This is the first of a two-part article on the history of communists in the United States, the trade union struggle in this country. This part deals with the contributions and the political and ideological errors of the Communist Party in establishing the CIO in the 1930’s and the war years of the 1940’s.-Ed.

Thirty-eight years ago last month, Nov. 9, 1925, the leaders of eight large unions in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) met in Washington, D.C. and founded the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO). This convention triggered the last explosive stage of the most important labor uprising in American history, the 1930’s.

The mighty battles for industrial unions which followed, brought the CIO into a working class of this country: courage, sacrifice, discipline, solidarity. In the forefront of the proletariat in this battle were the revolutionary Marxist-Leninist organization.

Throughout many tremendous gains might have been lost without the Party, there is also much to learn from the hideous errors it made under the revolutionary influence of Browder, head of the Party.

In 1930, labor organization in the U.S. was controlled by the American Federation of Labor. This was an organization dominated by old-style eight unions, unions of men and women engaged in a particular trade. Bookbinders, Carpenters, Shoemakers, etc.

But the growth of monopoly capitalism had already outstripped this form of organization. The big profit-making corporation, in which only a small percentage of the workers required any skill to attain the ability to stand 70 or 80 hours of grueling work under the most inhumane conditions. The answer to monopoly had to be the creation of industrial unions, containing all the workers, skilled and unskilled, in a particular industry.

From the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to the steelworkers’ drive of 1919, attempts were made to create such unions, but always the narrow craft union leadership of the A.F. of L. opposed them outright or sold them out. They feared and despised the masses of workers, and they led even the workers in the craft unions to defeat as their collaboration with the bosses extended from the “earning 20Y” into the breaking of backs.

The CIO was begun by some AFL leaders who saw that the future of the entire labor movement depended on industrial unions, and others who decided their own futures depended on industrial unions.

CIO Based on Strategy

To understand the CIO, it is necessary to take a look at the way in which class struggle developed during the Depression. During the early years, 1930-33, the working class ruled under one blow after another: pay cuts, speedups and finally mass layoffs and plant shutdowns, followed by hunger and evictions. They fought back first through the communized Local Unions. These organizations prevented evictions, with street battles if necessary; they demanded jobs in demonstrations at local plants, and they were first local and then national “relief”-unemployment insurance, welfare, social security, etc.

Starting in 1933, when unemployment, though still massive, dropped to about 10 million, strikes began to take place among those still in the shops. This was made easy by the National Recovery Act, which Franklin Roosevelt was forced to pass as a concession to the anger and struggle of the millions of hungry and fed-up workers. Clothing workers, farmersworkers, rubber, miners, and auto workers all went out, but Roosevelt showed his true colors by being both broad and forcing many union leaders to call off the strikes.

It was not until 1934 that the future broke through to daylight. Teamsters in Minneapolis and Auto-Lite workers in Toledo fought and won tremendous strikes despite attacks by police, vigilantes and the National Guard. 475,000 textile workers, mostly in the South, struck against pay cuts and for union recognition. More than 20 strikers died in the face of machine gun and pistol fire from National Guardsmen during those weeks it took to break the strike. But it was in San Francisco that the biggest development came. In support of longshoremen and seamen, the Central Labor Council declared a city-wide general strike that put S.F. in union hands for a few days. And proving it was no West Coast fluke, 26,000 workers went out on a two day general strike and 600 metal workers were attacked by police—in Terre Haute, Indiana.

CP Not Idle

The Communist Party was by no means idle at this time. In all of these struggles, particularly the carefully planned and the San Francisco general strike, the most militant and progressive workers were looking to the Party for leadership. At this time, the Communist Party made a fundamental error of dual unionism in its workplace work.

During this “left” period, the CP had led the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), which had been formed in 1927 as a revolutionary workers’ movement working inside and outside of the union structure, into a policy of forming “revolutionary” unions and a tendency to scorn the AF of L as hopelessly reactionary.

