The Origins of the McCarthy Era — Part II

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Just as revolutions brewed in France, Italy and Greece after World War II, the U.S. was also affected by similar conditions. Though not nearly so deeply as Europe, in 1945, the U.S. ruling circles knew they would face fierce opposition at home after the war. Although they still had the ideas to the depth of the crisis worldwide, they did perceive that they had to attack two obstacles to avoid postwar crisis. One was the leadership of the Communist Party, U.S.A., which in 1937, led hundreds of thousands of people under the banner "Forward to a Soviet America." After the war, its membership had risen to its all time high of 74,000. Secondly, the bourgeoisie knew it had to strike at the workers' spontaneous resistance and basic organization, the trade unions, whose membership had also risen by the war's end.

Workers Rally Around 30% Demand

In 1941, as part of their pledge to fight fascism, the unions agreed to a no-strike pledge for the duration of the war. As the war drew to a close in 1944-45, wildcat strikes, called "quickie strikes," became more frequent and more common. By 1945, both labor and the capitalists were fed up with the lack of strikes at the war's end and the ending of the no-strike pledge loomed.

The war's end brought the biggest strike wave ever in American history. In one month, 3.5 million workers struck. In 1946, 4.6 million more workers struck. Strike figures since have never been so high. The strike wave concentrated in basic industries. For the first time, General Motors, then America's largest industrial corporation, was completely shut down. The steel strike in 1946, was the largest to this day. All four major rubber companies were struck at the same time. 43,000 oil workers walked on Sept. 17. Railroad workers hit the bricks as did textile, electrical, maritime and lumber workers, meatpackers, truck drivers and city utility workers.

Almost every strike rallied to the same demand — 30% increase in wages. The strikes lasted from four to six weeks. The soldiers were enraged and marched in protest as they left the service, with one soldier reportedly saying, "I've never been told there was any possibility of a war." Many workers held mass meetings and paraded on city halls to back the strikers' demands.

400,000 striking miners forced the government to accept their demand for a health and welfare fund — the workers' greatest shame, the capitulation of the Communist Party, U.S.A. These five years are most crucial to understanding the McCarthy era.

This three-part series examines the period that created the McCarthy era. In part I (Workers Viewpoint, May 25), we examined the U.S. bourgeoisie and summed up that the U.S. capitalists, although the strongest capitalists worldwide, were weak in comparison to the strength garnered by socialism and the Soviet Union during and after the war. The U.S. capitalists reacted in large part to crisis after crisis after the war.

War at Home — Heat and Cold

Basis For Strike Wave

Why were the workers so relentless and determined to win their demands? During the war, workers' overall income rose to a peak, but with the escalation of war, more and more people by government force had increased. The workers footed the enormous costs of WWII — 41% of the war costs were paid by taxes. Taxation was for the first time extended to the lowest income brackets, taxing broader strata of people, while the workers, who were returning from battle, were forced to pay favorable tax depreciation rates.

Due to the rise in inflation during the war, workers were robbed of their incomes at faster and faster rates. By 1948, food costs increased over 115% and clothing prices rose 101%

By 1944, the monopolies began massive layoffs. Between V-E day (May 2, 1945) and V-J Day (Aug. 14, 1945), more than a million workers lost their jobs. By 1949, unemployment rose to 6%. This was the material basis for the workers' dissatisfaction and their demands. How there were good reasons as well.

Strike Gains Legitimacy

During the war soldiers risked and gave their lives to the fight against fascism. Families were separated for years. Women at home shouldered the entire burden of raising families, never knowing if they would be reunited with their men again. Indeed many were not reunited. The workers made Herculean sacrifice to fight for a world without fascism, to end war and to live a better life in peace.

Congress' proposal in 1945, to maintain high levels of troops abroad to stave off revolution in other countries, fueled a surge of protest "to bring the boys home" and "one man's war is another man's profits." They besieged the Pentagon to release 12 million soldiers at one time instead of discharging 2 million soldiers over a period of a year as they had proposed. It was partly proletarian internationalism when GIs staged protests to return home from Guam, the Philippines and China.

After hearing a long anti-Soviet tirade about why the troops had to remain in Rome after the war, one soldier remarked, "I thought we were allies fighting one war. I've never been told there was any possibility of a war with Russia over some mystical ground about fundamental differences from the American way of life. Has the U.S. government been fooling me?"

According to General Harry Lewis Twaddle, commander of the Ninety-Fifth Division, assembled the troops to explain, "You soldiers over here in Europe had the solution to your problem. The solution to your problems was so prolonged and frequent, it took him 40 minutes to deliver a 15-minute speech." It struck the soldiers most sharply after the war as they were protecting other peoples interests, not their own.

