

## CHAPTER ONE COMMUNISM, ANTI-COMMUNISM, AND LABOR HISTORY

The Communist movement was the major organizational form of working class radicalism in the United States during the second quarter of the twentieth century. Although only a minority of American workers joined or even supported the Communist Party, that minority, as we shall see, was no small or insignificant handful. 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, and unemployed councils, and in organizations like the International Workers' Order and the International Labor Defense. The membership, influence, and strength of the Communist Party in American factories far exceeded that of Students for a Democratic Society on American campuses in the 1960's, and SDS' impact was considerable. Although few, if any, unions were "Communist-dominated" in the sense which their critics charged, many unions had Communists in important leadership positions, and individual Communists and Communist-led caucuses played important roles in unions without any Communist leadership.

By 1950, the position of the Communist Party within the working class movement had been seriously eroded. A coalition of conservative unionists allied with the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU) on the right, and Socialists and Trotskyists on the left, challenged the leadership in nearly all unions influenced by Communists. When most of those campaigns proved unsuccessful,

eleven unions, representing approximately 750,000 workers, were expelled from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The expelled unions faced hostility from government, raiding by unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the CIO, legal repression, and extra-legal violence. Only three of the unions still exist; only one retained its membership. In CIO and AFL unions, provisions denying Communists the right to union membership or office were vigorously enforced. Thousands of workers were expelled from labor unions, usually over the strong objections of their co-workers and the stated wishes of their local unions.

Neither the Communist role in the CIO, nor the implications of the purge of the Communists, has been adequately studied. Many standard works in the field are little more than cold war documents, or exercises in demonology. The following essays examine specific activities of Communist workers in specific industries over time. It should be remembered that Communists saw the working class movement as the crucial arena for Communist work; in most areas, far more effort was spent to elect the president of a local union than a Communist city councilman. Electoral politics was never as important to Communists as trade union work. These studies, therefore, examine party activity in what Communists believed to be the most important area of work. They can tell us a great deal about the form of working class radicalism in the second quarter of the twentieth century, and about the Communist movement. But before examining these specific cases, it is necessary to offer some background information about the Communist movement and the

scholarship which has examined it.

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The historians, labor economists, and political scientists who have written about Communists in American labor have assumed that Communists were unique among workers, labor officials, and organizers in that they were not interested in building strong unions which could win better working conditions and higher wages for themselves and other workers. Instead, Communists are thought to have been concerned with political considerations which they kept hidden from other workers. One political scientist has cited a bizarre alchemy whereby "once taken over by the Communists a trade union ceases to be a trade union, for all that it may retain the charter and outward appearance of a trade union."<sup>1</sup> A second assumption frequently made is that whatever influence individual Communists or the party itself attained in the labor movement must have been due to deception and manipulation, and therefore any action taken against Communists constituted a defense of union democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Anti-Communist scholars have developed an interesting technique which makes it possible to denounce Communists without evidence. They simply describe common-place activities engaged in

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Max M. Kampelman, The Communist Party vs. the CIO: A Study in Power Politics (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1957), 249.

<sup>2</sup>This position is analyzed further in chapter five, "Communism, Democracy, and the National Maritime Union."

by Communists and non-Communists alike in quite different terms. For example, non-Communists win union elections, but Communists "capture" a union.<sup>1</sup> Non-Communists join organizations, while Communists infiltrate or invade them.<sup>2</sup> A non-Communist political party passes resolutions or makes decisions; a Communist party issues directives.<sup>3</sup> A non-Communist states his or her position, but a Communist peddles the party line.<sup>4</sup> Non-Communists influence or lead unions, while Communists control or dominate them.<sup>5</sup> With only a little practice, scholars can include several anti-Communist themes in a single sentence: "In 1935, according to a variety of witnesses, the party dispatched an agent named Jeff Kibre to

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<sup>1</sup>In Philip Taft's chapter on radicalism in American labor, the word "capture" appears five times in three pages. No mention is made of winning (or even contesting) union elections. Philip Taft, The Structure and Government of Labor Unions (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 5, 10-11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>3</sup>Jack Barbash, The Practice of Unionism (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 324.

<sup>4</sup>David Shannon stated that the "well known radio news commentator Johannes Steel . . . was invited to speak at IWO conventions, where he peddled the straight party line." Shannon would never think of saying that a liberal peddled the Democratic Party line on the Marshall Plan or the Truman Doctrine, because he respects that party line. Such rhetoric is reserved for real and imagined Communists. David A. Shannon, The Decline of American Communism: A History of the Communist Party Since 1945 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1959), 115-16.

<sup>5</sup>The phrase "Communist domination" or "dominated by Communists" appeared four times in one paragraph and eleven times in the essay as a whole in Taft's discussion of labor radicalism. Taft, Labor Unions, 1-34, especially page 14. For a defense of this language, see Walter Galenson, "The Communists and Trade Union Democracy," Industrial Relations, XIII (October 1974), 236.

organize the infiltration of the talent and technical unions."<sup>1</sup> The key phrase of the sentence is, of course, "the party dispatched," which conveys the image of the party as an organization which treats its members as nothing more than the component parts of a huge machine, but each phrase of the sentence, with the possible exception of "in 1935", conveys a distinct, anti-Communist message.<sup>2</sup>

This anti-Communist image is not dependent upon concrete evidence of pernicious Communist activity. Good work by Communists serves equally well, since it is assumed that constructive trade union work by Communists is a camouflage for other, less admirable, activities. As Vernon Jensen argued in his study of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers:

They [the Communists] often pushed grievances energetically to foster the belief that collective bargaining and the workers' interests were their chief . . . objectives. The militant emphasis upon collective bargaining was a camouflage for gaining freedom to pursue

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<sup>1</sup>John Hutchinson, "Trade Unionism and the Communists," William Peterson, ed., The Realities of World Communism (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 171.

<sup>2</sup>It might be instructive to analyze each portion of Hutchinson's sentence.

"In 1935." We will return to this phrase later.

"according to a variety of witnesses." The witnesses are not named (no need for elaborate evidence against Communists) and the term "witnesses", rather than "sources", establishes a criminal or conspiratorial tone.

"the party dispatched." This phrase is discussed in the text.

"an agent named Jeff Kibre." If Kibre belonged to any other radical group, he would be called an organizer, not an agent.

"to organize the infiltration of the talent and technical unions." The key word here is "infiltration." It implied that Kibre planned to sneak Communists into the union, rather than win a base for the party or its program among those already in the union.

"in 1935." Kibre had been in Hollywood since the 1920's. The phrase "in 1935" obscures this point, and builds the notion that Communists are alien invaders who must always be imported.

other objectives as it suited them. A penetrating look reveals that control of the organization . . . was their primary goal. . . . Policy formation was, of course, not enough. The union had to be built. What better way to achieve control than to build local unions and handpick and control the local officers?<sup>1</sup>

There is, of course, no way to empirically test Jensen's argument, since it is based upon his assumption of carefully hidden Communist motivation. A Communist organizer who spent several years organizing workers in a basic industry, risking, as many did, physical assault, and, in extreme cases, death, could be shown, in Jensen's view, to have been uninterested in organizing workers if he so much as made a single speech at a union meeting in support of any position advocated by the Communist Party.

