CHAPTER THREE
COMMUNISTS IN AUTO, I: ORGANIZING THE INDUSTRY

The following chapter examines the activity of Communist workers and organizers in the unionization of one of America's basic industries beginning in the mid-1920's and ending with the 1939 convention of the United Automobile Workers (UAW). Throughout those years Communists consistently sought to build an industrial union of auto workers, but their conception of the union they wished to build and the role they envisioned for the Communist Party inside the union changed drastically. During the early 1930's, Communists sought to build an auto union affiliated to a Communist-led trade union federation; by the late 1930's, Communists were working inside the UAW, a union with a predominantly anti-Communist leadership. Moreover, Communists supported that leadership and abolished their independent organization inside the union. There are, then, two stories which need to be told: one is the consistent attempt to organize an industry, and the other is the shift in political perspective which took place in the process of that attempt.

I

As a part of the effort to shift the party away from the dominant language federations and toward organization at the point of production, the Communist International had called for making units of workers in a single factory—the factory or shop nucleus—the basic organizational form of the party. This re-organization, while never entirely successful, resulted in the creation of a number of nuclei in

in the Detroit automobile plants, but their effectiveness is open to question.[1] One Detroit shop nucleus was said to lead "an isolated life, unknown to the workers in the plant, without influence, without contact."[2] As a way of breaking out of this isolation, party leaders strongly suggested that each nucleus issue a shop paper which would deal with issues which came up in the plant as well as more general political questions.[3] As early as the spring of 1928, Communist auto workers were publishing the Ford Worker, Packard Worker, Hudson Worker, Dodge Worker, and the Fisher Body Worker "more

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[1]An extensive discussion of reorganization, which the Communists called "bolshevization", appeared in Theodore Draper, American Communism and Soviet Russia (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 153-71. Two years after the program began, a committee of the Communist International noted that "in comparison with the number of street nuclei the number of factory nuclei is still rather small in many districts" and indicated that the nuclei "have not yet become real fundamental units of the party." Over six years later, Earl Browder informed the International that the proportion of party membership in the shop nuclei had increased dramatically from 4% to 9%. But in 1928, Jack Stachel had lamented that "no more than 10 per cent of our Party membership at this time is organized in shop nuclei." Only a small percentage of the total membership were ever enrolled in shop nuclei, but this is not to say that this small percentage did not play an important role in the party and in the plants. Organization Committee, Communist International, "Resolutions on the Results of the Re-organization of the Workers (Communist) Party of America," Party Organizer, I (April 1927), 6; Earl Browder, Communism in the United States (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 185; Jack Stachel, "Our Factory Nuclei," Party Organizer, II (May-June 1928), 5.

[2]Vera Bush, "Functioning of a Detroit Shop Nucleus," Party Organizer, II (July-August 1928), 14-15.

[3]See, for example, "Fight Underestimation of Shop Paper Work," Daily Worker, February 5, 1930. Another article indicated that although some workers did not want to issue shop papers "because that would endanger their jobs," it was still politically crucial to continue publication. Ibid., January 20, 1930. See also "Detroit Auto Workers Want Shop Papers," ibid., July 13, 1926.

or less regularly."[1]

In the nineteen-twenties, unionism was weak in the auto industry. In 1911, the old Carriage and Wagon Workers International Union, which had been affiliated with the Knights of Labor, received permission from the AFL to add automobile workers to its jurisdiction. Two years later, jurisdictional disputes with the International Association of Machinists caused the AFL to rescind its permission. When the union refused to stop organizing auto workers, it was expelled from the federation. The Automobile Workers Union, as the renamed United Automobile, Aircraft, and Vehicle Workers of America was more commonly called, grew rapidly during the First World War, but was decimated in the open shop drive of the early nineteen-twenties, and reduced to a small local in Detroit and an even smaller local in New York. In 1927, a Communist auto worker named Phil Raymond was elected general secretary of the Detroit local by the narrow margin of a single vote.[2]

While Communists in other industries were conducting major and often violent struggles against employers and conservative (or

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[1]"Organizational Work in Detroit," Party Organizer, II (March-April 1928), 9. No complete file of any shop paper currently exists, but there are scattered issues available in various collections of the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs at Wayn State University and the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan.

