the United States, who actually wrote a book on the subject, *Will Roosevelt Succeed?,* was Archibald Fenner Brockway. At the time he was already a veteran of the socialist cause in Britain, had spent three years in prison during the First World War, had been a Labour MP and was now one of the leaders of the ILP and editor of its newspaper. He had enthusiastically supported the ILP breaking away from the Labour Party in July 1932 and championed what he saw as a revolutionary way forward.[2] And Brockway had seen fascism at first hand, going on a speaking tour in Germany in 1932, where his meetings had to be physically defended against Nazi thugs.[3] He was also the author of an impressive number of books on subjects ranging from prison reform, *A New Way with Crime* (1928), British repression in India, *The Indian Crisis* (1930), poverty during the Great Depression, *Hungry England* (1932) and the arms trade, *The Bloody Traffic* (1933). What did he have to say about the United States?

Will Roosevelt Succeed? was published in 1934 and chronicles Brockway's visit to the United States that took place towards the end of the previous year. This had been his fourth visit in five years. Setting the scene, he wrote that there were three responses to the Great Depression in Europe: 'Germany is seeking the Fascist solution; Russia the Socialist solution; and Britain, with masterly inactivity, is pursuing her historic policy of "muddling through" without any definite plan'. As far as he was concerned, Socialism was certainly being built in the Soviet Union and consequently the Russian people had escaped the Great Depression, but his main concern was with the spread of Fascism which was evident just about everywhere else.[4] He goes on to consider the nature of Fascism, identifying three essential features of the Fascist state. First there is 'an extreme form of Nationalism, finding expression in militarism, war psychology, racialism and economic nationalism'. The second was the imposition of 'an iron dictatorship' and the suppression of all opposition. And third was the introduction of the 'Corporate State', that is 'a highly centralised Capitalism in which competition between employers is eliminated and in which the workers become a disciplined subject class' (pp.16-17). This was the road along which both Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany were travelling. The question was whether or not the United States was going down this same road?

As far as he could see once he had arrived in the country, there were signs of economic recovery already evident compared to his previous visit at the height of the Great Depression. Back then, in St Louis, he had seen 'the unemployed living on waste lands, in shacks put together from old boxes (wood and tin), bits of old motor-cars, bits of corrugated iron, bits of cloth [...] I saw them scrounging over refuse heaps like flies crawling over a dung-hill. Even in India I had not seen destitution more horrible or humiliating'. He observed that back then even in New York 'you could not walk a block [...] without being stopped several times by men, often well-dressed, who begged for money for food or a night's lodging'. Now, however, while there were still people begging, although nowhere near so many, what struck him was that you could not walk the New York streets without coming across 'men and women [...] carrying posters announcing strikes'. Indeed, there were 'trade union pickets every hundred yards or so' (pp.27, 32). This was something new and unexpected. What Brockway had to get to grips with was the National Recovery Act that had been signed into law by President Roosevelt in June 1933 and the impact it was already having.

As far as Brockway was concerned, Roosevelt's administration was engaged in a revolution of sorts. While it had started out cutting the wages of civil servants and carrying through other austerity measures, 'following exactly the same financial policy as Mr Ramsay MacDonald in Britain', this soon changed. Instead, the administration 'plunged into expansion' (pp.147-148). It had, in his words, 'completely thrown over the theory of rugged individualism', recognising that 'the system of competitive Capitalism has broken down and that it must be radically changed'. The US government was now intervening where previously 'only the feet of the great financiers and industrialists could tread' (p.33). The administration had rallied all sorts of radicals to its cause, indeed he met someone he knew from an ILP Summer School who had been enthused about the Soviet Union back then and now told him that 'We are planning too' (p.38). From what he could see, the United States had certainly thrown off 'the deadly indifference of London', but was it going down the Fascist or the Socialist road, 'Or something new, something different from either' (p.36). This was at the very start of the New Deal. Certainly, there was a Fascist danger, the turn to Corporatism, in Roosevelt's revolution and the government had assumed dictatorial powers in many areas, but it was 'a dictatorship by consent' (p.55). As far as Brockway was concerned, General Hugh Johnson, who Roosevelt had installed as head of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), certainly saw Corporatism, the creation of an American Corporate State, as operating along at least 'parallel lines' with Fascist Corporatism. In both the Johnson and the Fascist model, 'the workers must surrender the right to strike and must accept the conditions which are imposed upon them'. Strikes were 'economic sabotage' and 'cannot be tolerated' (pp.94-95). The American working class, however, took a very different view. In his book, Brockway has chapters critically examining the administration's industrial, agricultural, financial and public works policies, but the focus here is on the working class response and the Fascist menace.

