

## 33 *Patriotism Pays Off*

Communism's advance among the intellectuals and white-collar people, impressive as it was, was less significant than its deep inroads on the industrial sector. For the first time the CP could boast, without undue exaggeration, of being "rooted in the decisive strata of the proletariat." And these unprecedented gains were realized in two or three years.

The Committee for Industrial Organization, formed by John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky and Charles P. Howard, in Atlantic City, November 1935, that changed the entire industry-labor setup, was the Communists' first big chance. The CIO, encountering the hostility of the old craft unions and the die-hard resistance of management, was in no position to refuse help from any quarter willing to give it. Lewis, Dubinsky and Hillman could provide the financial sinews for the vast drives in the mass production industries, but they could hardly spare the great number of field organizers needed for such a tremendous job. The Communist movement was more than willing to fill this shortage.

Lewis, his mind set on organizing the steel industry, which directly affected his coal mining, welcomed the young Communists supplied by the party as organizers in the steel centers. In the Youngstown area alone the party sent in nearly 50 young people.<sup>\*248</sup> Energetic and determined, and accustomed to rough treatment by the police on picket lines, they proved to be the right men for the job. The party also made excellent use of its contacts in factories and mills in various industries. These contacts became part of the

base of operations for the CIO. The Communist group in Ford's suddenly found itself leading a wide and genuinely spontaneous movement for unionization. In other big auto plants they shared leadership with various elements, all the time maneuvering for domination.

### CIO, COMMUNISM'S BIG CHANCE

From steel and auto the Communists spilled over into electrical appliances, oil, marine, city transportation, lumber, chemicals, communication, furniture and others. Before long Communists were in control of about eight important affiliates of the CIO and had a foot in many others, including the auto workers' union.

The goal that the party missed through strenuous concentration and revolutionary go-it-alone methods in the early 30's was now reached through close cooperation with established labor groups and through support of the New Deal.

The rapidity with which the CP gained control in these new unions can be attributed in part to the duofold task of a Communist trade union officer. He was not merely a union builder but a party builder as well. The party never made a secret of its motto, *Build the Party in Your Union*. And in the beginning the party trade union officer gladly did party recruiting; a strong party fraction was the guarantee of his power in the union. Only in 1938 did the Communist union leaders, being entrenched in their positions, consider the party fractions as something of a nuisance that interfered with their authority. It was primarily because of them that the fractions were abolished by the party convention of the same year.

To state that the party was little interested in the essential function of a trade union, improvement of the daily lot of the workers, would be an understatement. That the party did not think at all in these terms would be closer to the truth. Gaining positions of strength in industry was its prime motivation, a goal the Comintern kept urging. And such strength was indispensable for two immediate reasons: one, to be able to speak politically, through its top union officialdom, for millions of wage-earners, without having to consider their opinion; two, and this was of deeper consequence—to gain the coveted position of being able to shut down key industries for political purposes—political strikes—as was so often prac-

ticed in later times by the Communist parties in France and Italy, when they obtained control of the trade unions.

However, the eager young men thrust into the role of union builders could not prosper on Communist theories. Their power had to rest on practical results for their members, not merely on machine politics. Behind the surface of total unanimity, resistance to party dictates by Communist union leaders was not infrequent. But in most cases the will of the party prevailed.

The CP, loudly advocating labor unity, was actually frightened by the prospect of peace between the AFL and the CIO. Unity would have robbed the party of the strategic balance of power in the CIO; the launching of a permanent CIO, in 1938, immensely strengthened the Communist position in the latter.

The ILGWU was out of the CIO, and only Lewis and Hillman were left to stand up against the Communists. And these two had to tolerate them while keeping them from taking over.

#### THE RAPID GROWTH IN SIZE AND INFLUENCE

In the field of literature and art the party extended its influence through the Writers' League, the Artists' League, the Screen Actors' Guild, the Script Writers' Union, and the Theater Arts Committee.\*<sup>249</sup> The stirrings on the campus were channeled through the American Students Union, launched by the YCL, and, later, through the American Youth Congress, for all practical purposes an auxiliary body of the CP.

Among the middle class, the party had at its disposal a colorful variety of local and national bodies formed for specific purposes. They were a source of valuable contacts, prestige and contributions. The most outstanding was the League for Peace and Democracy, formerly the League Against War and Fascism, Dr. Harry F. Ward, chairman. The first league was created September 1933. J. B. Matthews, an official of the SP but a secret member of the CP, was made chairman; Donald Henderson, secretary. It was a division of the Communist-inspired World Congress Against War, August 27-29, 1932, in Amsterdam—a reflection of the Kremlin's fear of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.

Of the local groups, the most useful was the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, comprising middle-class elements and a sizable display

of Hollywood talent. A statement in support of a cause, or in protest, bearing the names of Hollywood stars had a wide resonance here and even abroad.

The vigorous anti-fascist appeal by Moscow and by the party here and all-out support for the New Deal paid high dividends in more ways than one. Government offices on a local and national level became accessible to Communists. These openings enabled the party to start a concerted drive to "colonize" Washington.

The incessant recruiting in the CIO unions and in the various transmission belt bodies multiplied the party ranks nearly fourfold. However, the party's boast in 1938 of a membership of 75,000 was an exaggeration. A more exact table was given in the confidential report to the tenth party convention. The total figure for dues-paying membership for January 1936 stood at 30,836; in 1937, 37,685; and 1938, 54,012.\*<sup>250</sup>

The impressive industrial inroads notwithstanding, only 50 per cent belonged to unions and to the Workers Alliance, the unemployed group. The increase in membership was proportionately much higher in what the party report called light industries, professionals and white-collar workers than in the mass production industries. And though the fluctuations were normalized from the disheartening 70 per cent in 1936 to about 40 per cent in the latter part of 1937, the problem of keeping the new members still weighed heavily on the party.\*<sup>251</sup> The official figure also indicated the new and changing structure of the party. Over 20,000 members were in the party two years and longer; nearly 34,000, less than two years; and 27,000, only one year or less.

