

## TWO MORE COMMUNIST PARTY EXPERIENCES

By Don Hamerquist

I want to detail two experiences of C.P. organizational politics. On the first I'm basically an observer. I had a role in the second.

**No. 1.** In the late spring of 1966, I was one of 500 delegates to the 18<sup>th</sup> Convention of the CPUSA, the first convention for almost a decade. Over the previous years the advancing disfunction of the aged leadership was paralleled by an influx of young members who tended to be more active and radical and less dominated by fears of repression. A good number of these were Convention delegates and it was generally understood that some of us would be elevated to a renovated National Committee (80 member) and possibly to the National Board (24 member).

There was a gradual reduction in state harassment of reds during the early 60s, but the C.P. was still de facto illegal under the various registration provisions of the Communist Control Act and was still operating in a half-assed underground fashion. There were only a handful of open C.P. members in the country and a significant fraction of the convention delegates didn't know many of the current leadership or most of the other delegates. This didn't raise any obvious problem until the time came to elect a new national committee. Before that the Convention had been managed by the typical M.L. presiding committee; selected prior to the Convention and operating along the usual democratic? centralist lines. Rank and file convention participants weren't aware there were differences within the presiding committee – much less what the differing positions might be.

When the moment arrived for the election, the presiding committee offered a complete slate of 80 nominees for the 80-person national committee. As a concession, this slate included half a dozen 'youth' – along with a number of relics that were well past their sell-by date. In the hopes of making the convention a public coming out for the party, the Hall leadership had invited a bunch of skeptical mainstream news people to observe the proceedings. As a result, they were embarrassed when we organized a mini-rebellion against the presiding committee slate and made a number of additional nominations from the floor – mainly 'youth'. The leadership responded with an attempt to pre-empt the problem by expanding the size of the National Committee and incorporating the additional nominees into the approved slate. However, the dissidents also wanted an opportunity to get rid of some dead wood placeholders, so we responded with still more nominees. Largely as a result of the media

observers, the presiding committee was maneuvered into a convention floor vote, raising the possibility that a handful of its recommended nominees would fall. This challenge to the presiding committee was further magnified by the fact that many of us didn't intend to vote for a full slate.

For 'security', all nominees were only identified by initials. In many cases these weren't sufficient identifiers, so a set of descriptive characteristics; "trade unionist, Black, woman, student", etc. were attached to the initials. It was quite clear that nominees with "good" characteristics; Black, Trade Unionist, Youth, were essentially guaranteed home free. A no vote for an unknown Black woman trade unionist was not going to happen, but withholding votes from nominees that were just anonymous initials was very likely. This ensured that some of the original slate recommended by the current leadership and presiding committee were going to be voted down.

At this point, Gus Hall took the floor and made a speech for the nomination of "comrade x.x. x.x. was presented as a vital, indeed essential, member of the current and future leadership. However, he was not Black, young, woman, trade unionist, etc. Without Hall's explicit endorsement the prospects were good that he would be voted out. Our clique was immediately interested in knowing more about this uniquely important comrade. We quickly learned that x.x. was the 'Ambassador' - the all-important liaison with the Soviet Party - who would only deal with him if he was in the formal party leadership. In any case, the 'ambassador' was re-elected and played a predictable role in the C.P. leadership over the remainder of my involvement in that swamp - particularly on the issue of Czechoslovakia. However, there's more to the 'ambassador' story that became clear well after I was long gone from the C.P.

The ambassador's actual name was Morris Childs. From the early 1950's to the mid 1980's, while Childs was the primary direct connection with the Soviet party, he and his family were central players in a major FBI operation within the C.P. The FBI set him up in a jewelry business in Chicago as a cover for his extensive foreign trips, and Childs became influential in the international soviet structure while conscientiously bringing back Russian political directives - and money - all with the full knowledge and active oversight of the FBI. A good deal is known now about Childs and the FBI's "Operation Solo". However, I don't think the fact - and the irony - of Hall's intervention to ensure he could continue to function is adequately appreciated, so I'm doing my part to remedy that situation.

**No. 2.** In the current political environment, virtually all inter-organizational grievances and disputes end in political splits – whether or not the issues might seem to be open to easy resolution through political debate and collective work. Given this reality, it's difficult for current activists to see why it was quite hard to leave the C.P. even when its corrupt nature was evident. Here is my partial explanation for my own behavior in that regard.

