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THE TRUTH ABOUT THE AUTO CRISIS.

(The Petty-Bourgeois Leaders Before the Test
of the Class Struggle)

by

George Clarke

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THE TRUTH ABOUT THE AUTO CRISIS

(The petty-bourgeois leaders before the test of the class struggle)

It is now approximately one year since the dispute arose between the New York Political Committee and the comrades in the field over the policy to be followed by party members in the auto workers union--popularly known as the "auto crisis." This event is now history but it is important history in that it serves to illuminate more than any other single incident the real meaning of the current factional struggle.

Shachtman, Burnham, Abern and the other leaders of the minority have deliberately distorted the facts of the "auto crisis", carefully hidden their true meaning and laid down a smokescreen composed of the secondary aspects of the crisis which bears no significant relation to the principal issue. There is nothing astonishing in this. They conceal the truth from party members for very substantial personal reasons:

1. The "auto crisis" contains a crushing answer to the charges made by them in their fanciful document "War and Bureaucratic Conservatism";

2. The "auto crisis" reveals that if ever the party leadership was administered in an arrogant, bureaucratic manner it was by Burnham, Shachtman and Abern;

3. It reveals that their conception of the powers and authority of leadership is one based on formal authority and not upon the voluntary confidence and respect granted them by the rank and file for competence in answering the practical problems of the class struggle and solving questions in dispute with skill and understanding;

4. It reveals that the Burnham-Shachtman-Abern leadership was prepared, in a practical matter, mind you!, to use the most drastic measures to enforce the formal powers of the P.C., to establish their authority by main force even if it meant disgracing comrades directly involved in an important sector of the class struggle and compromising the party in the eyes of thousands of workers;

5. It revealed in Shachtman and Burnham qualities of stubbornness and capriciousness entirely alien to leaders of a proletarian movement--qualities which made them incapable of making concessions in a practical matter except under the most insistent pressure from the most experienced trade unionists in the party and from a whole cadre of loyal, tested and responsible comrades. And when the concessions were finally made, they showed themselves to be embittered, petulant petty-bourgeois, threatening to resign from leadership, washing their hands of all responsibility for the change in policy and for its execution and taunting the comrades in the field with prophecies of disaster; (How differently they react when the fundamentals of the party program are involved! How flexible they are before the pressure of the petty-bourgeois radicals and bourgeois liberals!)

6. It revealed not only an unwillingness to learn from the workers and the trade unionists but a presumptuous attempt to teach in a field where they admittedly are least qualified, least informed and least experienced; it revealed complete ignorance of the dynamics of the workers movement--a formalistic, undialectical approach to the real problems of the class struggle.

These charges will be proved beyond the possibility of successful contradiction in this document.* To those not blinded by factional animus, the auto crisis will indicate far more than an incidental error in policy. The auto crisis was, in a sense, a microcosm of the present factional struggle--a prophetic warning of the kind of party the S.W.P. would be under the leadership of Burnham-Abern-Shachtman or the kind of party Burnham-Abern-Shachtman will lead outside the ranks of the Fourth International if they carry out their threats of split.

1. The Famous New Year's Day Meeting

The "auto crisis" has its chronological and psychological origin in what has now become the "notorious" New Year's day meeting. The opposition has for months been whispering--mostly misinformation--in corridors, cafeterias and private homes about this "notorious" meeting. The Winchellian masterpiece "War and Bureaucratic Conservatism" assigns prominent place to this meeting. It alleges that this meeting proved that: "The P.C. is in reality a fiction or at best a semi-fiction (!) Its authority is strictly limited. Here it may act, but into this territory it may not venture. Over the P.C. looms the N.C. (which formally is as it should be); and over the N.C. looms the final authority--the Cannon clique...But even the N.C. is largely fictitious. It is called upon to act only rarely (we will soon see how much respect the Burnham-Shachtman-Abern "democrats" actually have for the National Committee -- G.C.) and then its deliberations have an air of unreality. The clique itself is the court of last appeal, on all "crucial" questions--i.e., questions "off/roginge." And this is illustrated by the January 1st meeting which "sat as a deciding body, usurping the functions of both P.C. and N.C." (Internal Bulletin, Vo. II No. 6, pages 12 and 13).

Now what actually happened? Late in December 1938, Comrades Cannon, Dunne and Smith had a conversation in Minneapolis concerning trade union matters. In the course of his work Comrade Smith had developed new contacts. The question of how these contacts could be utilized to build our forces in auto was discussed in the Minneapolis meeting of the three comrades and some tentative plans were worked out. It was agreed that Smith would submit the proposals to his contacts; further concrete steps awaited the results. On December 30th, Comrade Cannon received a wire from Smith informing him that Smith had made satisfactory agreements with his friends and that he and Dunne would arrive in New York to discuss plans more concretely. Cannon immediately wired Cochran (then in Flint) to come to New York so he could supply information on the auto situation with which he was conversant.

The first informal meeting between these four comrades took place on New Year's eve. Immense possibilities were opened up for our work in auto. Plans for a large-scale, aggressive campaign were outlined. The Opposition seriously reproaches the out-of-town comrades for the jesting reply made to queries about their appearance at the party affair "that they wanted to attend the New Year's Eve party." What stupidity and nonsense! Do they seriously suggest that information about such a highly confidential mission as this be discussed, or even information given at a New Year's Eve party--of all places? Shachtman, Burnham and Clarke were, however, asked to attend an informal meeting the next day.

At the session the following day at Cannon's home, a report of the meeting the previous day was given, proposed plans for the campaign were outlined; The plans were for Cochran to return to Michigan to lead our group in auto; Clark to

* All facts concerning meetings where the author was not present have been carefully checked with official documents and participants at the meetings.

go to Detroit for party work and Jules Geller to Flint; confidential matters relating to the financing of the campaign were discussed. Contrary to Opposition insinuations little discussion took place over policy to be followed in auto--we shall return to this point later. The campaign was to be conducted under the direction of the N.C. members in the field with authority to decide practical questions on the spot. By and large, this is the only way to conduct a serious trade union campaign. Naturally the field committee was not freed of supervision or of final veto by the P.C. The proposed plans were approved by all present for presentation, discussion and ratification or rejection by the Political Committee. (Incidentally, Felix Morrow was not present at this meeting as the Opposition asserts in its document.)

On January 3rd at the Political Committee all members were present including N.C. members Clarke, Morrow and Morgan (alternate) and Lebrun and Roberts by invitation. The plans for the campaign were presented as fully as possible by Cannon and accepted by the committee without opposition either in the discussion or in the vote. The only discordant note was struck by Abern who was playing his old game of clique politics. He proposed "that Comrade Clarke remain in N.Y. for a period of 60 days to work on the Appeal, pending the addition of forces to the Appeal; that during the period of 60 days, the labor secretary (Widick) proceed to Michigan to work there, assisting in the party and trade union organizational work." It was of little importance to Abern that Clarke had worked for over a year and a half in the Michigan areas as organizer; knew all the comrades personally and had excellent relations with them; had many contacts among auto workers and was well informed on the problems of the auto union. Abern was concerned, as always, with rewarding a member of his clique for personal loyalty. Give Widick a chance to cop some "glory" in a big campaign. The trick use of the words "labor Secretary" in his motion were too obvious a ruse to deceive any of the members of the committee. Abern's amendment was defeated by all votes except those of Abern and Widick(!).

No intimation was given at this meeting or previously that anyone had objections to the New Year's consultation or considered it "usurping the functions of both P.C. and N.C." How could there possibly have been objections to this procedure? Scores of such consultations had occurred previously and subsequently among leading members of the party--consultations in which the only member of the so-called "Cannon clique" present was Cannon himself. Such consultations take place in every serious organization that ever existed.

As a general rule practically all important formal decisions are preceded by informal consultations and discussions in the course of which definitive plans finally take shape. There was nothing wrong in the New Year's meeting nor in the New Year's Eve meeting nor in the preliminary consultations in the field. The comrades involved deserve not criticism but credit for initiating the plans for the campaign and developing them in informal consultations in order to bring them finally before the P.C. in the form of a practical program of action. Practically all important party actions are initiated and developed that way and cannot be efficiently prepared any other way. What the party needs is more comrades who can initiate and develop practical plans for trade union campaigns and bring them before the P.C. for ratification.