When stated explicitly, many criticisms of Communists appear ludicrous or vicious or both. The preoccupation of Southern racists with possible interracial sex in the Communist movement is well known. Less well known, perhaps, is the fascination the topic holds for Northern social scientists. Using a subtler style, Nathan Glazer explored a favorite theme of the Ku Klux Klan: "in the party, Negro members were treated with more than equality, and white female party members went out of their way to demonstrate how serious the Communists were in eliminating all social barriers between the two races." In case there is any doubt as to Glazer's meaning, his next sentence added, "the slightest hesitation in social relations with Negro party members, and indeed, some felt, in sexual relations,

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<sup>1</sup>Vernon Jensen, Nonferrous Metals Industrial Unionism: A Study in Leadership Controversy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954), 296-97.

made a member suspect and might lead to denunciation."<sup>1</sup> Communists are pictured as moral monsters who are never quite so happy as when reading about the lynching of a black man: as Wilson Record put it, "what more welcome event could occur for such [Communist] propagandists than a lynching in Georgia, legal or otherwise?"<sup>2</sup> A rather common assumption appears to be that it is perfectly all right to destroy a movement or organization if it includes Communists:

Today this union [the International Ladies Garment Workers Union] is safe from Communist disruption. The issue was fought to a finish, mostly because its outstanding leaders had had a long experience in appraising and dealing with factional feuds and were quick to recognize the menacing proportions of Bolshevism. . . . And though after the struggle the International was almost gone, what was left of it was healthy and progressive.<sup>3</sup>

That the [Communist] party was willing, even during this united front period . . . to infiltrate and even destroy [Negro organizations] was evidenced in the Workers' Councils of the NUL [National Urban League]. Lester Granger later described what happened: "That was an ideal organization for the Communists to capture. They grabbed one in New York City, we had to kill it off.<sup>4</sup> They grabbed another in Pennsylvania, and we had to kill that off."

The argument which these writers are making deserves some comment. They are describing, with considerable approval, the destruction of organizations by anti-Communists simply because Communists have attained positions of leadership or influence in

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Glazer, The Social Basis of American Communism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), 171.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson Record, The Negro and the Communist Party (New York: Antheneum, 1951, 1971), 259.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Stolberg, Tailor's Progress: The Story of a Famous Union and the Men Who Made It (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, 1944), 108-109. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Record, Negro and CP, 147-48. Emphasis added.

those organizations. Similarly, Jensen, in the passage quoted earlier, described, with considerable disapproval, the building of a union by Communists. The sincerity of these scholars is not at issue. There can be little doubt that Record believes that black workers in Harlem are better off without any Workers' Council than they would be with one led by Communists, or that Stolberg believes that New York's garment workers were fortunate that their union was destroyed to remove Communists from positions to which they had been democratically elected.<sup>1</sup> But sincerity is no substitute for judgment. If anti-Communists are unable to be critical of a program which literally destroys an organization, they are probably unable to be critical of any anti-Communist program.

Most of the discussions of the role of Communists in the CIO were written after the CIO's decision to expel Communists and are, at least in part, justifications of that expulsion. And that expulsion is impossible to justify without a profound and deep anti-Communism. The repressive measures of the CIO leadership against Communists, therefore, have placed a heavy burden on anti-Communist scholars. It is not enough to argue that workers should not vote for a Communist for shop steward or local president; it must be argued also that Communist workers should be barred from the ballot and that workers who persist in electing Communists to union office should be expelled from the CIO. A factual account of the role Communists played in American trade unions, while it might provide the basis for some cogent criticisms of Communist theory and practice as seen by the

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<sup>1</sup>For more on this point, see chapter two.



American party, simply would not create the hatred necessary to justify a massive purge. Incidents would have to be misconstrued, positions distorted, and events obscured to build that strong a case. Anti-Communist scholars have been equal to the task.

None of this is too surprising. Indeed, it would be utopian to expect that objective histories of the American Communist movement would have been written in the United States during the 1950's and the early 1960's. It was, after all, during those years that numerous American intellectuals came to believe not merely that the Communist movement should be opposed ideologically, but that individual Communists should be denied rights which other Americans could take for granted. In the manifesto of anti-Communist liberalism, which, as interpreted by the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), rapidly became the official brand, Arthur Schlesinger, jr. noted that traditional freedoms could no longer be granted to those accused of having a possible connection with Communists. One casualty was the right to face one's accuser which struck Schlesinger as particularly unreasonable: "government counter-espionage agencies simply cannot be expected to unveil their agents at every demand of a defense attorney." After all, Schlesinger pointed out, civil liberties "do not deny society its right of self-protection," and if the Communist Party gains strength, "then we must act in the defense of freedom."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout these years, many American intellectuals did not even claim to be objective. They openly announced their commitment

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, jr., The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 216-18.

to anti-Communist politics and, more importantly, their use of scholarship and classroom advocacy to propagate that commitment. Daniel Boorstin, in a discussion of historical methodology with the members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, explained that the two forms in which he has expressed his opposition to the Communist Party were "an affirmative participation in religious activities" and "an attempt to discover and explain to my students in my teaching and in my writing, the unique virtues of American democracy." Boorstin added, "I have done this partly in my Jefferson book [The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson] . . . and in a forthcoming book called The Genius of American Politics, which is on the presses at the moment." Boorstin went on to say that no member of the Communist Party should be allowed to teach any subject in public schools, and that no Communist should be allowed to teach humanities or social science courses in college.<sup>1</sup> Boorstin, then, was not merely committed to aiding the American side in the cold war in both his teaching and his scholarship, but he was also asserting the legitimacy of excluding those who would present an alternative perspective.

Boorstin's position was by no means unique. In the annual presidential address of the American Historical Association, Conyers Read sternly told his audience that "discipline is the essential prerequisite of every effective army whether it march [sic] under the

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<sup>1</sup>This testimony is quoted and analyzed in "The Genius of American Politics," Radical America, I (November-December, 1967), 59-61. The testimony itself appeared in U. S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, 83rd Cong., 1st Sess., Communist Methods of Infiltration (Education), Part I, 51-52.