On Strike

What was decisive for Brockway was that regardless of Johnson's intentions, far from putting an end to strikes, Roosevelt's measures actually precipitated a growing strike wave, unleashed rank and file activity and gave the impetus to a powerful assault on the open shop that prevailed throughout much of US industry, an assault that was to eventually culminate in the great wave of sit-in strikes in 1937.[5] After the initiation of the National Recovery Scheme, 'it is estimated that trade union membership shot up by nearly a million – that is by twenty-five per cent – and hardly a town was without a strike' (p.59). Although this was certainly not the intention, the Scheme actually encouraged union organising and strikes, indeed in some places, it was the wage cuts and worsening conditions imposed by the NRA that provoked strikes. Brockway looked at the situation in the coal mining industry where for years 'the miners [...] have been starved and terrorised. The Companies have owned the men, body and soul'. The conditions in company towns amounted to servitude with attempts at union organising put down by 'beatings and shootings' (p.61). Now the United Mine Workers Union proclaimed that Roosevelt's New Deal gave them the go-ahead to organise and the tremendous rallying of the miners to the union cause forced both the employers and the government to reluctantly, indeed very reluctantly, back down. Brockway chronicled the revival of the Ladies' Garment Workers' Union that in six months saw its membership rise 'from 40,000 to 160,000', indeed, at one point 'the union actually had 125,000 workers on strike, demanding a twenty-five per cent increase in wages, a 35 hour week and union recognition'. In sweat-shops on the outskirts of New York, the union did not win its full demands, but as he notes wages were increased from six dollars to seventeen and hours worked were reduced from 50 to 37½. Union membership here grew 'from twenty-five per cent to virtually one hundred per cent'. He attended 'one of the strike meetings…They were white-hot with enthusiasm' (pp.65-66). However, it was Detroit that was 'the centre of the class struggle in America'. On his previous visit to the city, he had spent his time looking at 'the conditions of the unemployed', but in 1933 he spent 'most of my time among the strikers at the automobile works'. Here in less than six months the tool and die-makers union 'grew from a dozen men to thirty thousand' and he spoke at a mass strike meeting where 'there was no mistaking the reality of their enthusiasm' (p.65). He knew the strike leader who was a Scottish immigrant and a former ILP member.

Elsewhere, workers actually went on strike against the conditions imposed by the NRA. Brockway visited Paterson, New Jersey, where some 30,000 silk workers had walked out after their wages were cut and their work intensified, striking against the NRA. Here the AFL-backed United Textile Workers was competing with the Communist-led National Textile Workers for support. The United Textile Workers leadership 'discourages mass picketing; the Communist union practices it on a bold scale'. He recounts how at the Lodi factory there were some 5,000 operatives still working so the National Textile Workers organised a march to bring them out with the United Textile Workers instructing its members not to take part. In the event, many of them did regardless. On their way to the Lodi plant, the marchers 'stopped at another dye works in East Paterson where 1,500 operatives were still at work. The demonstration outside the mill brought them all out'. Reinforced in this way, the march continued to the Lodi plant where they clashed with the police. As Brockway puts it: 'There was a riot. But the 5,000 operatives came out'. The National Textile Workers Union in Paterson was led by 22 year old Anna Burlak, 'popularly known as "Red Flame"' (pp.68-69).