Secondly, it should now be clear that highly confidential matters were discussed at the New Year's Day meeting. That was quite clear to the members of the P.C. meeting at that time. There isn't space in this document to relate the numerous occasions when matters requiring secrecy have been discussed by small

committees. Nobody ever thought or said in those instances that the failure to call in all P. C. members constituted a "usurping" action. Everyone knew and knows that this method was chosen for the protection of the party from premature or unnecessary exposure.

Then why--the Opposition still asks--were Gould, Abern, Widick, McKinney (the other members of the P.C.) not invited? For two very good reasons besides those stated above:

1. All of these present were personally directly involved in the contemplated activity. Moreover, two other campaigns were already under way (the twice-weekly Appeal drive, and the French campaign). Clarke had been the active editor of the Appeal up to that time; if he was to leave for Michigan someone had to take his place. Shachtman was unquestionably the indicated person, especially since the twice-weekly would soon be a reality. Cannon was to leave for France shortly. His place in the office had to be filled by someone during his absence. Goldman was suggested but it was indicated that Goldman could not leave Chicago for some time. In the meanwhile, the proposal was made that Shachtman and Burnham take over the office work with the assistance of Abern. All these motions are recorded in the P.C. minutes of January 3rd.

2. Abern's presence in a meeting where confidential information was reported was considered a disquieting factor. Everyone knew that Abern's clique--consisting of irresponsible people--was always informed of everything that occurred in the P.C., in its formal and informal meetings. Everyone knew that twice before in party history--just prior to fusion with the Musteite A.W.P. and just prior to the split in the S.P.--confidential information of this kind had fallen into the hands of our enemies. Abern was not trusted, and most of all not trusted by his present caucus comrades. To keep Abern out of the meeting and not create a factional situation--so we innocently but mistakenly thought--no other comrade regardless of his past either on the P.C. or N.C. or his trustworthiness could be invited to this meeting. Only comrades directly involved in the contemplated activity were called in.

It was a delicate problem. Burnham and Shachtman appreciated it as much no less than did the so-called members of the "Cannon clique." The fact that they found objections to the procedure post factum, "in the Spring" they say, derived from entirely different reasons than objection to the procedure. Their objection today, the raising of this meeting is a piece of the most brazen dishonesty--a cowardly renunciation for factional reasons of an action necessary for party growth and activity.

It may appear that the New Year's meeting occupies an inordinately long space in this document, entirely out of all proportion to its real importance. But the reader must remember that it is not the so-called "Cannon clique" which put the New Year's meeting on the agenda of the party discussion. This question has been persistently raised by the Opposition, and yet, strangely enough these champions of "truth" and "morals" deliberately fail to mention the most vital "truth" which emerged at this meeting.

Following reports and discussion of the situation in Michigan, of the technical and financial aspects of the campaign, the meeting turned its attention to personnel. Clarke agreed to leave N.Y. for the post of Detroit organizer and Cochran to return to Michigan. As a matter of course, Shachtman was asked to assume full-time duty as editor of the Appeal. To the great stupefaction of all,

Shachtman declined the "nomination". Then with one of his characteristic speeches--where he tries to anticipate objections by admitting guilt in advance--Shachtman declared his intention of quitting full time party work to seek a job in private industry. He had personal difficulties and needed more income. The campaign in auto, the drive for the twice-weekly Appeal, the intervention in France would remove Cannon from the center--all of this Shachtman had subordinated to his personal problem. More important his desertion of full-time work at this crucial moment, would have jeopardized these campaigns to the great detriment of the progress of the party.

Shachtman was aware of all this. Perhaps Shachtman believed he was confronted with a group of hard-boiled, callous fanatics for whom personal problems do not and cannot exist. If he actually entertained any such incredible notion, he was quickly disillusioned. True the comrades were infuriated by Shachtman's announcement of desertion--but they suppressed this anger to suggest financial arrangements that would provide a solution for his personal problem within the movement. The top party wage of \$30.00 per week was offered him and it was explained how this wage could be guaranteed. Still Shachtman remained adamant in his declination. Finally, after men like Cannon, Dunne and Debbs made speech after speech imploring and begging Shachtman to consent, he said he would "think it over" and give his answer within the next two days.

At the P.C. meeting on January 3rd, Shachtman accepted the proposal but made sure to couple it with the threat that he was serving notice that the first time the money failed to be paid he would leave the editorship for an outside job. Significantly enough, Burnham never uttered a solitary word during the discussion of Shachtman's role. Undoubtedly he was acting on a principle--the principle that the party has no right to interfere in the personal lives of its leaders; no right to ask them to subordinate their personal problems to the needs of the movement; no right to demand sacrifices from them in a crucial situation. How must the worker feel towards a party which asks him to sacrifice his life in a strike or demonstration and yet considers the serene calm of the lives of its petty bourgeois leaders a realm which it dare not disturb?

That revolting picture of Shachtman, the professional revolutionist, threatening to desert his post in time of crisis, left an indelible impression in the minds of the witnesses on the scene. If Shachtman would know what single incident, more than anything else, weakened nay, almost shattered our confidence in him let him turn back to the New Year's day meeting. If Shachtman would know the historical precedents for his petty-bourgeois tendency--precent XII added to the chain of eleven irrefutable and annihilating precedents cited by Comrade Trotsky--let him turn back to the New Year's Day meeting. ...

2. Shachtman-Burnham Reverse the Policy of the Field

Clarke arrived in Detroit on Monday, January 16th. By that time the factional struggle between Martin and the Stalinists had once again broken violently into the open. The press was full of charges and counter-charges. The atmosphere was tense and it was obvious that this was the show-down struggle. Clarke discussed at length with the local auto worker comrades their impressions of the struggle and heard their suggestions for party policy. The next day and the day after the discussion continued in Flint between Cochran, Clarke, Jules Geller, the Johnsons and Adams, leading party unionist in Michigan on a union assignment. The policy agreed upon was: an attack on both Martin and the Stalinists; a campaign which centered its main emphasis on the unity of the U.A.W. against both groups; and the formation of

a Third Group, with a positive program of union action, as the vehicle for this campaign. The question of which convention (Detroit or Cleveland) we would support was left unanswered as not vital to the main line, and as dependant on events which were developing with a terrific speed but in an undetermined direction. We will discuss the validity of this or that policy later on in this document. Here we wish merely to state the facts. Smith was contacted by long distance wire and he indicated essential agreement with the policy. For practical reasons, it was impossible to contact comrade Dunne.

A decision was adopted to summon a national auto conference to discuss the policy outlined above. On Sunday, January 26th, auto workers and comrades active in the auto centers of Detroit, Flint, Toledo, Cleveland and South Bend gathered in Detroit. After a lengthy, lively discussion, in which almost every comrade took part, the policy and the proposed program of the Third Group submitted to the conference were unanimously adopted. The comrades left for their home towns full of enthusiasm for the plan of action and eager to get the campaign under way.

Late that night in consultation with Comrades Cochran and Adams, Clarke wrote a combined policy-article and news-story for the Appeal and mailed it air-rail-special delivery to N.Y. A copy of the same article was also mailed to Dunne in Minneapolis. The article was purposely vague about the Cleveland and Detroit conventions in line with the policy adopted at the conference that afternoon. Its main fire was directed against both Martin and the Stalinists as splitters. Its slogan was unity. Its method the intervention of the rank and file. The entire policy was summed up in the opening sentences;

"Detroit, Jan. 23 -- The United Automobile Workers of America, which fought and defeated the biggest monopolies in the country, is now being split wide open by two contenders for power.

"Unless the rank and file speaks up, and speaks up soon, the union will be a smoking ruin, powerless to fight the corporations, unable to shield the interests of the unemployed. The entire labor movement will suffer a major disaster.

"On the one side, is the "Executive Board Majority", consisting of the union-wrecking Communist Party-Unity Group crowd in alliance with reactionaries who formerly supported Martin. On the other side is the Martin group, composed of a few bottom-heavy office-holders and backed by a very smelly alliance of reactionaries and Lovestonites..."

This article--more accurately, the policy contained therein--encountered violent opposition from the leading comrades in N.Y. (It must be pointed out here that Comrade Cannon had already left for France and did not return to N.Y. until Summer, long after the auto dispute had subsided. The P.C. was entirely free from the direct influence of any member of the "Cannon clique" and under the immediate leadership of Burnham-Shachtman). Confronted with this sharp disagreement over trade union policy with leading comrades in the field, how did this "leadership" react?