Stars and Stripes or under the Hammer and Sickle." The "liberal neutral attitude," he continued, "will no longer suffice." Historians may want to be free and independent scholars, but "total war, whether hot or cold, enlists everyone and calls upon everyone to assume his part." And today "the historian is no freer from this obligation than the physicist."<sup>1</sup>

Liberals also agreed with Boorstin's notion that Communists should not be allowed to teach. The Committee on Academic Freedom of the American Congress for Cultural Freedom (ACCF) announced that any "member of the Communist Party has transgressed the canons of academic responsibility, has engaged his intellect to servility, and is therefore professionally disqualified from performing his functions as scholar and teacher." The ACCF went on to urge that anti-Communist purges be left "in the hands of the colleges and their faculties" since "there is no justification for a Congressional committee to concern itself with the question."<sup>2</sup> To the ACCF, then, the issue of cultural freedom at stake was not whether Communists had the right to teach—they did not—but whether that right should be denied by University officials or by Congressional committees.

Anti-Communist liberals rarely criticized government action against Communists. On the few occasions when they were critical, the thrust of their criticism was that repressive activity made it more

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<sup>1</sup> Conyers Read, "The Social Responsibilities of the Historian," American Historical Review, LV (January 1950), 283.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Christopher Lasch, "The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of the Congress for Cultural Freedom," Barton J. Bernstein, ed., Towards A New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History (New York: Random House, 1968), 337.

difficult to fight Communism, not that individual men and women were undergoing violations of their rights. The ACCF criticized Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigation of the Voice of America because its effect "has been to frustrate the very possibility of the United States embarking on a program of psychological warfare against world communism." The ACCF also protested the cancellation of a film festival of Charles Chaplin's movies, noting that "while it is perfectly clear that Chaplin tends to be pro-Soviet and anti-American in his political attitudes, there is no reason why we should not enjoy his excellent movies, which have nothing to do with Soviet totalitarianism." The clear implication is that cancellation of the festival would have been justified if the films reflected Chaplin's political attitudes. When more fundamental criticisms of civil liberties in the United States were made, the ACCF attacked the critics. It described a group of citizens who petitioned the Supreme Court to declare the 1950 Internal Security Act unconstitutional as "naive" individuals who were guilty of a "whitewash" of the Communist Party, and concluded that "if freedom were left in the hands of the petitioners, it would have no future."<sup>1</sup>

In a careful study, Mary McAuliffe examined post-war American liberalism and concluded that the commitment to anti-Communism had retarded liberal goals. The Americans for Democratic Action devoted its major energies to convincing American liberals that those who opposed American foreign policy were Communist dupes. In short, the ADA "lent support to the forces which bred the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 340, 343, 344.

Red Scare and McCarthy." The American Civil Liberties Union dissipated its strength in an internal struggle over whether the organization should take repeated, public, anti-Communist positions. The ACLU's "attempts to take a hard, 'realistic', anti-Communist position weakened its defense of civil liberties from 1947 to 1954 and contributed to the national hysteria over Communism." A similar statement can be made about the American Congress for Cultural Freedom. "In the name of defending freedom," McAuliffe noted, the ACCF "had attempted to curtail the individual's freedom of choice in thought, speech, and association."<sup>1</sup>

A full-scale examination of American liberalism in the post-war period is beyond the scope of this study, but two episodes should be mentioned since they eloquently convey the spirit of the time: Leslie Fiedler's essay on the Rosenberg case, and James Wechsler's appearance before Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The evidence against the Rosenbergs was dubious at best.<sup>2</sup> Virtually all important evidence was supplied by a few witnesses who were admitted spies and were in prison or under indictment. By far the most damaging testimony came from Ethel Rosenberg's brother, David Greenglass. Greenglass was hardly a disinterested witness. By testifying against his sister and brother-in-law, he was given a lighter sentence, and his wife—also involved—was not even brought

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<sup>1</sup>Mary S. McAuliffe, "The Red Scare and the Crisis in American Liberalism," (Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1972), 115, 180, 249.

<sup>2</sup>The best analysis of the case is Walter and Miriam Schneir, Invasion to an Inquest (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965, 1973).

to trial. Moreover, the secrets which Greenglass claimed to have given Julius Rosenberg were, according to Harold Urey, useless to the Soviets. The maximum sentence for espionage was twenty years, but through a legal technicality the government was able to demand and receive the death penalty.<sup>1</sup> Despite a massive world-wide protest, the couple was executed in 1953.

Despite the weakness of the government's case, a leading anti-Communist liberal, Leslie Fiedler, wrote that "the legal guilt of the Rosenbergs was clearly established at their trial, and it is from an assumption of that guilt that I begin." No examination of the evidence against the Rosenbergs was presented in Fiedler's essay, and Fiedler did not bother to study the trial record. The only statement remotely resembling an argument (rather than a simple assumption of guilt) was his statement that to believe the Rosenbergs had been "falsely condemned" one would have to believe that the American government was composed of "monsters, insensate beasts." Since we all know that American officials are at all times honorable and honest men, we know that the Rosenbergs must be guilty. That this argument could be advanced, let alone seriously considered, says a great deal about the intellectual climate of the period.

Since they were not allowed to see one another, they communicated almost daily by mail as they waited to die. In a passage

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<sup>1</sup> Only for wartime espionage was the death sentence possible. The intent of the statute, obviously, was to punish espionage on behalf of wartime enemies. This alleged espionage took place during the Second World War, but the Soviet Union was a wartime ally.

remarkable for its vicious tone and bizarre assertions, Fiedler examined those last letters.<sup>1</sup> He found Ethel Rosenberg's prose style in her last appeal to President Eisenhower asking that her life be spared "almost a joke." For verbal brutality, there is little to compare with that passage. More bizarre was Fiedler's assertion that the letters were written in a "code" whose "true meaning can be read off immediately by the insider." Apparently an insider, Fiedler provided us with some translations. For example, when the couple spoke of their love for "roses and the laughter of children," they were "using conventional ciphers for the barely whispered word 'Communism.'" What Fiedler hated most about the letters, however, is that the Rosenbergs stated their innocence in them. "The most flagrant" of the lies in the letters, Fiedler insisted, was "the maintenance by the Rosenbergs of the pose of innocence to the very end and to each other." In professing their innocence in spite of the government's offer to let them live if they affirmed their guilt, "the Rosenbergs played out their comedy to the end." But the profession of innocence actually reassured Fiedler of their guilt, since the Rosenbergs, being Communists, were "incapable of telling treason from devotion, deceit from honesty."

But perhaps the most repellant aspect of this repugnant performance was Fiedler's attempt to make Communists murderers of the Rosenbergs. First, he claimed that they wanted the couple to die,

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<sup>1</sup>The letters were published by the Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg-Sobell case. The couple's sons are planning to issue a new edition. Jonal Raskin, "Life After Death: The Sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg," Ramparts, XII (November, 1973), 37-41, 49-52.

and that he saw "evidence of joy" on the "faces of the Communist crowds" in Italy when they heard that the couple had been electrocuted. He even stated that "for a little while they had been afraid that some last-minute reprieve might cheat them of their celebration, that they would be unable to go through the streets in their Sunday best chalking up 'Death to the killers of the Rosenbergs' and to sit afterwards over a bottle of wine content with a good day's work." He, then, without the slightest shred of evidence and without indicating what he could have in mind, claimed that the Rosenbergs wanted to die and that the defense committee purposely followed tactics which assured their deaths. It was, then, the Communists, not the government, which murdered the Rosenbergs. Except that it was not quite murder, for the Rosenbergs were not quite people. "They had failed in the end to become martyrs or heroes or even men." As Fiedler put it with his customary compassion, "what was there left to die?"<sup>1</sup>

One could argue that it is unfair to cite such an inhuman, perverse, and convoluted argument as typical of American liberalism. There is something to be said for this objection. Certainly, Fiedler had gone further than most anti-Communists. A number of liberals who had no real quarrel with his politics found "gloating" over an execution in poor taste.<sup>2</sup> But Fiedler's position was in tune with the

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<sup>1</sup>The essay was recently republished and defended by its author. Leslie A. Fiedler, The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, Vol. I (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 245-46.