In the early summer of 1968, the C.P. held a special convention that confirmed many of the reasons why I decided to leave the party and, at the same time clarified why a number of my close comrades chose to remain. My disaffection with the Party had grown rapidly in the last part of 1967. Here's a short summary of the main events, which I've indicated in more detail elsewhere.

Earlier in 1967, the party had made some significant moves to the left in its orientation to parliamentary struggles and to trade unionist reformism. I still don't know what underlay these changes and certainly realize, in retrospect that I seriously overestimated their significance and durability. However, at the moment, they were sufficiently substantive to make a number of us think there was a possibility to renovate the C.P. and to align it with the outburst of mass revolutionary action that had emerged globally. Part of these illusions had to do with Gus Hall's politics which at the time were deliberately promoting the younger and more radical cadre – including me.

As I've pointed out previously, the Party Convention in the summer of 1966 had been an odd affair where it wasn't really possible to confront the party's incompetence and its isolation from major political developments. These issues had all been deferred with the explicit understanding that the party would be holding regular 2-year conventions and there would be a complete review of basic policy and organizational questions in 1968. Hall was an active promoter of this scenario into the fall of 1967.

Specifically, he asked me to develop a critique of the main existing policy framework, the so-called 'anti-monopoly coalition' for the upcoming convention. I wrote an extensive document that fall and sent it to Hall to read before sending it to the committee organizing the pre-Convention discussion. He responded quickly and favorably, or so I thought at the time, and asked to give the document to Henry Winston, the C.P. chairman. Later events made it clear that it had been circulated much more widely within the National Board and Secretariat. They also made it clear to me that I had been delusional to believe it would be received favorably.

Shortly afterwards, I had a significant split with Hall over my report to the National Board from the NCNP convention that I've written about separately. There were two major issues: first, I argued that the contemporary organized trade union movement had been shown to be irrelevant to current mass radical politics – at best. Second, and most important, I argued that there was no possibility during the -68 election cycle for an organized radical mass movement that was not explicitly anti-imperialist and, at least implicitly, anti-capitalist. I believe Hall's response was adequately conveyed in his statement. "Shut up, No more of this bullshit."

### **So on to the 1968 Convention**

My first indication that something was serious amiss with the 1968 convention planning came slightly earlier when I learned that my solicited strategy paper would not be distributed as part of the pre-convention discussion and that I should not circulate it - either inside or outside the party. I asked if I could break up the article into smaller pieces and was told that I would be limited to one 750-word summary (the original was more like 40,000 words), and that summary would only be distributed as the leadership saw fit. Shortly afterwards, I broke discipline big time, circulating a few hundred copies to dissidents in the party and to a number of interested leftists on the outside. (In this project my most active confederate was Duggan – about whom I have written separately). This violation of discipline was a major element in my eventual 'trial' before the national committee.

This led to my first effort to quit the party in very late 1967 that I've also written about elsewhere. I was convinced not to do it by two arguments from comrades that I respected who were unwilling to quit themselves at that moment. Their first point was that I was still on the paid staff and was assigned to some promising work developing a radical challenge to the 1968 Democratic Convention that would be hard to continue outside the C.P. Second, and infinitely more persuasive, they argued that our faction was positioned to take over the Party at the upcoming convention; and that our success or lack of success there would provide a better basis for moving forward as a political tendency.

An important element of the second argument was quickly undermined when we learned that the Secretariat and National Board, on which we had very little representation, had decided not to have a full convention. There would not be any election of a new national committee, and there would not be a basic political review of strategic priorities. Instead, we would have a "special convention", limited to developing policy on the -68 elections, and to ratifying the long-deferred proposed party program that had been gestating for years.

Shortly thereafter, Gus Hall announced to the *N.Y. Times* that he would be running for President in 1968, and that the Party would be putting significant resources into his campaign. This was a real bombshell for me and the other dissidents. For over a year we had argued for a mass break with the Democratic Party via an independent or 3<sup>rd</sup> Party presidential campaign. We had argued further that the politics of the period demanded that such a campaign had to be headed by a Black candidate (King). Now the party proposed to undermine that policy with a public relations effort that would have no significant political value. Worse, the presidential candidate would be a very white man. We challenged the changed position as best we could in the arenas that were available to us – recognizing that it apparently had the Moscow imprint. This succeeded in getting the decision deferred to the Special Convention. However, with Hall having made his intentions so public, there was little doubt what the eventual outcome would be. His presidential candidacy seemed inevitable after King was assassinated later in the Spring; and even more so when, following Johnson's withdrawal, the Democratic Convention protest disintegrated into a mixture of the Kennedy/McCarthy campaigns and Yippiedom.