[2]Sidney Fine, The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle: Labor, Management, and the Automobile Manufacturing Code (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1963), 22-25; Lester Johnson, Oral History Interview, June 3, 1959, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. Hereafter the Archives will be cited as ALHUA. Lester Johnson was the man whom Raymond defeated in the election.

Socialist) union leaders, the Automobile Workers Union conducted a series of minor and mostly defensive strikes. The consequences of a lost strike were generally disastrous. At the Budd Wheel Company, for example, one entire department struck in response to a sixty per cent wage cut. The entire department was fired, and all workers were placed on a blacklist. In one-third of the strikes recorded by the union in which an outcome is listed, active strikers were fired. Only four of the twenty-four strikes were for wage increases, while fifteen were in response to a wage cut. Yet the workers were not entirely powerless. In eight strikes lasting from ninety minutes to five days, workers were able to get wage cuts rescinded.[1]

Under Raymond's leadership, the Automobile Workers Union evolved from an independent and apolitical union into the nucleus of a self-proclaimed revolutionary union affiliated to the Communist-led trade union federation, the Trade Union Unity League. Not until the summer of 1927 did explicitly radical material appear in the union's newspaper, the Auto Workers News. The July issue featured a banner headline proclaiming the seven hour work day for Ford workers in the Soviet Union, and the following month an editorial advised workers, "When you vote, let it be class against class—VOTE COMMUNIST."[2] More important, perhaps, was the union's attitude toward the AFL. At first, the AWU claimed to have "no quarrel with the AFL or any other group of workers," but it refused to join the

[1] "Record of Struggles," Henry Kraus Papers, ALHUA.

[2] Auto Workers News, July, August, 1929, capitulazation in original.

AFL when it had the chance, and later referred to the "tactics of betrayal pursued by the AFL."[1] Following a series of conferences organized by Communists, the Auto Workers News began to be published by the National Provisional Committee for the Organization of a National Industrial Auto Workers Union.[2] Finally, at a convention in May, 1930, called by the Automobile Workers Union in Detroit, a new AWU was formed, affiliated with the Trade Union Unity League, and Raymond was elected general organizer and editor of the union newspaper.[3]

The AWU, then, was independent of the AFL prior to the formation of the Trade Union Unity League. This raises an interesting question: would the AWU, under Raymond's leadership, have tried to re-enter the AFL had the TUUL not existed? Like similar questions, this one is unanswerable, but certain points should be mentioned. Raymond had five objections to the AFL: the "complete separation of one group of auto workers from another" due to the AFL's craft structure, the control of local funds by the national AFL, "a denial of the right to call strikes without sanction from Washington," the "probable expulsion from the locals of the most active workers," and the surrender of members to any AFL craft international at any time it laid jurisdictional claims on them."[4] These

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[1] Auto Workers News, July, 1928, April, June, 1929.

[2] Ibid., August, September, 1929; "Minutes of the Conference on the Organization of the Auto Workers," Robert Dunn Papers, ALHUA.

[3] Daily Worker, May 20, 1930.

[4] "Program of the National Provisional Committee for the Organization of a National Industrial Auto Workers Union," Kraus

criticisms reflected genuine concerns. The AFL probably would expel local Communist workers, hamper strike activity, and side with any craft international which claimed jurisdiction over skilled workers organized by the AWU. Independent unionism was the most sensible strategic option for the left.

The merits of independent unionism, then, existed quite apart from any concerns emanating from the third period[1] line of the Communist International. One distinction should be remembered: while Communists were forced to form independent unions by the AFL, their decision to form revolutionary unions was shaped by the Communist International.[2]

II

The TUUL-affiliated AWU received its first major test less than two months after its reorganization with the Fisher Body strike in the summer of 1930. Skilled workers in the Fisher Body plant in Flint, Michigan were joined by the rest of the workers in a fairly small strike. Communists, however, noted that this was the "first time in American auto history" that "all the workers in a single factory have walked out on strike" and called it "the largest and most

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Papers, ALHUA.

[1]According to the Communist International, the "first period" of "revolutionary offensives" occured from 1917 to 1924; the "second period" of "relative . . . stabilization" covered the years 1924 to 1928. The International argued that a "third period" beginning in 1928 would be marked by economic crisis and revolutionary advances.