<sup>2</sup>Fiedler replied that his essay was actually a protest against the "pointless execution" of the Rosenbergs. Ibid.



mainstream of American liberalism. The ACCF, for example, had insisted that the "pre-eminent fact of the Rosenberg's guilt must be openly acknowledged before any appeal for clemency can be regarded as having been made in good faith." In other words, the ACCF demanded that those who had doubts about the Rosenbergs' guilt denounce them as traitors before the ACCF would join them in a plea for clemency. The notion that it was impossible to believe the Rosenbergs innocent and still not want them executed was a curious one. The point, of course, is that the saving of lives was a secondary (at best) concern for the ACCF; the primary objective was obtaining affirmation of their guilt.<sup>1</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union "took a firm position that no civil liberties questions were involved" in the case.<sup>2</sup>

In its own way, the performance of James Wechsler before the McCarthy committee revealed as much about cold war liberalism as the Fiedler article. Wechsler honestly believed that he was combating McCarthyism by his appearance; actually, he was affirming many of its basic tenets. Wechsler, a former Communist, was an ADA liberal who edited the New York Post, a newspaper critical of McCarthy. When McCarthy subpoenaed Wechsler, the editor charged that the Senator was trying to intimidate editorial opposition. He asked that the transcript of the hearing be made public so he could submit it to the American Society of Newspaper Editors for a ruling

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<sup>1</sup>Lasch, "Cultural Cold War," 340.

<sup>2</sup>McAuliffe, "Red Scare," 175-76.

on whether the hearing violated freedom of the press. McCarthy agreed, provided that Wechsler would "complete his testimony" by providing a list of the individuals with whom he had worked when he belonged to the Communist Party. Wechsler provided the names, and his reasons shed considerable light on liberal anti-Communism:

I did not see how I could persuade my perplexed countrymen that unwillingness to entrust such a list to McCarthy was different from the now stereotyped refusal of Communists to answer questions before congressional committees. It seemed to me that any function I might serve was to establish beyond dispute that an American might be as resolutely anti-Communist as anti-McCarthy, and that being anti-McCarthy did not involve any sentimentality about Communists or Communism.<sup>1</sup>

Wechsler's first concern, then, when confronting McCarthy, was to establish his own anti-Communist credentials. His second concern was to focus on the issue of freedom of the press. But his concern for freedom of the press was highly selective. Three weeks after his own hearing, the editors of the National Guardian, a paper formed to support the Progressive Party campaign in 1948, came under attack. The New York Post was silent. When one of the National Guardian's editors was arrested and held without charge, the newspaper sent out press releases and documents to a variety of newspapers. The New York Times and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch printed editorials critical of the government's action; once again, the New York Post was silent.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James A. Wechsler, The Age of Suspicion (New York: Random House, 1953), 290.

<sup>2</sup>James Arcanson, The Press and the Cold War (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), 87-102.

As nearly every newspaper or magazine reader knows by now, a number of these intellectuals received money from foundation conduits for the Central Intelligence Agency. Christopher Lasch has eloquently summed up the meaning of the CIA funding:

For twenty years Americans have been told that their country is an open society and that communist peoples live in slavery. Now it appears that the very men who were most active in spreading this gospel were themselves the servants ("witty" in some cases, unsuspecting in others) of the secret police. . . . Men who have never been able to conceive of ideas as anything but instruments of national power were the sponsors of "cultural freedom."<sup>1</sup>

Most intellectuals did not knowingly take money from the CIA. The corruption of a few prominent intellectuals is not the issue here; far more important was the willingness of the secret police to finance the dominant intellectual trends of the period.

What does all of this have to do with labor history? Very little. But it has a great deal to do with the manner in which labor and Communist history has been perceived. Without some knowledge of the intellectual and political climate in which these works were composed, it is impossible to understand the portrait of the Communist that emerges from them. A Communist, to add one example to those cited earlier in this chapter, was described not as a human being, but rather as a "special purpose instrument tooled to a remarkable degree of precision in the organizational arts." Workers who "perform the Party's work in the unions or elsewhere are themselves brutalized to the point where they perform their Party work as

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<sup>1</sup>Lasch, "Cultural Cold War," 356.

soldiers in the ranks without conscious qualms."<sup>1</sup>

It is possible to accept this portrait only if one is so influenced by the anti-Communist atmosphere that one considers the men and women who worked in the plants and belonged to the Communist Party as abstractions rather than people. Is it possible, for example, to believe that Wyndham Mortimer, who spent forty years as an industrial worker, including nearly two decades in an automobile plant before the United Automobile Workers was formed, was uninterested in ending the speedup and winning higher wages for automobile workers?<sup>2</sup> In anti-Communist scholarship, Communists are always viewed as aliens, no matter how indigenous they may actually be. In labor history, this has led to a notion which this dissertation discards; namely, that Communists were somehow external to the working class movement. In fact, Communists were among the most active working class militants during a period of intense and militant working class struggle. As even their bitterest enemies would concede, many Communists dedicated (and sometimes lost) their lives working to build unions in basic industry. While there is no need to canonize them, there is a need to take them seriously as workers, as organizers, and as Communists.

## II

And yet, one might ask, were not anti-Communists pointing to

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<sup>1</sup>Barbash, Practice of Unionism, 324-25, 358-59.

<sup>2</sup>For more on Mortimer, see chapter three.

something real, however bitter and extravagant their rhetoric, when they charged Communists with being Soviet agents? To be sure, American Communists were not literally agents of a foreign power, but wasn't subservience to the Soviet Union one aspect of the Communist experience? Wasn't the Communist Party, after all, a section of the Communist International, and wasn't the International dominated by the Russian Communist Party? Couldn't one say, then, that American Communists were subject to the discipline of the Communist International and were, in that sense at least, under orders from the Soviet Union? These are complicated, important questions which can not be answered simply yes or no. A serious response would contain the following points.

