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Communists and the Communist Issue in the American
Labor Movement, 1920-1950

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by

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To Maya and Margie

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Abbreviations Used

ACCF	American Congress for Cultural Freedom
ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
ACTU	Association of Catholic Trade Unionists
ACWA	Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America
ADA	Americans for Democratic Action
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AWU	Auto Workers Union
CEC	Central Executive Committee [of the Communist Party]
CFL	Chicago Federation of Labor
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CMU	Committee for Maritime Unity
Comintern	Communist International
CP	Communist Party [of the United States of America]
CPPA	Committee for Progressive Political Action
FE	Farm Equipment Workers
FFLP	Federated Farmer Labor Party
FLP	Farmer Labor Party
GEB	General Executive Board [of UE, UAW, and ILGWU]
GM	General Motors
IAM	International Association of Machinists
ILGWU	International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
Mine-Mill	International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers
NDMB	National Defense Mediation Board
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NMU	National Maritime Union
Pol Com	Political Committee [of the Communist Party]
SP	Socialist Party
SWP	Socialist Workers' Party
TUEL	Trade Union Educational League
TUUL	Trade Union Unity League
UAW	International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America.
UE	United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America
UE-MDA	UE- Members for Democratic Action
USW	United Steel Workers
WP	Workers' Party

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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The Communist movement was the major organizational form of working class radicalism in the United States in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Although only a minority of American workers joined or supported the party, that minority was not tiny. Probably more than half a million working class men and women joined the party, and at least an additional million worked closely with Communists in trade union caucuses, community groups, unemployed councils, and in organizations like the International Workers' Order and the International Labor Defense. Although few, if any, unions were "Communist-dominated" in the sense which their critics charged, many unions had Communists in important leadership positions and Communists, both individually and collectively, played important roles in unions without Communist leadership. By 1950, the party's position in the working class movement had eroded. Eleven unions, representing approximately 750,000 workers, were expelled from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Only three of these unions exist at present; only one retained most of its membership.

Neither the Communist role in the CIO, nor the implications of the purge of the unions said to be Communist-dominated, has been studied adequately. Two characteristics of anti-Communist scholarship have served to limit historical inquiry. First, anti-Communists claim that virtually all Communist trade union practice derived from the requirements of Soviet foreign policy rather than American conditions. Second, anti-Communists have adopted a rhetorical style in which Communist and non-Communist activities are described differently. Non-Communists, for example, win union elections, but Communists "capture" a union. Non-Communists, join, influence, or lead organizations, while Communists infiltrate, invade, dominate, or control them. Since the activities of American Communists are viewed as a mere reflection of Soviet foreign policy, and since it is possible to denounce Communists without evidence simply by using the anti-Communist rhetorical style, anti-Communists have little reason to study the activities of Communist workers and labor organizers in detail.

This dissertation is a collection of essays examining the role played by Communists and the Communist issue in the organization and internal political life of certain industrial unions. Since only certain unions are covered, it would be useful to outline the contents. The opening chapter criticizes the assumptions of anti-Communist scholarship, brings together information about party membership (size, turnover, percentage of industrial workers), discusses the relationship between the American party and the international movement, and poses the basic questions which the dissertation will seek

to answer. Chapter two examines the internecine warfare between the Socialist leadership and the Communist-led opposition in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) between 1923 and 1928. Chapters three and four, which comprise close to half of the dissertation, cover Communists in the automobile industry from 1927 to 1950. Chapters five and six examine the struggle between Communists and anti-Communists in the National Maritime Union (NMU) and the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE). Chapter seven explores the Communist controversy in the national CIO. Chapter eight states the conclusions of the inquiry.

A few of the major conclusions can be stated briefly. First, those union leaders who were called Communists by the CIO leadership (some were Communists, but most were not) were considerably more democratic than their anti-Communist counterparts. This can be seen by comparing unions before and after successful anti-Communist campaigns (UAW and NMU), and by comparing the rights of the anti-Communist opposition in the UE with those accorded the pro-Communist opposition in the ILGWU. Second, the victory of the anti-Communists led to a decline in union militancy in all of the unions examined. Third, the view of party trade union history which divides the party's work into various periods based on Soviet policies can not be sustained by the evidence. While there was a relationship between the policies of the international movement and those of the American Communists, it is simply not true, for example, that Communists called strikes to disrupt national defense after the

Russo-German non-aggression pact, that the decision to form dual unions was dictated by the third period, or that Communists were suddenly ordered to abandon dual unions at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International.

The final assessment of the Communists which emerges from these essays is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, Communists were, in general, more dedicated, militant, and democratic than their anti-Communist counterparts. The party deserves enormous credit for its intense involvement in the campaign to organize basic industry. On the other hand, in the process of that organizing campaign, the Communist Party gradually lost those characteristics which should distinguish a Communist Party from other political formations. It abandoned the struggle for socialism, supported the New Deal, and made no serious or consistent attempt to challenge liberal ideology. Communists abolished the institution which enabled them to play a coordinated and independent role within the labor movement—the party fraction—and stopped publishing shop papers. As unionists, in short, they were excellent, but they were poor Communists.