Immediately Burnham sat down at his typewriter and banged out an editorial diametrically opposite in line from that proposed by the article summarizing the policy adopted by the Field Committee and the National Auto Conference. The main line of the Burnham editorial read as follows:

"They (the Stalinists) have now taken their final step. Fearing with good reason to face a really democratic and representative convention of the rank and file of the entire union, they have forced a split of the Executive Board and called their steege convention in Cleveland...

"The future of the union movement in auto does not and cannot lie with the Cleveland puppet show...

"It is time for the militant and progressive rank and file to assert their own rights, to take over their own union in their own name. The locals must elect their delegates to the Detroit (Martin) convention, not to submit to Martin but to re-establish the rule of the members over their own union..."

The orientation of this editorial was clearly for the Martin convention, as can be seen, despite the severe condemnation of Martin's policy and the call for the formation of a Third Group. Burnham did one more revealing thing in his editorial which exposes the ultimattistic attitude of the cloistered intellectual towards the workers. The editorial closed with a specific eight-point program for the Third Group to adopt. Clarke's article deliberately left the program in general terms so that it could be issued for the first time not by the S.W.P. or by the Socialist Appeal but by the Third Group which was already in process of formation. We wanted the program to appear as the product of an independent group of auto workers. Burnham apparently wanted to dictate it to the workers--no doubt in the interests of "science" and "truth." One more bureaucratic stunt--these "sensitive", "democratic" leaders pulled before they entered the P.C. meeting. They revised Clarke's article--"Bowdlerized" is a better word--in just enough places to completely change its meaning to the exact opposite of what it had originally said. This must have been the work of Shachtman who has shown himself quite adept at using the same arguments to support diametrically contrary policies. How interesting is the comparison between the brutal way they treated an article from the field and the loud complaints they fill P.C. meetings with when as much as a shade of a meaning of the precious literati Burnham, Shachtman, MacDonald and Co. is changed?

The Political Committee minutes of January 24, 1939 read as follows:

"Article by Clarke on the auto situation read.

"Editorial by Burnham read.

"Motions by Burnham: (1) To adopt the main line of the editorial prepared by Burnham on the UAW as embodying our policy; (2) to revise the article of Corrade Clarke in accordance with the line of the editorial; (3) to publish the editorial and revised article in the current issue of the Appeal. Carried.

"General discussion on motion and auto policy."

Observe here (and this is two-thirds of the recorded minutes, the remainder will be quoted later) that there is no motion, no suggestion no intimation that before adopting a policy completely at loggerheads with the Field Committee and the National Auto Conference--the committee was in the slightest degree interested in gaining additional information from the comrades on the scene. Not even a hint that some P.C. comrade, or the entire P.C. might go out to the field to get information and debate the policy; not even a hint that one of the Field comrades might be called into N.Y. for the same purpose--no! these thoughts didn't even

enter the minds of Burnham's "democrats." Even the simple proposal that no article or just a general news story appear in the next edition of the Appeal until a more thorough and rounded discussion could be held with the Field Comrades seemed as remote as Burnham's present connection with our movement.

The Political Committee, 5 out of 7 members present, was granted the formal right by the National Committee to make decisions between its plenary meetings. Burnham and Co. were bureaucratically insisting upon this formal right in a practical trade union matter 700 miles from the scene of action without consultation of the comrades involved and in direct opposition to the desires and policy elaborated by those comrades. They know, moreover, that comrades from five cities had not endorsed the Field policy. They had been informed in a letter to Shachtman accompanying the article by Clarke. They argue today that Clarke was remiss in his duties for not sending more elaborate information to the P.C. Suppose that is true--although there were extenuating circumstances, constant meetings with auto workers with our own comrades and the beginnings of work in a new situation--does that thereby give this committee the prerogative to act like peevish school children and say: "Since you failed to supply us with information we will not ask you for any and we will adopt a policy without your information and against your line." In our movement, this procedure goes by the name of "revenge politics"--the characteristic of petty-bourgeois leaders.

Still, to carry through the policy without consulting the Field Comrades was a little too brazen even for "daring" generals. A discussion ensued, opened by L., an N.C. member not on the P.C., over somebody going to Detroit for consultation. How did Burnham and Co. regard the proposal for consultation? To iron out a common policy? To obtain information? If the discussion at the P.C. meeting had any meaning at all, it was to the effect that the P.C. member would go to the field to put the P.C. line over on the Field Comrades. Here is how the minutes read:

"Motion by Aborn: That Comrade Widick go to Detroit and Dunne come there from Minneapolis.

"Amendment by Burnham: That Shachtman go instead of Widick. Carried, Widick recorded against.

"MEETING ADJOURNED"

An instructive little scene. An exhibition in miniature, in a practical action, of the basic characteristics of the Minority combination as revealed in the present internal struggle.

1. Burnham, the father of the policy and the maker of the motion on the policy does not volunteer to go. He proposes to send instead an errand boy (Shachtman). And nobody even proposes Burnham. Burnham, you see, is the aristocrat of the committee; he does the brain work; the "dirty job" of going out into the field, of persuading comrades of a policy or of carrying it out is not within the province of his class.

2. Aborn proposes Widick. Why Widick? Could Widick even convince a Yipsel of a policy he didn't believe in? Could Widick even convey information correctly if he was in disagreement with it? It is not easy to give an affirmative answer to this question. But Widick is a member of Aborn's clique--if the boy couldn't go for the "glory" originally, let him go now to teach these insolent

"Cannonites" their place. The vote is taken. Nobody is for Widick but Widick himself (and why not? Wasn't Widick Labor Secretary?). Poor Widick! If only he had half as much ability as conceit!

Just before Shachtman boarded the plane for Detroit, the committee made a final gesture of disregard and contempt for the field comrades: The technical editor of the Appeal locked up the forms of the paper containing Burnham's pro-Martin editorial and Clarke's bawdlerized article and prepared it for the press! Evidently to make an agreement easier.

3. Shachtman Up In The Air

Early Tuesday morning, January 25th, Shachtman arrived in Detroit. The same afternoon Dunne came by train from Minneapolis. Smith could not attend because of important union business. Discussions began almost immediately, with Dunne, Shachtman, Clarke and Cochran participating, and continued for more than five hours without interruption. Shachtman came to Detroit, in the unanimous decision of the P.C. means anything, as a defender of the Burnham policy for which he had voted. But Shachtman made no attempt to convince us of the correctness of this policy. He confined himself to questions arising from doubts in his own mind, to questions Shachtman's hypothetical "worker" was liable to ask, to abrupt demands for "yes" and "no" answers to "concrete" questions, to speculations about the future of the labor movement, to precedents of all varieties. Shachtman had no firm, independent position of his own. A peer attorney for Burnham, he was firmly convinced only of his own "doubts". By ten or eleven o'clock that night, in the opinion of all the others, Shachtman was ready to change his position in favor of that of the field comrades. He was already seeking answers to questions people like Burnham might ask about their line. But just around that time, Corrado Adams entered the room with a copy of the morning edition of the Detroit Free Press carrying the headline: "MARTIN BOLTS CIO". Dunne was the first to speak on this drastic turn in events. He pointed out that now we must turn our line sharply in favor of the Cleveland CIO convention. The majority of the auto workers favored the CIO and despised the AFL in which direction Martin was now turning. Any other policy would cut us adrift from the main stream of the auto workers movement and isolate us together with an insignificant minority in the Martin group.

With the speed of a recoiling spring, Shachtman seized upon the position outlined by Dunne. Yes, he was for it wholeheartedly. It seemed he was heaving a sigh of relief at returning to his task-masters in N.Y. with a position unlike either that of Burnham or the original policy of the Field Committee. Unfortunately for Shachtman, however, Clarke and Cochran could not fail to see the logic of Dunne's remarks and quickly arrived at agreement with the new policy. (Later it will be demonstrated that the pro-CIO convention orientation was a modification of the Field Committee line and did not clash with it as it did with the Burnham policy.) In reality Shachtman was not convinced of the pro-CIO convention line any more than he had been convinced of the pro-Martin line.

A good part of the discussion was devoted on Shachtman's insistence to an organization question: Did the Field Committee have "independent" or merely "autonomous" powers? Shachtman accepted our assurances that we wanted no "independence" from the P.C., that we were entirely prepared as a matter of course to be subordinated to it, that we wanted only the "autonomy" the P.C. had unanimously voted us in its January 3rd meeting to formulate tactics on the spot without prior consent of the P.C.--all of these earnest assurances were accepted by him with considerable scepticism.