During 1934-35, the TUUL was dissolved and the tens of thousands of workers in its unions entered the AF of L, largely under the leadership of the CP. With them they took one fighting principle of the TUUL—industrial unionism. But the CP left behind an even more important and the need for advanced political and organizational forms that functioned both in and independent of the trade union structure. In a matter of a few years, this error would develop into full blown political degeneration in the Party’s shop work.

The CIO Is Born

In 1934, at the AF of L convention, a large upswell of support for industrial unionism came from leaders of local Central Labor Councils and from the delegates of unorganized industries—like textile. They were beaten back viciously by William Green, the head of the AF of L, and the union leaders. The CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing,” and the CP leaders, set out to educate the unorganized workers “ridiculous,” “irrational” and “good for nothing.”

Defeated, the industrial unionists returned to the CIO convention with a new resolve. The ruling class was using the unorganized to keep pay at the starvation level and make existing unions increasingly powerless. The unorganized themselves were demanding organization, staging walkouts spontaneously over pay and grievances. And at this convention there was a new lookman—John L. Lewis, the autocratic head of the miners union.

After it was clear that even his strongest organiza-ize the unorganized” speech would not change the hide-bound reactionaries, Lewis took a bold and carefully planned action. He punched out Big Bill Hutchison of the carpenters, and in doing so split the AFL of L wide open. The CIO, which was set up three weeks later, was left thrown out of the AF of L officially until 1938, but from Lewis’ first punch it was an independent organization.

The strength and the weakness of the CIO can be seen easily in comparing the drive to organize auto and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. The strength were the rank and file industrial workers, and nowadays did they play a greater role than in auto, which was not even seen as the main focus of CIO organizing.

They had a union, the United Auto Workers, but no contracts, since the UAW had been given no work when it was affiliated with the AF of L. Nevertheless, the union had thousands of members who wanted union recognition, more money and better conditions.

Sit-Down Strikes

After wildcats and sit-downs in GM plants across the country through November of 1936, and after being told by CIO leadership, “Wait, conditions aren’t ripe yet,” the workers of Fisher Body in Cleveland struck and took over their plant. They said they would stay until GM signed a national contract. Two days later, the workers at two Flint, Michigan Fisher Body plants sat down in their shops.

It was only after this, as more than a dozen other plants from Georgia to Wisconsin moved to sit down or walk out, that the UAW called a formal strike. The focus of was of course Flint, where police violence, court injunctions and slick company promises failed to budge the men.

John L. Lewis came to town and said he stood with the sit-downers 100%. Rank and filters fromqty, rubber, steel and mininng poured into Flint to protect the strikers. An estimated 10,000 workers from as far away as Buffalo, N.Y., many of them armed, had taken off from work and formed motorcades to go to the aid of their class brothers.

The greatest horror, however, was that of the strikers, who for 44 days created a miniature democratic council workers’ council that organized life in the sit-down plants, and their wives, who not only provided the communication and transportation to the sit-downers, but armed with 2 x 4 clubs fought cops to defend the strike.

Try though GM did, they were unable to persuade the government to use the National Guard to try and crush the strike. For the capitalist state the stake was too high.
Steel Strike Top Down

The Steel strike points out the other side of the coin. It is a pattern of shock and an example of the tactics of trade union policymakers.

Steel workers organized a committee (SWOC) consisting entirely of leaders of the old unions which had bolted the AFL. They held strike on the first day. The steel workers' committee (SWOC) consisted entirely of leaders of the old unions which had borken the AFL. But even with a single rank and file steelworkers among them, its strategy was based on winning over the mass of men and perceptive opportunists from among the heads of already existing company unions.

It signed up thousands of rank and file steelworkers, but Lewis used them as his bargaining chip in two months of secret bargaining with U.S. Steel. On March 1, 1937, the world learned that U.S. Steel and SWOC had an agreement, which came as a real surprise to steelworkers and the heads of other steel companies. There wasn't much role the workers could play, since not until 1942 would the SWOC become a real union with even the pretense of democracy.

The steel companies sensed the essential weakness of the SWOC, the fact that it didn't have a powerful and independent rank and file. The group of company officials at the Steel Strike point out the other side of the coin, it is a pattern of shock...