Clearly, the NRA could not be described as Fascist, when, whether intentional or not, 'its first effect was a dramatic rise in trade union membership and a strike epidemic'. Fascism would never have tolerated such action, but would have ruthlessly put it down. He was, however, wary regarding various American Federation of Labor union leaders, such as John L. Lewis of the

UMW, who he thought might well be susceptible to Fascism if the terms were right at least as far as rewards for the union leaders themselves were concerned (pp.71-72). Brockway was absolutely scathing about the leaders of most of the AFL unions: they were 'no menace to Capitalism', indeed, they 'have unbounded faith in the Capitalist system' (p.232). And, he makes the point that the situation for leftwing trade unions, outside the AFL, remained bad. For them 'the New Deal had been a bad deal'. He gives the example of the National Miners Union, a Communist-led rival to the UMWU that in Utah had 'called strikes, which were suppressed with gross brutality. Picket lines were broken by the use of tear-gas bombs and rifle fire. Under martial law homes were broken into and women routed from their beds and beaten'. Over 200 strikers were arrested and held in a stockade and a protest against this treatment was 'attacked with gas bombs, clubbed with rifles and driven out of town' (p.88). Red unions were, with the connivance of the AFL, relentlessly harassed, their members victimised and their strikes broken.

The Fascist Danger

While the Roosevelt administration was clearly not Fascist, Brockway was nevertheless very aware of the Fascist danger that did exist in the United States. One factor he identified was the plight of the American middle class. Their 'economic suffering' would undoubtedly make them 'responsive to Fascism'. This was of great importance 'because middle class psychology is the psychology of so large a proportion of its population. The working class who are not labourers regard themselves as belonging to the middle class'. Even so, he thought the 'rugged individualism' that is an important feature of middle class psychology in the United States worked against an embrace of Fascism (pp.169-170). He also comments on the comparative weakness of the existing Fascist organisations, the Silver Shirts, the White Crusaders, the Khaki Shirts and others, at the time. They 'are of little significance except so far as they indicate an underlying tendency'. The biggest danger was actually posed by the American Legion, the ex-servicemen's organisation, which he saw as potentially playing the same role as 'the German Storm Troops before the triumph of Hitler' (pp.236-237).

Another factor that Brockway identified as pointing in a Fascist direction was 'the readiness with which Americans turn to violence', in particular the violence that the police and troops resort to 'almost as a matter of course'. Strikes and demonstrations were routinely subjected to violent attack. He describes one incident where a protest by small farmers and their supporters, some 300 people altogether, at Boonville in New York State, was confronted by troops who suddenly attacked them. The troops 'shot gas bombs at the crowd and clubbed them, old and young, men and women alike'. He makes the point that if such an attack had happened in Germany, 'it would have been described as a Fascist outrage. But such things are a commonplace of American disputes' (pp.172-173). And American workers were, he notes, more than ready to respond violently themselves. And then there was racism and lynching. He was in a newspaper office talking to the editor when news came in of a State Governor who 'actually commended a crowd of lynchers who had stormed a jail, strung two young men to a tree, and set their clothes on fire, after soaking them in kerosine'. The victims of lynching are almost always 'Negroes', and he identified this violent racism as one of the factors strengthening Fascist tendencies, especially in the South. Indeed, he thought that 'an American Fascism might easily re-introduce slavery'. In response to this racist oppression, many 'Negroes' turned to the Communists 'who are courageously championing their rights' and in the 1932 Presidential election 'the Communists boldly nominated a Negro as their candidate for Vice President'. This growing identification between the 'Reds' and the 'Negroes' which he welcomed was nevertheless yet another factor that he saw as potentially strengthening the Fascist cause in the United States. And, of course, there was also the corrosive presence of anti-Semitism in American society with the Jews being blamed for being both behind the 'Reds' and responsible for Capitalism and its problems (pp.173-177). One factor that he thought worked against Fascism was 'the mentality of feminine America' (p.181). He did not believe that young American women, certainly not those he had met, would submit to Fascist gender subordination.