Before the meeting broke up Shachtman tried to prevail upon one of us to return to N.Y. to help convince the P.C. of the new line. But this was out of the question because of pressure of the work. All the way down to the airport Shachtman kept trying to convince one of us to return with him and constantly repeating: "I wish I were as sure as you are that your policy is correct." But the discussion was over and Harriet Shachtman went up in the air again.

4. Burnham Cracks the Bureaucratic Whip

Shachtman reported the position he had taken in agreement with the Field Committee to the P.C. the next day. (The minutes report all present with the exception of Cannon "out of town" and Gould "(ill)". Morrow and L. were also present as N.C. members. Shachtman appeared at this meeting, according to the testimony of both L. and Morrow, not as a partisan battling for his convictions but rather as a reporter retailing information. The vehemence and drive with which Shachtman is now trying to change the party's position on its fundamental Marxist doctrine can be compared with his attitude at that meeting only by likening it to the harsh unmeasured tones with which the petty-bourgeois radical lashes at the "extremist" Bolsheviks and his gentle, chiding words admonishing the reactionary bourgeoisie. How could it be otherwise? Within a period of 48 hours Shachtman had taken two basically contradictory positions. He had been equally convinced of each of them--more accurately, equally sceptical of both. Unconvinced himself, how could he possibly convince others? Yet, the facts of the auto situation Shachtman had presented in his report were so persuasive that McKinney and L. came to agreement with the pro-CIO convention orientation before Shachtman's return from Detroit.

The Committee minutes read as follows:

SPECIAL P. C. MEETING, January 26, 1939

Report by Shachtman on the Detroit conference and policies recommended on the UAW.

"Extended discussion on auto policy.

"Motion by Shachtman: That the material in the Socialist Appeal be revised before distribution as follows: (1) The latest declaration of Martin is a reactionary step representing a split from the CIO to the AF of L, that is, from the main stream of the militant, progressive, industrial union movement and in capitulation to the AF of L machine, leaving behind, in the ranks of the CIO the bulk of the organized workers involved; (2) We must point out that the Stalinists bear the main responsibility for driving the progressive elements in the Martin ranks to an extreme and unsupportable reaction to their provocations; (3) We stand, at the present stage, for unity inside the CIO, not excluding the variant of a future Martin union converting its present minority into a decisive majority; (4) In orienting on the Cleveland convention, we call on the members to go there to fight against the Stalinist record, program, and leadership. (My emphasis-G.C.),

"For 1; Against 2; Abern not voting; McKinney abstaining. (My emphasis-G.C.)

Motion by Burnham: To reaffirm the position taken Tuesday.

"For 3 (Burnham, Widick, Abern); Against 2 (Shachtman, McKinney)."

"Motion by McKinney: That the article in the Socialist Appeal on the automobile situation be revised along the following lines;

- 1- To support the Cleveland convention on the ground that the majority of the automobile workers will go to Cleveland since this will be the official CIO convention. This is in line with the position of the party for support of the CIO in preference to the AF of L.
 - 2- The resignation of Martin from the National Council of the CIO is a backward step away from the CIO and logically leads toward the AF of L.
 - 3- The workers of Cleveland must be warned that the Stalinists bear the main responsibility for the difficulties that have arisen in the UAWU despite the fact that Martin's course has not been one that would make for unity and a militant union.
 - 4- The Cleveland convention must understand that the automobile workers must institute a struggle against the Stalinist wreckers and drive them from the union.
- For 2 (McKinney, Shachtman); Against 2 (Widick, Burnham); Abern not voting. L...
N.C. Consultative vote for McKinney motion. (My emphasis --G.C.)

"MEETING ADJOURNED."

In comparing the two motions it is obvious from the underlined sections in Shachtman's motion, that McKinney's position was far from positive and much less equivocal. Here again the actions of people are more revealing and instructive than all the speeches about themselves;

Widick votes against. His toes had been stepped on and now he is getting his revenge on the "Cannon clique."

Abern abstains from taking a position as he does on all political questions so he can be freed to make any organizational combination the needs of the moment dictate. His vote -- "not voting" -- is the decisive ballot defeating the McKinney motion. (In the Feb. 7th P.C. meeting Abern corrects the minutes to the effect that he should have been "recorded as voting against both motions." This is a patent fraud. First the secretary could not possibly have recorded him incorrectly on both motions. And second, this weasel device "not voting" is a method almost distinctively peculiar to Abern. The minutes of the P.C. contain innumerable examples of Abern "not voting". By his abstentionist vote Abern was freeing his hands for a bloc with Burnham. His vote reaffirming the Tuesday position commits Abern only to a policy made prior to the hearing of evidence, but it is cancelled out by "not voting" on the other motions. Thus Abern is, as usual, committed only to persons but not to policies.

Burnham remains adamant. None of the overwhelming facts presented by Shachtman had the slightest effect upon him. Nor did the position of an outstanding trade unionist and responsible party leader as Vincent Dunne. Nor the conversion of Shachtman to the position of the Field Committee. Nor the fact that L... and McKinney, also experienced unionists, were in agreement with the pro-CIO convention orientation. Of what importance could the evidence or the people be to Burnham whose position derived from a syllogism of formal logic?

Having voted down the Field Committee's policy, the P.C. only then confronted its most disturbing problem. The meeting did not adjourn promptly as the sketchy minutes seem to indicate, but it continued for many hours after. The patently absurd "majority" that defeated Shachtman's motion (1 for, 2 against, 1 not voting, 1 abstaining), McKinney's motion (2 for, 2 against, 1 not voting) and carried Burnham's motion (3 for, 2 against) deprived the P.C. of the moral authority to enforce its position. L... who had no vote, urged the comrades to give the Field Committee the right of way. Morrow, who continued to agree with Burnham's policy, joined L... in this proposal.

But these pleas fell on deaf ears. Shachtman did not come to their assistance. He failed to carry out his promise to the Field Committee viz. in case of disagreement to publish a non-committal news story in the Socialist Appeal until one or all of the Field Comrades could arrive in New York for further consultation. He failed to press the suggestion for a Plenary session of the N.C. which was discarded by the meeting because it wasn't feasible and would take too long to convene. He betrayed the Field Committee and himself by merely giving lip-service to their position but capitulating under pressure to Burnham.

In fact, by this time he was already in a bloc with Burnham on the "organization" question; what were the formal powers of the P.C.? With the question now turned upside down, and with McKinney, Abern and Widick joining in the bloc, Burnham was in a position to crack his bureaucratic whip.

The only condition, Burnham threatened, whereby the field could have precedence over the P.C. would be one in which he would resign from the committee. Abern immediately jumped into the breach; what an excellent opportunity for creating a party crisis! Yes, he too would resign, even though by his own admission it was a practical matter and the field might conceivably have its way. And Widick, brave Widick, he would likewise resign.

What a disgraceful exhibition!

In face of these threats the meeting adjourned sine die. The Appeal came off the press with the Burnhamistic pro-Martin convention policy smearing its front page.

Just reflect on this fateful incident for a minute;

A group of field workers, authorized by the Political Committee to direct a trade union campaign, adopts a policy on a practical trade union matter. Their position is concurred in by all the rank and file comrades directly engaged in the situation. The Political Committee, without consultation with these comrades, reverses their policy. It sends a competent reporter to the field who returns to New York in agreement with the Field Committee. The P.C. by a vote of 3 to 2, or 2 to 2 with 1 "not voting" rejects his report. The P.C. knows that every member of the National Committee, to which it is subordinated, who is cognizant of the situation favors the Field policy. In face of this crystal clear situation, the P.C. refuses to make any concession to the Field except on one condition, that Burnham, Abern, Widick, three of its leading members resign. Intimidated by this threat, the P.C. decides to ram its unpopular policy down the throat of workers in the field.

If this isn't bureaucracy, what do you call it?

The act of resignation, under circumstances such as these, especially from leading committees of the party, is the hallmark of the petty-bourgeois. The petty-bourgeois cannot tolerate the idea of being in a minority. Thus during the auto crisis Burnham, Abern and Widick were prepared to throw the party into crisis in order to avoid making a concession to the Field. Their split line today is only a logical culmination of their resignation line one year ago.