[2]For more on this point, see above, pages 92-97, and below,

important struggle in the history of the auto industry."[1] Communists had nothing to do with the original walkout, or even with the quick spread of the strike within the factory: there was, a party leader later admitted, "no organization inside the shop prior to the strike."[2] But on the third day of the strike, in a mass meeting, workers voted to work with the Auto Workers Union and elected a strike committee of close to one hundred and twenty workers. After the vote, Caesar Scavarda, the Flint Chief of Police, was quoted as saying that since "most of the strikers joined a Communist organization," they "will receive no more consideration than Reds do any place in the country." Scavarda's testimony before a friendly congressional committee on the strike revealed both his philosophy of law enforcement and some of the handicaps faced by Communist labor organizers:

> Mr. Nelson. What charge did you make against them [the Communist organizers] that you might arrest them?
> Mr. Scavarda. There was not any charge.
> Mr. Nelson. You just arrested them.
> Mr. Scavarda. That is all.
> Mr. Bachmann. Why, you arrest them for disorderly conduct, do you not?
> Mr. Scavarda. Well, possibly that would be a good excuse. There is not any particular law we can act on.[3]

The meeting adopted the mass picketing strategy put forward by

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[1]Robert L. Cruden, "Flint Strikes Fire," Labor Defender, VIII (August 1930), 165; "Youth Help Spread Auto Strike," Young Worker, July 7, 1930.

[2]Jack Stachel, "Coming Struggles and Lessons in Strike Strategy," The Communist, X (March 1931), 208.

[3]Daily Worker, July 3, 1930; U. S. Congress, House, Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States, Investigation of Communist Propaganda, Hearings, Vol. I, Part IV, 71st Cong., 2nd Sess., July 25, 26, 1930, 3.

the AWU and successfully shut down the plant,[1] but tensions within the strike committee led to disunity and finally defeat. A skilled worker named Cecil Comstock who had taken leadership early in the strike denounced the AWU as a Communist organization and called for a return to work after some concessions were made for skilled workers. Although close to six hundred workers had signed AWU membership cards, Comstock's denunciation and leadership of a back-to-work movement, coupled with the use of local police against strikers,[2] were too much for the young union to handle. Assessing the strike, the party's trade union director wrote:

> in the Flint strike . . . the most skilled workers maintained leadership of the strike and in reality carried through the social fascist policy. . . . In Flint, the further typical mistake was that the comrades did fight against the Comstock policies but after deating him in the strike committee did not bring these issues before the mass of the strikers but considered it merely as a "family quarrel." The result was that when Comstock was ready for open betrayal, the masses were not prepared for the situation.[3]

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[1]The following exchange about the Flint strikers is worth noting:
Mr. Nelson. Did they try mass picketing?
Mr. Scavarda. I will come to that. Yes; they did.
Mr. Nelson. I thought they might have.
Investigation of Communist Propaganda, 4.

[2]Police action against strikers took two forms: the dispersal of gatherings of strikers, either at the plant or in meeting halls, and the interrogation of individual workers. As Scavarda told a congressional committee, "I picked out at random some 50 cards from this 580 [AWU membership cards] . . . and asked them to come down to police headquarters . . . I asked them if they were members of the Communist Party; if they believed in Communism, sovietism, and they said, 'absolutely not.' I cross-examined them at length and found they were just ordinary workers and good citizens of Flint . . . but . . . some twenty-odd individuals . . . induced 581 citizens of my community to become members actually of the communistic organization without the individual's knowledge." Ibid., 7-8. For reports of the dispersal of strikers' meeting, see ibid., 11.

[3]Stachel, "Coming Struggles," The Communist, X, 212.

The Flint strike suggests a general pattern for strikes "led" by the AWU. The AWU would have either no organization or only a small group of members or supporters inside the plant when a strike broke out. After the strike began, AWU leaders would present a coherent program, call for the election of a large and representative strike committee, urge mass picketing and an alliance with unemployed organizations, and work close with the elected strike committees. Thus, at the height of the "third period," when most accounts picture Communists as intensely sectarian and isolated, the AWU actively worked to create coalitions with elected strike committees in which AWU adherents were in a distinct minority.[1]

III

The years following the Flint strike were ones of intense activity and substantial growth for the Communist Party in Detroit, but most of that growth took place outside of the AWU. Evidence that the Communist Party may have been stronger in Detroit than in any other American city is not hard to find. The Daily Worker reported that the largest membership of the party was in the Detroit district, and after a recruiting drive the Communist newspaper indicated that Detroit led all districts in new members.[2] One hundred thousand workers marched against unemployment under the banner of the

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[1]For more on this point, see the section of chapter eight which re-examines Communist Party history on the basis of material in this dissertation. That section appears below on pages

[2]Daily Worker, February 11, March 10, 1930.