In his final chapter, 'Where America Heads', Brockway concluded that Roosevelt was doomed to fail in his attempt to save American Capitalism, trying as he was, to sustain 'an economic system which has outlived its day' (p.248). Another great economic crisis was inevitable with everything that involved. This failure would lead to a massive increase in the level of social conflict with Socialist and Fascist forces battling on the streets. In these circumstances, he hoped for united action by the Socialists and the Communists. He wrote: 'There will be demonstrations in the streets, particularly by the working class belonging to the Jewish and "foreign" populations. There will be strikes in many large industrial centres. The violence which is inherent in American psychology will be let loose'. Fascism will become a major threat, indeed he 'can see America passing into a state of Fascism, but I cannot see America remaining in a state of Fascism'. The threat would not be uniform. He expected it to be most dangerous in the South where 'the Negroes would be driven back to a condition of virtual slavery by a brutality to which Fascist Europe could contribute nothing'.[6] In other parts of the country though, the Fascist challenge might well be beaten back and there 'are all the possibilities of the United States becoming the Divided States during the struggle which is likely to accompany a second crisis'. There will be fierce battles, but out of it will come Socialism, indeed 'the possibilities of America are exhilarating. They are greater than within any other country'. America will, he believed, 'have to go through a stage of Fascism. But beyond that one can see, after struggle and suffering, the realisation of the new society of social equality, justice and freedom' (pp.242 -245).

Looking Back

Brockway published a volume of memoirs, *Inside the Left*, in 1942. Here he looked back on his 1933 visit to the United States, describing the New Deal as 'a revolution in the whole approach of American statesmen to the economic problem'. Nevertheless, as far as he was concerned, 'the best thing about the New Deal was without any doubt the stimulus which it gave to Trade Union organisation and action'. More generally, Roosevelt's Recovery Plan 'did not deal with the fundamental causes of capitalist crisis and in many respects was grotesque'. It was, however, 'carried through with a boldness which was refreshing after my experience of the incompetent futility of the Labour Government in Britain'.[7] Most revealing is that there is no discussion whatsoever of any Fascist danger in the United States at this time! That had never materialised. There was no new economic collapse and then war broke out. But, as we have seen, the fear was very real at the time.

Notes

1 Henry Pelling, *America and the British Left: From Bright to Bevan*, London, 1956, p 142
2 For an overview of Brockway's political life see my 'In the middle of the road: Fenner Brockway, the Independent Labour Party and the class struggle', *International Socialism* 179 (Summer 2023)
3 Among the meetings he spoke at was one in Breslau, organised by the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands and chaired by Ernst Eckstein. A year later and Eckstein had been arrested, paraded through the streets for being a Socialist and a Jew, thrown into a concentration camp where he

was dead within a week. The ILP established the Eckstein Fund to assist the outlawed German Socialist movement. See A. Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left: Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament*, London, 1942, pp.280-281

4 He acknowledges that the Soviet Union 'has some features in common with Fascist Germany and Fascist Italy', but 'these likenesses are only on the surface'. Certainly the Soviet Union is a dictatorship, but he went on, 'the object of that dictatorship is to establish an industrial democracy in which alone, it believes, can real political democracy find expression'. In other respects, he was full of praise for the progress the country was making, insisting that 'the principles of industrial democracy have been applied very extensively' in the factories, that 'racialism is being eliminated by extending autonomy to the many peoples within its territories', punishing expressions of anti-Semitism in stark contrast to Nazi Germany, all while 'concentrating upon the task of national Socialist reconstruction' (pp.22-23).This was, of course, before the start of the Great Terror and the Moscow trials.

5 For the great working class revolt during these years see John Newsinger, *Fighting Back: The American Working Class in the 1930s*, London, 2012

6 Incredible though it might seem, in October 1935, the Nazi SS journal, *Das Schwarze Korps*, actually complained that the lynchings routinely taking place in the United States were far worse than anything that was happening in Germany but that the rest of the world just ignored them: see Newsinger 2012, p.119

7 Brockway, *Inside the Left*, p.229