First, there is not a one-to-one relationship between the decisions or general line of the Communist International, and the policies of the American party, at least in its trade union work. Many historians, as we shall see, have assumed a direct relationship, and, as a result, have made serious interpretative errors. It is often said, for example, that Communists suddenly decided to build dual unions at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International only to reverse that decision with equal suddenness at the Comintern's Seventh Congress. Actually, both decisions were gradual and made in accordance with the demands of the American movement. Communists were forced to build independent unions by a persistent campaign of mass expulsions from AFL unions.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it was the actions of hundreds of thousands of American workers, not

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<sup>1</sup>See chapter two, especially pages 100-105.

the dictates of an international organization, which forced the party to abandon the Trade Union Unity League.<sup>1</sup> Finally, there was not, despite the claims of numerous scholars, a persistent effort by Communists to disrupt national defense by calling strikes during the period between the Russo-German non-aggression pact, and the invasion of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

Second, the issue of outside domination can not be discussed without reference to one of the fundamental tenets of revolutionary Marxism: proletarian internationalism. This concept was central to Marxism from its inception. It was the task of Communists, Marx and Engels noted in the Manifesto, to "point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality."<sup>3</sup> In Marx's own political work, he spent a great deal of time organizing international strike support, and he was willing to break with British trade unionists over an "international" issue: support for the Paris Commune.<sup>4</sup> Communists, then, saw their movement as an international movement; the various Communist parties throughout the world described themselves as sections of the Communist International throughout the 1920's and most of the 1930's. E. J. Hobsbawm has sketched some of the complexities of this issue

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<sup>1</sup>See chapter three, especially pages 157-64, 237.

<sup>2</sup>See chapter four, especially pages 247-61.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (New York: International Publishers, 1948), 22.

<sup>4</sup>The best discussion of Marx's political activities is Alan Gilbert, "Karl Marx's Revolutionary Politics," (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1973).

by examining what was, particularly in Great Britain, by no means the party's finest hour: its response to the Russo-German non-aggression pact in 1939:

Communists, it was agreed, would never behave like international social democracy in 1914, abandoning its flag to follow the banners of nationalism, into mutual massacre. And, it must be said, they did not. There is something heroic about the British and French CPs in September 1939. Nationalism, political calculation, even common sense, pulled one way, yet they unhesitatingly chose to put the interests of the international movement first. As it happens, they were tragically and absurdly wrong. But their error . . . should not lead us to ridicule the spirit of their action. This is how the socialists should have acted in 1914 and did not: carrying out the decisions of their International. This is how the communists did act when another world war broke out. It was not their fault that the International should have told them to do something else.<sup>1</sup>

Hobsbawm's remarks add a dimension often overlooked. He reminds us that Communists were motivated by a vision of a unified working class movement, transcending national boundaries and struggling for the common interests of the class. This was a compelling vision, in part because the blood-stained banners of nationalism provided the most obvious alternative to international working class solidarity.

Anti-Communists would argue that this was a sham internationalism. According to this argument, Communists did not so much repudiate nationalism as substitute Russian nationalism for the nationalism of their respective nations. This argument ignores one crucial point: defense of the Soviet Union was a legitimate priority for working class radicals. The Soviet Union was, after all, the sole nation in which a revolutionary, working class party had seized and maintained state power. It was the sole nation which claimed to be

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<sup>1</sup>E. J. Hobsbawm, Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 5-6.

committed to the maintenance of working class power and the construction of socialism. If there is an international working class with definable interests, it would be difficult to deny that one of those interests would be the survival of the only nation which proclaimed itself socialist.

It is an enormous jump, however, from the realization that Communists believed fervently in the defense of the Soviet Union to the thesis that Communists were "agents of a foreign power" or that they were "attempting to establish bases of political power [in the labor movement] that could be and were used at the behest of the Soviet Union in times of crisis."<sup>1</sup> Communists were convinced that all workers had a stake in the survival of Soviet socialism, but that was never the driving force behind their work. The bulk of their efforts, as the studies in this dissertation demonstrate, was spent in organizing American workers in the fight for better working conditions. These men and women did not take the risks they did simply so they could pass resolutions urging a second front in the European war. They were pro-Soviet, certainly; they were not, however, foreign agents.

### III

There remains another question: how significant was the party? Perhaps it was so small and divorced from the masses of American workers that its history could be systematically distorted without

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<sup>1</sup>Galenson, "Communists and Union Democracy," 236.



distorting American working class history in the process. David Caute, in his study of intellectuals close to the Communist Party or friendly to the Soviet Union, has argued for the "virtual irrelevance" of the CP:

The IWW and the old Socialist Party had at least represented a genuine force among the American working class; the Communist Party never did. In twenty-five years it could boast of the following achievements: the election of the Mayor of Crosby, Minnesota (pop. 3,500) in 1932; the election of two members of the New York City Council in the 1940's; and an estimated Party membership which climbed from about 57,000 in 1938 to a meteoric 80,000 in 1944.

In his work on the New Deal, Arthur Schlesinger, jr. also minimized the importance of the Communist Party:

But Communism became the whole way of life for very few Americans. In 1930, the party claimed only six thousand members; by 1932 after two years of furious agitation in the midst of economic collapse, only a meager twelve thousand.

To Schlesinger, the party was "a clique of dreary fanatics and seedy functionaries, talking to themselves in an unintelligible idiom, [and] ignored by the working class."<sup>2</sup> Neither Schlesinger nor Caute has studied the Communist movement seriously, particularly in its relationship to the working class, but their comments reflected widely held attitudes among historians.

But are these attitudes correct? Was the party ignored by the working class? Before accepting this sweeping generalization, it is necessary to answer some basic questions. First, how many men and women joined the Communist Party, and what percentage of them

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<sup>1</sup> David Caute, The Fellow-Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 304.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, jr., The Crisis of the Old Order (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Book Company, 1957), 22.

were industrial workers? Second, what was the turnover in party membership? Did most ex-Communists become anti-Communists or did they retain some loyalty and respect for the party? Third, why were not more workers recruited? None of these questions can be answered precisely, but reasonably good estimates can be made.

As the following table indicates, the party's growth was quite rapid:

Table 1  
Membership in the Communist Party, USA, 1930-1938<sup>1</sup>

Date	Membership
1930	7,545
1931	9,357
1932	14,475
1933	20,593
1934	24,500
1935	35,356
1936	42,000
1937	43,000
1938	75,000

In eight years, the party's membership had increased tenfold.