Not a word appears of this resignation in the "Bureaucratism Document" which succeeds in leaving the auto crisis untouched from Jan. 2nd onward -- when it really got under way! That's Burnham's conception of truth; don't print the news damaging to you.

V. The "Suppression" of the Appeal

The same night, Thursday, Jan. 26th, Dunne still in Detroit received a long-distance call from Shachtman informing him of the slap in the face the P.C. had given the Field Committee. It is difficult to express our anger and resentment at the scandalous action of the Political Committee. We decided that Dunne was to leave for New York at the earliest possible moment for further consultation with the P.C. Far from defying the Political Committee, as minority slander has it, we were making every effort to arrive at an amicable agreement. Yet before Dunne could appear in New York to further persuade the committee, thousands of copies of the Socialist Appeal would arrive in Detroit, Flint, Toledo, and Cleveland. We were faced with a difficult, complicated problem.

It was, to be sure, our party duty to sell and distribute the official party organ. But we know from experience, and later events confirmed our opinion, that the Burnham line would result in catastrophe for us as a similar line did for the Lovestonites. We would make another attempt to convince the P.C. In the meantime we were determined that our work would not be jeopardized -- the P.C. decision was, so to speak, not irrevocable. To prepare the comrades for the shock of the Burnhamistic Appeal, to soften the violent reaction on the part of people who had yesterday been so enthusiastic and so unanimous for the Field Committee policy, comrades Cochran and Clarke went directly to the rank and file comrades in the four principal auto centers. We explained the situation in terms that were deliberately intended to preserve the prestige of the P.C. from the frightful damage it had inflicted upon itself. We were not entirely successful in this task, it is true -- the bureaucratic methods of the committee stuck out like a sore thumb from our curtain of alibis and subterfuges. We urged the comrades not to distribute the Appeal and openly took the responsibility for this action upon ourselves, pointing out how serious and extraordinary a measure this was.

But little urging was necessary. On the contrary, not a single copy of the Socialist Appeal would have been sold or distributed had we pounded the table, invoked the party constitution and shouted ourselves hoarse. The program handed down to the rank and file workers violated their judgments and convictions to the utmost. They had a perfect right to ask that distribution of that issue be held up until their complaints had been fairly heard.

This would seem an elementary axiom of party democracy. During the time of discussion, a minority is not coerced into carrying on public activity in behalf of the policy to which it is opposed. Following the discussion and decision, discipline applies universally to all. Those who do not accept the discipline either leave the party or are expelled from it. Not so for Burnham, however. For him there is a double standard: one for the leaders, one for the rank and file; one for the "intellectuals" and one for the workers. Thus Burnham lectured the Toledo, Cleveland and Detroit branches in a letter signed by himself for the Political Committee:

"The only responsible way in which your branches could have proceeded would have been to distribute the Appeal in the usual manner and in the meanwhile to make known your protest and to attempt to secure a reversal of policy. From your point of view this would have meant trouble with respect to the workers in auto and perhaps elsewhere who would have been reached by these issues of the Appeal. But that temporary trouble, serious as it might have seemed or been, would not and does not compare to the trouble to the party as a whole, considered by the action you actually did take. We do not exaggerate when we say that your suppression of the Appeal has struck a heavy blow -- not primarily at the P.C. as it might perhaps have seemed to you at the time -- but at the entire party and its functions. It will be some time before the party wholly recovers from this blow.

"We hope that these considerations will make clear to your branches the organizational attitude you adopted was impermissible, must be reversed, and ruled out for the future."

Notice the stiff, uncompromising tone of these paragraphs. They betray the man totally inexperienced with the workers movement, where the official party paper has to be withheld from circulation many times for practical reasons or over disagreements with the center of tactics; Defeat the party in a class struggle action, compromise the rank and file workers in the eyes of their shop-mates and fellow-unionists -- this the arrogant petty-bourgeois can do without batting an eyelash. But never, never must you dare infringe on an arbitrary principle set up by the bureaucrat in his office.

We did not contest Burnham's letter in the field, although it alone might have set about a rank and file revolt the reverberations of which would have been buzzing to this day in the ears of Burnham and Co. We prevailed upon the branches to accept the letter of Burnham without protest, although the letter was a "heavy blow" directed mainly at us; we were concerned with upholding the prestige of the party leadership; we refused to allow the auto campaign to be detoured by Burnham's provocations.

How outrageous Burnham's letter actually was can be seen from one fact: the policy of the P.C. was changed in favor of the field committee before this letter was written!

How did the policy come to be changed?

VI. Burnham Washes His Hands of the "Dirty Mess"

On Monday, January 31st Comrade Dunne arrived in New York from Minneapolis. A meeting had been previously arranged for that afternoon. The meeting was called to order with a large group present. P.C. members: Shachtman, Aborn, Widick, McKinney, N.C. members: V.R. Dunne, Morrow, L; N.C. Alternates: Morgan, Erber, Milton; comrades by invitation: Karsner, Stanley, Lebrun, Glenner, Cannon, who was in France, is recorded in the minutes as "(out of town)" and Gould as "(ill)".

Burnham appeared shortly after the meeting had been called to order and made the announcement that he would have to leave shortly for a dinner engagement and debate at the Labor Club of the A.L.P. Burnham could not be prevailed upon to break this engagement in favor of the extraordinary session of the Political Committee in progress. Dunne could manage to tear himself loose from the most vital activities of a labor movement affecting thousands of workers and travel 1200 miles to discuss an important party problem. But Burnham could not break a dinner engagement of no importance to the party, the unions or anyone else. By this procedure Burnham was making the supreme gesture of contempt at which his class is so skillful. The patrician Burnham was allowing the plebian Dunne to cool his heels as the price for questioning the higher authority. He would return at 10 p.m. after he had fulfilled his social obligations.

The meeting continues in a desultory fashion for hours. It was obvious to all that Burnham's deliberate absence was a demonstration of refusal to settle the crisis between the center and the field. How striking is the contrast between this haughtiness and arrogance and the considered efforts of Comrade Dunne to solve the crisis. To the petulant questions of these petty-bourgeois leaders who had lost in authority through no fault of their own, Dunne replied; if he were presented with a choice -- he would demand that the field carry out the line of the P.C. rather than see the resignation of leading P.C. members and the consequent precipitation of a deep-going party crisis.

Burnham did not return as he had promised at 10 P.M. The committee tentatively decided on proposals mutually agreeable but continues to burn the midnight oil for Burnham. No agreement was possible without his vote. Finally two hours later Burnham phoned and gave his assent to the following notions which we summarize for lack of space:

1. "statement of policy on P.C.-Field Committee relations to be drafted and presented to the next P.C. meeting; 2. An article on the U.A.W. situation to be written by "Shachtman in line with the proposals of the Auto-Sub Committee and in agreement with Dunne". 3. A motion by Shachtman on the "proposal of Comrade Dunne that a full meeting of the P.C. be held with the attendance of the leading comrades of the auto-fraction" at the earliest possible time, date to be set at the convenience of the fraction.

Burnham, however, had not yet written the final chapter to his role in the auto crisis. He had yet to write the statement where blame for the auto crisis was placed entirely at the door of the Field Committee, where the P.C. washed its hands of all responsibility for the policy it unanimously voted for at the Jan. 31st meeting, where the Field Comrades were given a send-off in their work with prophecies of doom. At the February 7th meeting Burnham presented this statement. It was accepted unanimously. Shachtman and McKinney voted for it with a statement that their endorsement did not mean agreement with the "final paragraph because the inference may be drawn that my vote for it is at the same time an endorsement of the policy of the P.C. in the U.A.W. with which I do not agree." (Gould withheld his vote "until amply informed, in view of his absence from the meetings at which U.A.W. policy was discussed." (Gould apparently was "never amply informed" as future meetings show no record of a vote by him on this subject.)

"The Statement of Policy in Auto" begins with a misrepresentation of the facts. It charges that responsibility for the disagreement rested with Cochran and Clarke with a confused policy: Clarke for boycott of both conventions, Cochran for attendance at both.

It denounces the comrades in the field for the "unprecedented step...of suppressing the issue of the Appeal (containing the pre-Martin convention editorial-G.C.)" And further indicts the Field Committee by innuendo: "We do not wish herein to comment upon any questions of formal authority or discipline...."