This same sentiment forced Congress to vote down Truman's proposal for a peace-time draft in 1946. The strike wave of 1945-46 became a legitimate avenue of dissent for GIs. They went from the lines to the unemployment lines. Instead of standing up and fighting for their rights, many joined the CP. They sought new ideas and new solutions.

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This surge in mass activity was channelled into the demand of 30% wage increases. It focused on the crisis of the U.S. economy, which was driven by inflation and unemployment. An underlining cause was the massive anti-fascist sentiment for greater democracy and better living standards. During the war time, many had joined the CP. They sought new ideas and new solutions. Many examined the Soviet Union, probing and questioning the ideas of communism.

Crisis Inevitable

The ruling circles were driven into more of a frenzy. On one hand, without the government's force and
troups they doubtless could not have withstood labor's demands as long as they did. On the other hand, they demanded an end to price controls and government regulation. With the demand for consumer production, some of their gains were transferred to the working masses during the war. The biggest monopolies who had benefited the most off war contracts saw it as a chance to mop up.

In 1946,增收的 manufacturers and business organizations appeared before hearings of the House Banking and Currency Committee to demand continuation and the withholding of consumer goods unless the already flimsy price controls were eliminated. In 1946, the most near industry withheld 90% of the meat from the market and curtailed production to press Truman to reinstate controls.

The U.S. capitalists could only go in one direction to step up their attack on the working class.

Public Opinion Fluid: Capitalists Whip Up Counter-Trend

After the end of WWII, the U.S. monopoly capitalists worked overtime to swing public opinion in their favor. The National Labor Relations Act (NALM, which represented over 17,000 affiliated companies of which 60 were dominant), spent several months doing everything but existing. Truman imported Churchill to his hometown of Fulton, to get the spending appropriations for Europe from Congress, he would have to "scare the hell out of the people".

The newspapers reported that this tactic was not working. The prestige of the Soviet Union was high in the United States. Cyrus L. Sulzberger, a leading correspondant, wrote on March 21, 1946, "The momentum of pro-Soviet feeling worked up during the war to support the Grand Alliance had continued to grow in 1945. It was felt to be difficult for the Administration to carry out the stiffer diplomatic policy required now. For this reason, these observations are a peculiarly appropriate moment for a better psychological balance of public opinion."

In 1947, Senator Vandenberg told Truman, if he expected to get his appropriations for foreign aid, he would have to "sac[e] the hell out of the country."

Public opinion remained fluid. On March 5, 1946, Truman imported Churchill to his hometown of Fulton, Missouri, and gave his "iron curtain" speech in which he denounced "communist fifth columns" which were "everywhere." The public sentiment against Churchill's speech was so great that even Truman had to disassociate himself from the speech. Undersecretary of State, Dean Acheson, excused himself from the speech, saying that he was unable to present the speech because he was working on a better psychological balance of public opinion. At first the polls showed that 40% of the public opposed Churchill's speech. Robert Now, a 28-year-old political agent of the National Maritime Union and chairman of the local Wallace-for-President Committee, was murdered in cold blood by an anti-communist member of the NMU.

As Truman came out with the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan which played up both chauvinistic and humanitarian sentiments of the workers, he quickly enacted a great deal of the legislative and executive machinery later to be used full force in the McCarthy Era. Ten days after he proclaimed the Truman Doctrine, he signed Executive Order 7835 which established the loyalty and security program for all federal employees, and he revived the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations. The same act established the CIA.

By 1946, although the CIO had begun to attack communists and militants, the Marshall Plan was used to force through acceptance of the Taft-Hartley Act and using of communists and wayward unions from the CIO.

Appearance and Essence of Workers' Sentiments

By 1947, William Z. Foster, Communist Party leader and leading party theoretician, concluded that the CP had no mandate from the people. In 1945-46, and up to 1947, the unions and the workers' spontaneous consciousness was even stronger than before the war due to the rise in union membership, the prestige of the Soviet Union and the masses' immediate experience with war. The strike wave of 1945-46 shows that the workers were determined to fight, that their demands gained broad support and legitimacy from other strata of the population.

The fact that the government nationalized four industries in response to strikes shows that the working masses had been advanced among the people will really understand the idea of socialism and communism and propogate it among the masses. The masses on the other hand, despite war and fascism, will not make revolution by ideals, but will make revolution by necessity. Their stands will not be so clear cut as pro-socialism or anti-socialism, but will voice the demands they see as necessary for their survival.

Even though the government took advantage of the respect people had for it built up from the war, people continued to resist it even at the height of anti-communist hysteria. 212,000 miners left the mines in protest of the Taft-Hartley Act and demanding workers called out some 132,000, mostly advanced among the workers for 84 days despite Taft-Hartley threats.

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