These figures indicate only a portion of the number of men and women who joined the party during those years. In a valuable, and unfortunately neglected, doctoral dissertation, Robert J. Alperin calculated the rate of membership fluctuation in the party during the

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<sup>1</sup>Glazer, Social Basis, 92-93, and Robert J. Alperin, "Organization in the Communist Party, USA, 1931-1938," (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1959), 49. Alperin's dissertation is an extremely valuable work, covering the party's membership characteristics, recruiting practices, internal education, channels of communication, street and shop units, leading committees, and policies of personnel, safety, and finance. Its major weakness is the short span of time it examined. One wonders, for example, if the abolition of shop newspapers and party fractions in 1939 had a major effect on the industrial composition of the party, or if the turnover after the Russo-German pact was significantly higher than the "normal" fluctuation inside the party.

first years of the depression:

Table 2  
Recruitment, Dues, Fluctuation, 1931-1933

Period	Recruitment	Increased Dues for next 6 months	Rate of fluctuation
1931 July-Dec.	7,301	3,679	50%
1932 Jan. -June	11,498	1,539	77%
1932 July-Dec.	7,322	2,339	68%
1933 Jan. -June	8,065	2,351	71%
1933 July-Dec.	9,240	4,371	53%

In the first four months of 1934, the party recruited 9,601 members, but the total membership actually decreased. Turnover for six months of 1934 was 100%.<sup>1</sup> Between 1930 and 1934, 60,000 were recruited to the party, while its membership increased by only 16,000.<sup>2</sup> Excluding an eighteen month period for which no recruiting figures are available, Alperin concluded that the party recruited a minimum of 134,006 persons from 1930 to May, 1938.<sup>3</sup>

Although party membership figures remained reasonably constant from 1938 to 1949, fluctuation continued to plague the party. In 1945, a Communist leader reported that two-thirds of the Detroit Communists had been in the party less than one year, although total party membership had remained high.<sup>4</sup> "In the waterfront section," recalled a woman formerly close to the party, "men were going in and out of the CP like yo-yos."<sup>5</sup> One estimate, said to be based on

<sup>1</sup>Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 49-50.

<sup>2</sup>Glazer, Social Basis, 101.

<sup>3</sup>Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 50.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Glazer, Social Basis, 117-18.

<sup>5</sup>Helen Lawrenson to the author, December 21, 1970.

reports of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, is that 700,000 men and women joined the party.<sup>1</sup> A reasonable minimum estimate would be 500,000.

But how many were industrial workers? The following table gives the percentage of party membership of industrial workers and workers in basic industry at various times:

Table 3  
Industrial and Basic-Industrial Membership of CPUSA, 1932-1948

Year	% industry	% in basic industry
1932		13.9
1935	50.4	23.8
1936	51.6	18
1942	47	17
1943	43	23
1944	46	27
1946	43	22
1948	51	18.5

This understates the percentage of working class men and women in the party, since many of those outside of industry were service or clerical workers, working class housewives, or unemployed workers, rather than intellectuals or members of the middle class. Usually, steel, metal, railroad, mining, and auto were considered the basic industries. On the average, then, 20.4% of the party's members worked in basic industry. Using the minimum total of 500,000 party members, it would appear that approximately 100,000 workers in basic industry joined the party.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Morris L. Ernst and David Loth, Report on the American Communist (New York: Capricorn Books, 1952), 14.

<sup>2</sup>The table is based primarily on Glazer, Social Basis, 123, but see also Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 51.

Most of those 100,000 workers did not remain in the party.

According to Arthur Schlesinger, jr., who has done no research on this question, most Communists "passed through the party as through a revolving door, finding the discipline unbearable, the dialectic meaningless, and the vocabulary incomprehensible."<sup>1</sup> Schlesinger has simply assumed that people joined the party, discovered its "true nature," and left in disgust. According to this view, most ex-Communists became anti-Communists. Alperin, who based his conclusions on research rather than a priori assumptions, disagreed with Schlesinger's interpretation. He found that few who left the party cited political disagreements and, more important, that most continued to work closely with the party in mass organizations or union caucuses which included Communists.<sup>2</sup> Very few were disillusioned and bitter. The importance of Alperin's findings can not be overestimated. Had Schlesinger been right, the number of Communists could be limited to those who remained in the party for a substantial period of time—perhaps 25,000. Those who joined and left could be safely discounted as disillusioned ex-Communists. But if many ex-Communists continued to work with and support the party, the high number of those who passed through the party becomes more important.

It is impossible to say with any certainty why people who accepted the basic principles of the Communist Party and generally admired its work would leave the party; it would be even more

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<sup>1</sup>Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 22.

<sup>2</sup>Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 197.

impossible to say what percentage left for what reasons. But it is possible to suggest a number of possible reasons.

First, the round of activity required of party members might lessen the member's political activity in areas which the member believed were more important or in which he or she felt more at home. This problem also kept individuals from joining the party in the first place. One potential recruit stated, "I know from the experiences of my friends that if I joined the Party I would be taken out of work which I want to do and be assigned to a new job every two months and won't be able to do anything effectively."<sup>1</sup> A local leader of the Unemployed Councils or a steward in a large factory could find Communist ideas and the support of party members invaluable in the community or factory. After joining the party, however, he or she would attend more meetings, devote more time to selling the Daily Worker, and might be asked to do work in another area where the party was weak. Such a person could leave the party, but continue to have a close relationship to the CP in his or her factory or community.

Second, a person, despite a strong belief in Communism, might be temperamentally unsuited for an activist role. The Communist Party was not simply a group of like-minded individuals; it was a group committed to changing the world. It made demands upon its members that the Republican, Democratic, and Socialist parties did not. A sluggish street unit was given the following talk by a party leader:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 163.

It was therefore necessary to explain that the Communist Party was the most advanced, most intelligent, most heroic section of the working class. It was necessary to explain that Communists must give leadership to the rest of our fellow workers in our every-day struggles and at the same time link the immediate struggle with the question of Soviet Power. It was necessary to explain that the unit was the Communist Party in our neighborhood; that in order to give this leadership it was imperative that we, as a unit as well as every individual member, had to equip ourselves for this task; that we had to read and study our Marxist-Leninist literature; that, however, we should not postpone our activities until we all got through studying, since we had a great deal to learn in the process of the struggle.<sup>1</sup>

This was a tall order. Party members had to take the lead in political struggles both on the job and in the community. A group of Communists living in the same community could not simply meet regularly and talk politics; they had to view themselves as "the Communist Party in our neighborhood." This meant an obvious time commitment; perhaps more important, it meant that Communists had to be outgoing and aggressive individuals. Many shy, reticent people overcame their shyness in the heat of mass struggles; others never did.