The statement throws responsibility for the party crisis solely at the door of the Field Committee; "The majority of the P.C. retained its conviction of the correctness of its point of view, and was thus confronted with the following condition: The attempt to carry out the policy of the P.C. majority (that is, the policy of the party) -- ("with a stroke of a pen three members of the P.C., opposed by every informed N.C. member trade unionist and party auto worker, became the party! -- G.C.) would be certain to lead to a major internal party crisis -- quite apart from the specific effects on the work in auto; and, since there was and is no practical or technical means for the quick convening of a representative plenum of the N.C., there would be no way in which to solve the crisis."

The statement washes its hands of all future responsibility for the work in auto: "Confronted with the facts summarized above, the P.C. decided to put the direction of policy in auto for the next period -- including what is presented in the party press -- into the hands of the Auto Fraction and the N.C. field committee. The article appearing in the February 4th issue of the Appeal was prepared in accordance with this decision with the agreement of Comrade Dunne."

Finally, the prophecy of disaster: "The majority of the P.C. wishes it to be entirely clear that it holds to the point of view presented in the January 28th editorial and believes that the policy of the Fraction is seriously and dangerously wrong. It is convinced that the test of practise during the next weeks will make clear to the members of the Fraction their own error, and will demonstrate the correctness of the point of view of the P.C."

The P.C., according to this statement, did not make even the slightest error. The P.C. of Burnham, Widick and Abern was the poor victim of the machinations of the rest of the party. Prestige politics, false pride, inability to admit error-- these are mild characterizations of Burnham's statement.

Meanwhile the crisis simmered in the P.C. It was upset by the "broader internal problems which came to the surface in the dispute over policy in auto," so said the statement on Policy in Auto. And it continued: "The difficulty was aggravated by the unanimous opinion of the P.C. that the cleavage in this instance between the P.C. and the comrades concerned in the field was not the result merely of the differences of opinion in connection with the situation in auto but was related to other incidents during the past period." A dispute between Detroit and California over policy in the U.A. further added to the consternation of the N.Y. committee.

On February 19th, Smith, Dunne and Goldman attended the meeting of the P.C. projected in the January 31st meeting. The meeting was not very fruitful. The main burden of complaint which ran through all the speeches of Shachtman, Burnham, Abern and Widick can be summarized in a single sentence:

"It isn't so much that the Field Comrades opposed us. Rather, on the contrary this dispute would never have arisen if Cannon were here. They would never have dared challenge Cannon the way they did us."

Is it possible to answer such drivel? Can you prove to old ladies like those that Cannon's prestige derives from his deliberate aversion to such bureaucratic misuse of administration as Burnham-Shachtman were guilty of? Is it possible to convince such people by a citation from the record that Cannon always seeks out complete information before jumping to a policy, especially on trade union matters; that where there is disagreement on a practical matter where no political principle of the party program is involved between himself and field comrades he first of all attempts to persuade them that he is correct, that failing to persuade them -- even though firmly convinced of the justice of his position -- he yields in their favor? Can you explain to these people that this is an essential quality of leadership in a proletarian organization -- in conjunction, of course, with a noteworthy record of being correct on practical matters of tactics? How can you convince people of such A B C propositions when their heads are full of "cliques", "plots", "machiavellian politics" and constant fear of the Stalinist degeneration of the future American Soviet through the mistakes of the Socialist Workers Party?

What could Goldman reply to Widick's whining that the Field Comrades had treated the P.C. with contempt, except to say that if it would satisfy Widick he would make a motion that the Field Committee do not treat them with contempt?

The minutes report "agreement reached on carrying out of present auto policy. Unanimous agreement that suppression of Appeal by certain branches in recent period was impermissible, and that such action is incompatible with the functioning of the party."

From a formal standpoint there could be no objections to the section of the motion concerning the Appeal. In reality, however, it was a deliberate and

unjustified blow aimed by Burnham at the comrades in the field. The representatives of the Field Committee in New York were out of harmony with the spirit of this motion but they were first of all desirous of smoothing out the friction in the leading committee of the party. Their first aim was to create a condition in the party where its campaigns might be conducted without a continuing crisis. Moreover, they were confronted by an accomplished fact. Many days before this meeting, Burnham, in the name of the Political Committee, had mailed a letter of censure and condemnation to the Middle Western and California branches.

VII California Interlude

The dispute in auto was further complicated by the situation in California. The comrades working in auto there were completely off the track. Through the activities of two or three comrades, not auto workers, they had established close relationships with Martin's machine in California, particularly Los Angeles. They mistook the work they were doing for Irvan Carey, Martin's henchman, for a bloc. They were confused by the minutes of the National Auto Conference, calling for a Third Group but taking a non-committal attitude on the two conventions. The P.C. raised a high wall between them and a correct policy. When in the next few days, the split in the U.S.A. reached sharper proportions, David Stevens, L.A. organizer, wired Detroit and N.Y.: "Imperative to have policy in UAW. Wire whether we support Martin. Follow with detailed information. Reply very urgent." The date on the telegram (a similar one was received from Sam Myers in Oakland) is very important; January 28th -- that is two days after the P.C. had rejected Comrade Shachtman's report and three days before it reversed itself in favor of the Field Committee under pressure of Comrade Duane. Comrade Cochran wired back in agreement with Clarke that the policy was still under discussion but in the meantime he urged them to hold up distribution of the Appeal. (Unfortunately there is no copy of this telegram available in New York). Widick, however, wired California in an entirely opposite sense: "Policy is to support Martin. It is contained in the January 28th edition of the Appeal. Copy of which being sent by airmail."

Widick's telegram was all the California comrades wanted. They immediately proceeded to distribute the January 28th edition of the Appeal. But they suppressed the next edition of the Appeal which contained a change of line. It is monstrous for Burnham to shift responsibility onto the Field Committee for the failure of California to distribute the Appeal. They abstained from distribution for two reasons: 1. They were in favor of the January 28th line and opposed to the Field Committee because of their own erroneous policy. 2. they were confused and disoriented by the shifts in P.C. position as reflected in the Appeal.

Instead of helping the California comrades correct their error -- or turning that job over to the Field Committee entirely if the P.C. could not square this task with its conscience -- Burnham wrote for the Political Committee a disloyal letter to the Los Angeles, East Oakland and San Francisco branches. Under cover of a letter of the "suppression" of the Appeal, the following statements appear:

"We recognize especially the difficulties for the West Coast branches and what is in a sense the "injustice" to these branches brought about through the fact that their representatives could not be present during the discussion leading to the new policy.

"We recognize also the right (and duty) of the West Coast branches to protest the new policy, if they do not agree with it, and to press through all legitimate means for a change. (We suggest that their point of view be made entirely clear to the N.C. field committee).

"We hope that these considerations will make it obvious to the California branches that the organizational attitude they have taken (suppressing the Appeal -- G.C.) must be reversed. We say this naturally without in any way linking it to the matter of policy in auto -- an issue which stands on its own merits -- or with any intention of denying the altogether just complaints about the manner in which the policy was arrived at."

Then follows a long confused paragraph about how the California comrades might build a third group and support neither convention and possibly even lean slightly in the direction of Martin.

This letter was sent two weeks after the P.C. had reversed its line, and one week after it had thrown all responsibility for the line on the field committee. The recitation of dates is comment enough.

But the letter of Burnham did not end the dispute with California. Burnham kept insisting in the P.C. meetings that the position of California supporting Martin supported his position. What sterile reasoning! Even if the California comrades were correct -- and events proved them completely wrong -- no national auto policy would be based on the situation in California. The central points of the auto industry, where automobiles are manufactured, are in Michigan, Ohio and to a lesser extent Indiana. In these places too the UAW is strongest. To determine a policy on the basis of what was happening in California, the home of several auxiliary assembly plants and a few parts plants, is so obviously false as to require no answer.

But the California comrades were wrong even on the basis of the situation in their own state. The majority of the auto workers there -- according to reliable reports which were available to the P.C. as well as the field committee and the California comrades -- were for the Cleveland CIO convention and opposed to Martin. Our comrades there were prevented from acting upon these facts because of their disorientation by the Burnham Committee. The Field Committee had difficulty in correcting their error because of the complete lack of cooperation of the P.C. which refused to lend its support and authority to its efforts. It was not until Comrade Cannon arrived from France, months after the dispute with the P.C. had subsided, that California received its first letter from the P.C. indicating complete agreement with the Field Committee.