When the Convention opened in the early summer of 1968, our dissident group was significantly larger and had far greater political cohesion than had been the case in 1966. We had the operative leadership of the two largest districts, Southern California and New York, and were the majority of the youth section. Essentially everything the party had accomplished politically was due to our work and international events were in our favor (very temporarily as we shortly discovered). However, we were far short of a delegate majority; a generous estimate of our strength would have been around 30%; and we were not well placed in the party structure. It was not of our doing, but, as had been the case for 1966 Convention, the '68 plenary sessions were partially open and significant elements of the press were in attendance.

The '68 Convention had a slightly more representative presiding committee. Carl Bloice and I from the 'youth' were on it, along with a handful of the old leadership that we now recognized as critics of the Hall regime. My memory is failing me on the exact order of events at the Convention, but I believe that before the issue of the Hall campaign was put on the plenary agenda, our minority faction had made some significant gains. The old guard's draft program had been scrapped rather than ratified, and the pressures to embrace the McCarthy campaign as an alternative to challenging the two-party institutional structure were effectively countered.

The work of the convention was suspended when the Presiding Committee was convened to consider the issue of Hall's campaign. That meeting began with Hall laying out all the big plans for his campaign and the usual crew chiming in with their 5 minutes of preplanned enthusiasm. Our camp spoke, opposing the general idea and stressing the added problems from having a white man head the ticket. It was clear that we were going to lose the vote decisively and most of our camp was ready to accept defeat in the traditional democratic-centralist manner where minorities in leading bodies must support the majority position in subsequent discussions. At that point, I, and Bloice in a less clear way, screwed up the proceedings by announcing that we would speak against the nomination of Hall on the convention floor and would demand a floor vote on the issue. After a flurry of denunciations of yours truly as petty bourgeois, anti-working class, anarchist, anti-Leninist, there was a prolonged suspension of the presiding committee meeting. For some hours the convention remained at a standstill. I remember being besieged by questions about what was going on – but I didn't have a clue.

Finally, the presiding committee reconvened – and a tense meeting it was when Hall took the floor and announced that he had reconsidered his candidacy. He had apparently just learned that he was going to be much too busy to campaign for President, and he proposed that Charlene Mitchell, a Black woman who was a leading member of our opposition group, as the candidate. This led to a beautiful sight where, with much wailing and gnashing of teeth, the most brown-nosed stalwarts of the leadership jumped all over Hall for “capitulating to petty bourgeois anti-working class ‘blackmail’”.

At the time we were well aware that our ‘victory’ rested entirely on the fact that Hall could not risk a public challenge to his leadership – even one that he was certain to win. At stake was the credibility of his control of the party with the Russians. However, our group saw this ‘victory’ as the centerpiece of a generally successful convention effort. I won't go into further detail about the other achievements that seemed significant at the moment. The net impact was that our factional hopes of taking over and radicalizing the C.P. were given a boost, and my arguments that we should be seriously preparing for an organized split lost further traction.

A few weeks later, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, the momentum within the Party was sharply reversed, and we discovered how tenuous our ‘victories’ were. All the leading members of the faction were public opponents of the Soviet position and were immediately repositioned from being the ‘left’ adventurist advocates of revolution to being the ‘right’ advocates of social democratic reformism. We were all brought up on charges and some, including me, were given wrist slapping

discipline for 'publicly' advocating a position that had not been organizationally sanctioned. At the same time all of our convention victories – including Charlene's campaign - suddenly lost access to party resources.

A few weeks following our sanctioning, the group of dissidents got together for a discussion of prospects for an organized departure from the party. I have detailed that sad discussion elsewhere. After being fired from my CP staff job and a short awkward stint with Charlene's resourceless campaign, I left the party permanently. Over the subsequent years, so did almost everyone else in the opposition group. All the moth-eaten reasons for hanging on in the C.P.; the fact that 'good' people were still being recruited; the importance of the international connections and various hopeful developments elsewhere in the world; the sad state of the non-party left; were eventually exhausted, but not in a way that promoted a viable alternative.