Third, particularly in the years before 1936 and after 1945, Communists faced extensive repression. In 1931, according to a survey by a research group close to the Socialist Party, 121 meetings and demonstrations were stopped, "resulting in the arrest of close to 1,000 Communists, 7 Socialists, and 7 others." These figures do not include "the police attacks on the Communist-led demonstrations of February, March, May Day, August, and Labor Day."<sup>2</sup> A recent

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<sup>1</sup>M. T. Martin, "Some Experiences in Activizing a Street Unit," Party Organizer, VIII (February 1935), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup>American Labor Year Book (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1932), 215-19.

scholar surveying anti-Communist repression in a single city turned up the following incomplete list:

Besides flogging Gelders and railroading Jack Barton, police or local vigilantes:

—kidnapped Blaine Owens, a known Communist, beat him severely about the face and head, ripped off portions of his scalp and stuffed them into his bleeding mouth;

—arrested Jane Speed, white, in May 1933 for attempting to hold a May Day meeting, twisted her arms while making the arrest, slugged her at least once during the booking, bloodily beat one of her male Negro companions;

—entered the home of Emily Mabel Owen under a liquor search warrant, seized and confiscated several pieces of Communist and Socialist party literature in her possession;

—arrested Robert Washington, a Negro sharecropper organizer in Selma, Alabama, during a sharecroppers strike in 1935, released him after dark, whereupon he was kidnapped and flogged for the better part of an hour with a thick leather strap;

—took into custody a young Negro who had come to look for Washington, also released him after dark, whereupon he too was kidnapped. He was never seen again;

—illegally entered and illegally searched the dwelling of Helen Longs, Negro and Communist, later arrested her while she distributed Communist leaflets, took her into custody, beat her with a leather strap until she nearly lost consciousness;

—broke up a strike of WPA sewing project women during the course of which they severely beat up two Negroes;

—arrested two union officers incidentally connected with the WPA sewing strike and held them incommunicado for two days;

—arrested, during the red ore strike of 1934, as a suspected Communist, one Paul Weller, released him, whereupon he was kidnapped and flogged;

—illegally entered the home of Ben Winston, a Negro, during the same strike, kidnapped him and two other Negroes, severely beat the three of them with a weighted rubber hose.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas A. Kreuger, And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, 1938-1948 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), 9-10. The two cases referred to in the opening sentence should also be described briefly. Joseph Gelders, white, Jewish, was assaulted, kidnapped, blackjacked, and beaten with a thick leather strap. Jack Barton was the local secretary of the Communist Party. He was arrested for possession of Communist literature and sentenced to 180 days at hard labor. The list, however, is incomplete. The May-June, 1934 issue of the Young Fighter named Rich Foster and Henry Witt, Negro members of the Marine Workers Industrial Union, as having been shot to death by thugs in Birmingham while on the picket line.



One could, of course, argue that Birmingham was a Southern city and therefore unrepresentative, but Communists faced similar problems in other cities. Communists passing out leaflets were regularly arrested in Chicago.<sup>1</sup> A Detroit Communist named George Marchuk regularly sold the Daily Worker in front of the Ford plant; one cold, December morning, Marchuk was found lying in back of the plant with a bullet in his skull. Local authorities made no attempt to investigate the murder, and Detroit newspapers implied that Marchuk had received what he deserved.<sup>2</sup> Jane Newton, a white woman married to a black man, was arrested in a demonstration when she and her husband resisted an attempt to evict them because of his race. After being arrested, she was sent to a mental hospital for observation on the theory that marriage to a black man was evidence of insanity.<sup>3</sup> Communist labor organizers in California agriculture faced what one anti-Communist labor historian described as "a proto-fascist offense by the grower-shippers and the corrupt local officials they dominated to suppress civil liberties in order to destroy unionism."<sup>4</sup> Communists were killed in the Ford Hunger March of 1932,

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<sup>1</sup>Harold D. Lasswell and Dorothy Blumenstock, World Revolutionary Propaganda (New York: Knopf, 1939), 69.

<sup>2</sup>Michael S. Clinasmith, "The Black Legion: Hooded Americanism in Michigan," Michigan History, LV (Fall 1971), 256; James R. Prickett, "Communists in the Auto Industry in Detroit Before 1935," ibid., LVII (Fall 1973), 202; Daily Worker, December 25, 1933.

<sup>3</sup>Daily Worker, December 18, 21, 27, 1934.

<sup>4</sup>Irving Bernstein, Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 160.

the Memorial Day massacre of 1937, numerous textile and mining strikes, and the San Francisco general strike of 1934. This survey barely scratches the surface. Unfortunately, there is no study of the extent of repression or its effect on the movement, but it must have been considerable. To be sure, it served to steel some Communists and make them more determined, but it also frightened many possible recruits.

Fourth, given the intense pressure under which Communists worked, personal conflicts within a unit could be decisive in whether members remained in the party. An arrogant or unsympathetic leader, the presence of an ex-husband or ex-wife, or a lack of closeness could all create an atmosphere of tension which, combined with the tension imposed by outside pressure and the demands imposed by Communists themselves, could cause people to leave the party.

Fifth, although the party made serious attempts to eradicate it, racism sometimes drove blacks out of the party. In one unit, for example, white white-collar workers dominated discussions, leading to the departure of three black women. These women remained left-wingers, and worked in the International Labor Defense, where they were apparently allowed to make a larger contribution to the work of the organization. In this example, the racism was probably unconscious, but it was still harmful.<sup>1</sup>

Sixth, a worker might disagree with an aspect of the party's line, but not with the overall perspective of the party. Such a person would become inactive, less enthusiastic about party work, and finally

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<sup>1</sup>Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 197

drop out. Once out, the ex-member could either maintain his ties with the party and continue to work with it, drop out of political work altogether, or join another (usually small, Trotskyist) group. The Trotskyist groups, however much they appealed to intellectuals who left the party, had little appeal to workers. These tiny sects, with little more than a handful of members and mimeograph machine, devoted most of their energies to attacking the Communist Party (rather than the boss), and this had little appeal to those who opposed only one aspect of the party's line.

Seventh, the Communists themselves pointed to "the life of the units" as a major cause of fluctuation. Initial impressions were important here. "Possible sources of difficulty," Alperin noted, "were the snobbish attitude of veteran members, a lack of personal welcome and guidance, the piling on of assignments without any consideration for interests, understanding, or the possibility of fulfillment."<sup>1</sup> In addition, there was often inadequate political discussion within units, so that units simply carried out directives from above. This was not seen as "Communist discipline," but as a very serious weakness within the party.

Eighth, and perhaps at the root of all of the other reasons, was the party's failure to make the necessity of a Communist Party clear. Since so much of the party's energies were devoted to building CIO unions, working in the American Labor Party or even the Democratic Party, and creating broad-based organizations for racial equality

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<sup>1</sup>Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 194-95.

or against war and fascism, many members did not see what additional assets a separate Communist Party could bring to the movement. When these people left the party, they continued to work in the arenas which the party helped to create and were usually assumed to be still in the party by hostile critics.