* * * * *

The comrades and the party in auto paid heavily for the bureaucratic attitude and the false policy of the P.C.

1. Burnham boasts that when he commits an error he is quick to admit it publicly. But the fact remains that the auto campaign received a severe blow from the inconsistency of the Appeal which featured three different policies in three consecutive issues of the Appeal. Demagogues and Stalinists, who secured copies of the pro-Martin issue despite our careful concealment, exploited this inconsistency against us very effectively. The Lovestonites had a Roman Holiday over it in their "Workers Age."

2. It cost the party approximately \$500. in train and plane fares along to settle this dispute. This excludes long distance phone calls, telegrams, and large numbers of Appeals not distributed.

3. The work of the California comrades was completely disoriented.

VIII. The Question of Policy

The question of policy is a secondary consideration in a discussion of the party crisis over the auto situation. That is why we have reserved it for last place. Any person, any leader of the party, is liable to make a mistake on a matter of practical policy, particularly on a trade union question. As a matter of fact such mistakes are made quite frequently, and only a fool would condemn a leader for this or that incidental mistake. Yet Burdham's "mistake" on the auto situation is on the same order as his "mistake" on the Russian question. His empirical, formalistic, non-dialectical method of thinking is revealed in the auto question no less than it is in the Russian question.

To understand the auto situation and party policy in it, it is necessary to go back to the convention of the U.A.W. in Milwaukee in August 1937.

Martin was confronted at that convention with a powerful opposition representing almost 50 percent of the convention delegates, known as the "Unity Group." This opposition was led in part by the Stalinists, it is true, but the Stalinists were exploiting through the "Unity Group" the most militant and democratic sentiments of the best rank and file progressives. The worker militants were jealous of their democratic rights and for a militant union. Martin was abusing these democratic rights and attempting to "stabilize" the union. The revolt against him was entirely healthy even though it was misdirected by the Stalinists. Supporting Martin at that convention were the worst type of office-holders and the most reactionary and backward members of the union.

We gave the unity group critical support at that convention, attempting in the meanwhile to organize an uprising within it against the Stalinists. Following the convention we made several attempts to organize an independent group which would oppose Martin and at the same time fight the Stalinists who were not interested in a struggle against the bureaucracy but were rather seeking a deal with the administration. Unfortunately, our weakness condemned this effort to failure.

In the Spring of the following year, 1938, events took a new turn in the auto union. The Stalinists had pried Frankenstein, Martin's chief lieutenant, away from him, and were now making an open bid for power -- against the wishes of their allies, the S.P. group led by Reuther and Mazey who headed powerful locals in the auto union. It was now, for the first time, possible to conduct an open struggle against the Stalinists which the workers could understand. Seeing our opportunity we sent a delegation to Martin which was successful in persuading him to adopt the program we presented (later revised by him and popularly known in the U.A.W. as the 20-point program). With this program Martin pledged to take positive action in the pressing organizational problems that confronted the union, to guarantee the locals their autonomy and the rank and file democracy and to conduct a militant fight against the corporations. And also to fight the Stalinist "collective security" propaganda with an anti-war campaign.

The program met with instantaneous success. It is not an exaggeration to say that it swept the union with the power of a new dispensation. The Stalinists were completely stymied. Unfortunately, Martin was not the man to carry the program through to the end. No sooner were the Stalinists defeated at the Executive Board, than Martin entrusted the union administration to some of his incompetent lieutenants and boarded his plane to make speeches at banquets and meetings where everything was discussed but the auto workers problems and everybody was present but the auto workers. Within a month, the Stalinists attempted to usurp power. Instead of going to the rank and file and crucifying the Stalinists ideologically as we had urged him,

Martin expelled five of them from the Executive Board. From that time on Martin behaved like an hysterical old lady, revoking local charters, appointing administrators over locals and allying himself with the worst reactionaries. Within three months Martin had completely nullified the effectiveness of the 20-point program and antagonized that section of the rank and file which had begun to move in his direction. Once again he was isolated, and the Stalinists had begun to recoup their former power as the self-appointed champions of democracy.

From that time on we began to steer a course away from Martin. Through the months of September, October, November and December 1938 our criticism of Martin constantly sharpened in its tone. We had felt Martin's reactionary policies personally. Bert Cochran, appointed by Martin at the time of the adoption of the 20-point program as Detroit UAW-WPA director, was summarily removed from office. The McCord strike, led by our comrades, was betrayed by one of Martin's lieutenants without Martin lifting a finger. In the month of December our criticism of Martin had become condemnation. At a meeting of the National Auto Fraction held on December 25th, 1938 - minutes of which were mailed into the National Office - Cochran reported as follows:

"Our line in auto is changed today, the orientation being against the administration of the UAW. Our aim today is that of building a new progressive group with the objective that this group may win the leadership of the union--- Our general aim is the creation of a new group in auto. We can only agitate for it and present our program. Later, when our forces grow, we may find allies in the S.P. in Detroit, groups in the West Side Local and Briggs local who were part of the Unity Group - and organize a loose alliance with them for a progressive group on the basis of our program."

It is alleged by the Opposition that the auto policy - ostensibly a pro-Martin policy - was decided at the January 1st meeting. This is absurd. It was evident to all present that the situation was in the process of change while we were meeting and no definitive policy could be formulated from the distance of New York. The question of policy was left undecided at the meeting, and no policy motion was recorded at the P.C. meeting on January 3rd.

If there had been a pro-Martin policy adopted at that meeting, how explain the article Cochran wrote for the January 21st issue of the Appeal, entitled "Faction Fight Flares Again in U.A.W. Executive Board"? It characterized the two groups ("the Martin and Mortimer crowd") as gangs whose scandals had exhausted the patience of the membership. It referred to the "record of stewardship of the International Executive Board and the International Officers" as one of "opportunism, stupidity, supineness, treachery." It called upon "the automobile workers to turn thumbs down on fake leaders whether of the Peiper-Hauser type or job-holders of the Mortimer-Stalinist type of bureaucrats...."

When the field committee adopted its original program under the title: "One Convention - One Union - One Fight Against the Employers" it had these salient facts in mind: Martin was thoroughly discredited by his reactionary and bureaucratic policies, the Ford scandal unscrupulously exploited by the Stalinists only adding to his discredit. Only the most conservative and backward workers supported him. The Stalinists were growing in disfavor with the auto workers because of their vicious, unprincipled factionalism. The Stalinists could now pose as champions of democracy only with the greatest of difficulty after they had brought in and saddled upon the union the CIO receivership of Hillman-Murray. The Routhier-Mazoy-Marshall (Chrysler local president) group had already broken with the Stalinists. The workers were nauseated with the internecine struggle and were seeking a road to unity and struggle against the corporations.

Our line was, in the colloquial expression, "a natural". It denounced both groups on the Executive Board of the union for bankruptcy in organization, bureaucracy in internal affairs, capitulation before the corporations and for leading the union to the brink of a split. It called for unity of the union against both groups on the basis of a nine-point "Union Building Program". The program found an immediate and welcome response among wide layers of the auto workers union. The Detroit newspapers understood the significance of the "Third Group" and gave it leading publicity. At the Cleveland convention many of the planks of the program were adopted with great enthusiasm.

We can confidently assert that had Martin not split from the CIO, the original "Third Group" program would have catapulted our small group into a position of great influence and strength. But when Martin bolted the CIO, the situation changed almost overnight. The workers knew that Martin was moving towards the AFL, which they despised almost as much as the corporations, and they began to line up. In a short while the overwhelming bulk of militant workers had taken their place in the anti-Martin, pro-CIO camp. The Stalinists could stage another comeback by shouting their patriotism to the CIO. With the most militant workers determined first of all to defeat Martin and the AFL, our small third group could at best play a modest role at the Cleveland convention.

Burnham charged in his Statement on Policy in Auto that Clarke was originally in favor of boycotting both conventions, and Cochran of participating in both conventions. In his answer to Trotsky he charges that both Cochran and Clarke were in favor of boycotting both conventions. His charge is false in both instances. They arise out of Shachtman's report in which Shachtman completely misunderstood what Cochran and Clarke stated to him in response to his demand for a "concrete answer". The situation was still too unclear, too fluid, and too turbulent to require an immediate answer to the question of "which convention?". Our policy was best served at this juncture by concentrating on the slogan unity of the U.A.W. against both groups on the basis of a positive program. The phrase "a plague on both your houses" was used to epitomize this policy and referred specifically not to the conventions but to the Stalinist and Martin group. The easy transition we made between this policy and the pro-CIO policy proves that far from playing "abstentionist" politics, we had set a general line in a complicated situation and were waiting for events to indicate what the next practical step would be.