A closer insight into the composition of the party is given by the report to the convention of the New York State party, May 20-25, 1938. This was the only detailed analysis of the membership ever published. And New York contained about 40 per cent of the party strength.

#### THE DECLINE IN NEEDLE TRADES

Max Steinberg, organizational secretary, reported a rapid growth. In two years, the party "grew from 15,814 to about 30,000, and 10,000 in the YCL . . . dues-payers number about 22,000. The state party now counts 860 branches instead of 650 two years earlier.

. . . Two hundred and forty-four industrial branches as compared with 92 in 1935, and they cover 171 local unions in 15 industries. . . . They number 6,377 members instead of the previous 1,827. . . . The number of women have increased from 5,142 to 7,883 . . . native born, from 6,849 to 14,059. . . . The 11,149 industrial workers represent 42.2 per cent of this membership. This is unsatisfactory. . . . Here growth is indispensable for building the Democratic Front" (Socialism or conquest of power was not mentioned at all. M.E.).<sup>\*252</sup>

The party in New York had doubled in size. But only 6,377 belonged to industrial branches. The largest proportion of the recruits obviously came from white-collar workers and the middle class.

Dwelling on the unsatisfactory features of the recruiting, Steinberg pointed to the situation in the needle trades:

"Noted for their militancy and progressiveness, where our party during many years of bitter struggle and victories gave the best forces . . . we find the situation even worse. . . . The recruiting tempo shows a marked decrease compared to the last years. In the building trades in spite of all these favorable conditions (Communist victories in Painters' District 9—M.E.), the membership decreased from 95 in 1936 to 66 now. . . . In all the light industries, our membership has proportionately decreased by 7.1 per cent, while in the heavy industries . . . the proportion compared to the entire membership has decreased from almost ten per cent to 7.1 per cent."

In summing up, Steinberg posed a cardinal and touchy question:

"Would it be correct to say that the progressive people in our city are to be found only among the white-collar and professional workers, . . . and the food and needle trades workers have suddenly become conservative? Ridiculous!"

Neither Steinberg nor Stachel, who spoke for the CEC, could offer a rational answer to this question. They were satisfied to blame the local Communists and, in the needle and allied trades, the Lovestonites.

Since the dissolution of the Left union, the needle trades workers, because of their radical tradition, again became a Communist concentration point, the foremost target being those unions where Socialists and former Communists were in the leadership. The Communists and Lefts there were prompted by the party to conclude

election alliances with other dissident groups to wrest the union from the control of the former Communists. An example is the letter sent by Amter to every party member in the large dress-makers' union, Local 22, dated March 22, 1935. It said in part:

"Our party considers the present election in Local 22 of major political importance. The objective conditions for sweeping out the remnants of renegade Lovestonites from positions of leadership . . . is very favorable."<sup>\*253 +75</sup>

The struggle against other former Communists in the trade unions was also of "major political importance." A particular target was Louis Nelson, manager of the Knitgoods Workers Union, Local 155, ILGWU. A third Lovestonite, Sam Freeman, was unseated as the district secretary of the Brooklyn painters' union by an election alliance of Communists with the notorious Jacob Welner and his gang.

#### RECRUITING AMONG JEW'S A FAILURE

Recruiting among foreign-born Jews was steadily declining. The report to the tenth national convention, 1938, speaking of partial gains among foreign-born, omitted the Jews entirely. And Stachel, in an article in the *Freiheit* on recruiting, pointed to the gloomy fact that party "fractions in the IWO and in the *shules* took in only 11 new recruits during the year," despite the seemingly energetic campaigns with quotas for every branch and *shule*.<sup>\*254</sup>

The Jewish Bureau made a determined effort in 1938 to impress the party with a successful recruiting. Special meetings were called and a detailed quota was worked out for the entire country. For a couple of months, the *Freiheit* kept hammering on the vital significance of this recruiting. An application blank was printed on the front page of the paper with a line across it, "Recruited through the Jewish Bureau." But when the campaign was over, no report appeared on its results. (The reasons for this failure appear in a later chapter.)

Steinberg's report showed the strenuous efforts made to assimilate the newcomers politically. During 1936-1937, 7,000 went through section training schools, nearly 1,000 enrolled in the district training schools and about 450 studied in the national schools. George Siskind was director of the latter. These did not include the many

thousands who received their indoctrination in the workers' schools functioning in the large cities.

No less significant than the size was the party's new role as the dispenser and protector of thousands of jobs, in unions, in government and in social agencies. (In the spring of 1939, the author and a few friends calculated that the number of paid jobs controlled by the party, including those in the party itself, reached between eight and ten thousand. This meant that approximately 16 per cent of the membership depended on the party for their livelihood and status.)

A marked undercurrent of resentment ran through the old-guard Communists against the turn to liberalism and patriotism. Trained as they were in party discipline, the suddenness of the change in line and the absence of any discussion was irritating. This feeling was shared by those who joined the party during the depression years. The switch was too abrupt for them. However, this discontent never came to the surface. A consolation was found in the tacit understanding that the new line was a mere expedient forced on Communism by a passing necessity. Besides, as a Russian saying has it, "The victor is not brought to trial," and the Communist Party was victorious indeed.