Closely linked to the question of fluctuation is the question of recruitment. Why weren't more workers recruited to the party? Actually, the party did recruit more workers than the membership or recruiting figures indicate. Many applications were stalled or lost completely, because the party bureaucracy was incapable of handling them. In 1933, New York issued over 500 membership books which never reached their owners, and in 1934, 2,680 applications were lost in New York (one of the best organized districts) alone before they could be assigned to units. After a militant, anti-eviction demonstration in Chicago in which three blacks were murdered by policemen, the unemployed councils received 3,000 applications, the party 500, and the Young Communist League 200. In this case, Alperin noted, "the party's drawing power far surpassed its ability to contact and assign the interested." In 1934, only 61% of those who applied for membership were actually assigned to units.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the major reason that the party did not recruit more members is that party activists frequently neglected to combine recruiting with other activities such as union-building, organizing community groups and leading strikes. The following table makes

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<sup>1</sup>Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 159, 154, 196.

this point clear:

Table 4  
Industrial Composition: Three Recruiting Drives<sup>1</sup>

Category	1930	1934	1935	1937
Steel, metal	331 7.7%	596 8.3%	331 6.5%	967 5.6%
marine	87 2%	183 2.5%	254 5%	603 3.5%
textile	95 2.2%	95 1.3%	65 1.8%	206 1.2%
rail	14 .3%	110 1.5%	87 1.7%	187 1.1%
auto	750 10.6%	190 2.6%	100 1.9%	426 2.5%

These figures reveal that a steadily declining proportion of those recruited during major drives were from basic industry, and yet the party, as we shall see, played a major role in organizing many of those industries. In auto, for example, at the beginning of 1938, there were 1500 party members, 2.8% of the total membership, "a slim rise from 2% (1935) considering the energy expended in building the UAW." The problem, Alperin noted, "was one of combining recruiting with other work rather than the absence of favorable response from the workers."<sup>2</sup> Workers were following leadership they knew to be Communist in these industries, but most party members made little effort to recruit those workers. Increasingly, they appealed to workers for support on the basis of their skill as union leaders, and argued that their membership or nonmembership in the party was irrelevant.

Party publications pointed to other reasons for lack of

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<sup>1</sup>Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 53. The 1930 figures represent total party membership rather than members recruited. In all columns, the first figure is the total number of individuals, and the second figure is the percentage of the total recruited into the party in the 1934, 1935, and 1937 recruiting drives or belonging to the party in 1930.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 54.

recruiting. The failure to publicize party activity, similar to the failure to recruit, not only deprived the party of enhanced prestige, but reinforced the image of the party as a secretive, and not entirely trustworthy, organization. Alperin noted a number of other attitudes of party members which hindered recruiting:

(e) Membership drives were often blunted because only a small segment of the party recruited. (f) Particularly in the early period among those in language organizations Party membership was seen as something for the very few rather than in terms of a mass party. (f) Goals for recruiting specific types were sometimes interpreted as meaning not to recruit others. . . . (h) Attitudes of pessimism stalled shop work including recruiting. . . . (i) Behavior reflecting conceit created a poor image of the Party. . . . (j) Perhaps the attitude most harshly criticized was that of "the worse the conditions, the better for us."<sup>1</sup>

In some cases, of course, workers rejected the Party even when vigorous attempts were made to recruit them. Some workers felt that they did not understand Marxist theory sufficiently. Others feared that they would be taken out of work they enjoyed and placed on a treadmill of party assignments. Still others had strong objections to the Communist view of religion, racial equality, or the need for revolutionary violence. Some had unpleasant contacts with individual Communists, or disagreements with tactical aspects of the party's program. But very few appear to have held virulently anti-Communist ideas until after 1950.

To sum up, the Communist Party recruited approximately 250,000 industrial workers of whom 100,000 worked in basic industry. For a variety of reasons, turnover within the party was high, but most of those who left the party continued to support it in one way

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<sup>1</sup>Alperin, "Organization in CPUSA," 160-62.

or another. Prior to 1935, the key roadblock to mass recruiting was organizational. Party leaders were inexperienced in mass organization, unable to handle the number of workers who applied for party membership. After 1935, the key problem was political. Party members leading mass movements ignored recruiting or, at best, did not have a systematic approach. Many workers, in effect, recruited themselves.<sup>1</sup>

While the American Communist Party never attained the mass popularity of the French and Italian parties, it is highly inaccurate to view it as "ignored by the working class."<sup>2</sup> The Communist movement faced serious legal and extra-legal repression, and made extensive demands upon its members. Nevertheless, it involved a quarter of a million industrial workers. This is by no means a small or insignificant number. And numbers are not the whole story. These men and women were in the forefront of struggles to organize their industries, they played major roles in organizations of unemployed workers, and they won positions of leadership in several CIO unions. In short, they were an important force within the working class movement, and they should be taken seriously.

#### IV

Taking them seriously means answering certain questions. One set of questions has been dictated by previous works in the field.

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<sup>1</sup>For one example of this process, see Eric Johnson, "The Assassination of Dow Wilson," Progressive Labor, VI (July-August 1967), 24.

<sup>2</sup>Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 22.

Is there any validity in the portrait of the Communist as brutalized robot, uninterested in improving working conditions for American workers, obedient only to Joseph Stalin? What can one say about the extensive and elaborate critique of Communist trade union work made by liberal, Socialist, and Trotskyist authors?

A slightly different set of questions is dictated by the expulsion of unions said to be Communist-led from the CIO and the virtual elimination of Communist strength throughout the labor movement in the years following the Second World War. How democratic were Communist unionists in practice? How do they compare with their anti-Communist counterparts in the CIO? Did Communist errors and weaknesses contribute to their defeat, or were they simply faced with forces that no small, left-wing party could defeat? What might the party have done differently? Finally, what were the results of the expulsions for workers in basic industry, for individual Communists, for the labor movement, and for the United States?

Taking them seriously means taking them seriously as Communists. This raises a third set of questions. Were these men and women, in the main, good Communists? Was the American Communist Party the sort of party that Marx and Lenin envisioned?<sup>1</sup> These are difficult questions, since there is considerable confusion as to what a Communist Party should be.

In the Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels outlined the basic characteristics of a Communist Party:

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<sup>1</sup>The fundamental agreement between Marx and Lenin is outlined in Gilbert, "Marx's Revolutionary Politics."



The Communists are distinguished from the other working class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

The Communists, therefore, are on the one hand, practically the most advanced and resolute section of the working class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.<sup>1</sup>

Aside from the firm commitment to proletarian internationalism (which has already been discussed),<sup>2</sup> the central theme of this description is that Communists provide both tactical leadership of immediate struggles and a strategic vision for the working class movement as a whole. The essence of that strategic vision is the struggle for socialism. As Marx and Engels put it, Communists fight for the "immediate aims" and "momentary interests" of the working class, but they also attempt to build the movement of the future in the movement of the present.<sup>3</sup>

This, too, raises basic questions. Were Communists the leading fighters in the movement of the present, the drive toward industrial unionism? Did they provide tactical leadership in that struggle? Did they have a strategic perspective on the movement which shaped their work in the struggles which they helped to lead?

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<sup>1</sup> Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto, 22.

<sup>2</sup> See above, pages 20-24.

<sup>3</sup> Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto, 43.

Most important, were they building the movement of the future, a socialist movement, in the movement of the present, or were they wholly involved in the movement of the present? Or did their strategic perspective exclude building a socialist movement in favor of a broad, anti-fascist front? If so, how did that affect day-to-day trade union work?

These are a few of the questions to which this dissertation addresses itself.