Burnham boasts in his answer to Trotsky that contrary to Clarke and Cochran's abstentionism in auto he formulated a concrete policy. How did he formulate this "concrete" policy, by what process of thought? What would have been the results of his policy had it been carried out?

You will recall in the quotation cited from his editorial in the Jan. 28th edition of the Appeal his statement that the "Cleveland meeting will be 100% Stalinist stooge assembly."

He continued: "Every move, every motion, every resolution will be dictated by Earl Browder, in exactly the same manner that he dictates the proceedings of the American League for Peace and Democracy, the I.W.O. or the conventions of the Communist party itself. The future of the union movement in auto does not and cannot lie with the Cleveland puppet show...The locals must elect their delegates to the Detroit convention, not to submit to Martin but to re-establish the rule of the members over their own union."

It is true that Martin was opposed to the Stalinists. But how had he opposed the Stalinists? As a reactionary not as a progressive. Who would be most likely to follow Martin? Certainly not the militant workers whom he had done everything in his power to alienate and drive away. Who would go to Detroit which was oriented towards the AFL? Only the backward, the privileged or conservative workers who looked upon the CIO as a "Red" organization, always creating trouble for the employer in the plants -- workers seeking the road of class collaboration. In truth, to go to this convention "not to submit to Martin" but to "re-establish the rule of the rank and file" would be like going to a Communist Party convention (all proportions guarded) "not to submit" to Stalin or Browder and to re-establish the rule of the rank and file.

Burnham's undialectical thought on this question is of a piece with his undialectical thinking on the Russian question. The Soviet Union is dominated by counter-revolutionary, Bonapartist, Stalinist bureaucrats. These bureaucrats are the worst enemies of the Soviet and international working class. Therefore, be for the defeat of the Soviet Union in the war.

Or: the workers state is a democratic structure which improves the standard of living of the workers. In the Soviet Union totalitarianism has replaced democracy and the standard of living has improved only in favor of the bureaucrats. Therefore, the Soviet Union is not a workers state; it is a Stalinist bureaucratic state.

Burnham is proud of his undialectical method of thought. He says it enables him to predict -- indeed only on that basis is any method of thought efficacious. On February 7th Burnham made a prediction in the Statement on Policy in Auto, endorsed by Widick and Abern:

"The majority of the P.C. wishes it to be entirely clear that it holds to the point of view presented in the January 28th editorial (the one cited immediately above --G.C.) and believes that the policy of the Fraction is seriously and dangerously wrong. It is convinced that the test of practise during the next weeks will make it clear to the members of the Fraction their own error, and will demonstrate the correctness of the point of view of the P.C."

If ever a prediction was knocked into a cocked hat it was this one.

The Cleveland convention of the U.A.W. represented the great majority of auto workers from all the important corporations, Chrysler, General Motors, Briggs Body, Studebaker, Hudson, Wyllis, etc. etc. from all the important centers of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin. Far from the convention being a Stalinist stooge convention, a powerful opposition functioned against the Stalinists from the day the convention opened. One of the largest locals in the union openly sported "brooms" as their emblem of a campaign to sweep out the former Executive Board. At least half of the points in our program were taken up by other delegates and pushed through the convention. Far from Browder dictating the decisions of the convention, the Stalinists had to fight for every position tooth and nail. There was no red-baiting at Cleveland. And as to the future of this convention, the UAW-CIO regained nearly all of the members it had lost to Martin, defeated him decisively in every NLRB election, it has signed contracts with every major auto corporation with the exception of Ford.

On the other hand Martin's convention was a complete fiasco. Its delegates came almost exclusively from small shops, representing small groups of workers in out-of-the-way cities. The delegates from the large locals were completely trumped up and represented no one but themselves. The composition of the convention was backward and conservative, and nine-tenths of the proceedings were devoted to problems entirely extraneous to the real problems of unionism.

They were against the "radicalism", the "communism" and "trouble-making" of the C.I.O. The sessions were devoted to flag-waving patriotism and rabid red-baiting. The convention was a Martin stooge assembly. Eulogies of Martin were as regular, frequent and repulsive as they are in a C.P. convention - because with Martin the convention was without leader or reason for existence. The Lovestoneites, forced into a corner like rats by the right wing around Martin, were compelled to put up the semblance of an opposition. They tried "not to submit" - but came to the most ignominious end. This convention marked the public suicide of the Lovestoneites in auto just as it would have marked our own had we participated in it.

A party comrade came to this convention from California - not as the delegate of his local but as the representative of a minority. His hotel room was constantly infested with reactionaries who ranted from early morning to late at night against "reds", "Lovestoneites", "Trotskyites"; his movements were watched by them and he was shadowed through the streets; he met with the auto committee of the party only in greatest secrecy; he did not dare take the floor at the convention; he was almost expelled both by the rump Martin group and by the controlling CIO local when he returned to Los Angeles.

As to Martin's future; his locals left him one by one until he was left with only a shell. He practised strikebreaking in the CIO strikes in GM and Briggs. He united with Gerald Smith and Coughlin against the CIO in the Chrysler lockout. He is the most discredited man in the auto union.

Now, for the first time in a year Burnham publicly admitted his mistake - and only with a hateful snarl at those who corrected him - And we were supposed to see and admit our error in "the next weeks"! Need more be said.

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The picture of the leadership of the petty-bourgeois opposition as it would look at the helm of our party or at the helm of its own group if their threat of a split is carried out, can be drawn from the highly symptomatic events of the auto crisis:

Burnham: revealed strong tendencies towards bureaucratism in administration, an arrogant approach to the rank and file, a hateful attitude towards the workers who correct his line, sterile and formalist in analysis. By his own admission, he is an undialectical thinker. (See "Science and Style").

Shachtman: revealed an indecisiveness in position, a Hamlet-like attitude under pressure, which made him a tool of the strongest force and treacherous to the political convictions of his fellow-thinkers and of himself. In the auto crisis Shachtman demonstrated symptoms of this disease, observed many times in him prior to and subsequent to these events.

As for Abern, Trotsky's characterization of him needs no improvement: "Abern long ago came to the conclusion that Marxism (and even concrete policy on practical matters as the auto crisis proved - G.C.) is a doctrine to be honored but a good oppositional combination is something far more substantial."

IX. Epilogue on a Slander.

To cover up their bureaucratic methods and false policy, the Opposition whispers; anyway nothing was achieved in auto; the campaign was a flop. They do not dare say this out loud because they know - or do they? - that policies and methods are not judged by immediate results to the party. Concrete conditions have at least as much to do with party results as do party energy and party policy.

Still they slander the campaign and its achievements.

We were confronted with big obstacles in our drive in auto. Early in the campaign accidental circumstances entirely beyond our control completely prevented us from utilizing our new contacts as we had planned to on January 1st. The turn in events in the auto union did not help our small group break out of its isolation. The lack of important locals or prominent spokesmen prevented us from playing an outstanding role at the U.A.W. convention.

Yet despite these obstacles we rolled up solid achievements, modest though they were, for the party. Our program and group was respected and popular among the militants. Many sections of it were adopted at the convention. We had a caucus of 15 delegates in Cleveland, in contrast to two at Milwaukee, the previous convention of the union. Through our program and activities at the convention we made contacts in many cities and among auto worker militants where we had none before.

The Socialist Appeal, through widespread distribution, became the most widely read radical paper in the auto union. This was the principal work of our untiring Detroit comrades whose lack of growth is attributable to factors far beyond the control of the campaign or the party. Only now Detroit is making its first real gains in recruitment of auto unionists.

The Flint Branch blossomed forth as a genuine proletarian branch with solid auto worker composition, leading influence in the CIO-WPA local and tremendous possibilities in the main auto workers local of the city. This was our greatest achievement.

The Cleveland local expanded its influence in the auto union, recruited new auto workers into the party until now it is in alliance with other progressives, a force to be reckoned with in the CIO Council of the city.

Long after the auto crisis has become a bad memory, the auto campaign will be recalled as the initial drive in building the party of the Fourth International in the motor manufacturing centers.

George Clarke

March 4, 1940.