Communist Party and the Unemployed Councils in Detroit, as compared with twenty-five thousand in Cleveland and fifty thousand in Chicago.[1] The Detroit branch of the Young Communist League held demonstrations of ten thousand on International Youth Day and several marches of five thousand young workers.[2] In the report of the party's political committee, Earl Browder wrote that "the struggle against evictions . . . has been the most living part of our work," but "the only place I know where it has really been systematically approached was Detroit."[3]

The most famous and tragic of the demonstrations held by the party and the Unemployed Councils was the 1932 Hunger March to the Ford plant in Dearborn, Michigan.[4] Marchers proceeded peacefully through Detroit, but found the entrance to Dearborn blocked by rows of armed policemen. The marchers refused to stop, and the police attacked, beating demonstrators with clubs and firing tear gas at the marchers. Suddenly, from behind the gates of the heavily guarded Ford factory, Ford secret service men were given the order to open fire on the marchers. Although initial press reports were openly

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[1] Daily Worker, March 7, 1930. It is possible, of course, that the figures are exaggerated, but it is still significant that Detroit reported twice the number of marchers as Chicago.

[2] Young Worker, September 28, October 19, November 30, 1931.

[3] Earl Browder, "PolComm Report," The Communist, X (January 1930), 16.

[4] For a somewhat different view of the Ford massacre, written after this chapter had been completed, see Alex Baskin, "The Ford Hunger March—1932," Labor History, XIII (Summer 1972), 331-60.

hostile to the marchers,[1] no one introduced any evidence to suggest that any demonstrators were armed or even that Ford security forces had reason to believe that they were armed. They simply were too close to the Ford building and four young men paid for that crime with their lives. Joe York, district organizer for the Young Communist League, Joe Bussell, Joe DeBlasio, and Coleman Leny were killed, twenty-three more were seriously injured, and scores were wounded or hurt.

Communists responded to the killings in two closely related ways: first, they called for intensified work in Detroit as the best answer to what they called the "Ford massacre," and second, they held both Henry Ford and liberal mayor Frank Murphy responsible for the killings. Communists knew that attacking Murphy, who had considerable working class support, would make it more difficult to organize a large demonstration against the murders. But Communists did not compromise on this point since they believed it was politically crucial to convince workers that the liberal politician was no more

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[1]The newspapers pressed hard on two themes: first, that the marchers were vicious rioters, and second, that they were dupes. The two themes were not entirely consistent, but, at first, both were effective.

The captions from a series of photographs in one Detroit paper best illustrated the first theme: "Members of Dearborn Police fleeing before savage attack of onrushing rioters after first skirmish;" "Group of rioters set upon policeman and beat him unmercifully;" "Patrolman Albert Wiggins returned to duty at Dearborn station after head cuts were treated;" "A Woman played a prominent part in inciting mob." Detroit Mirror, March 8, 1932.

The second theme was presented clearly by another Detroit newspaper which printed a picture of William Z. Foster with the caption: "Speeches Spur Disciples on to Death/Foster Stays Behind When Red Cohorts Face Gunfire." The New York Times made the same point more subtly. Detroit Free Press, March 8, 1932; New York Times, March 8, 1932.

their friend than the capitalist. Murphy insisted that the city of Detroit bore no responsibility for the shootings, and the American Civil Liberties Union, after an investigation, publicly exonerated the Detroit Police Department from any direct involvement. Less publicized, however, was the ACLU's finding that a number of other charges leveled at the city administration by Communists were true. Wounded marchers had been chained to their cots in the city hospital, Detroit police had raided the headquarters of several Communist organizations in Detroit, and Detroit police assisted Dearborn police in "restoring order" after the shootings.[1]

Although obviously frightened by the murders, Communist responded in a spirited and militant manner. Along with the Detroit Unemployed Councils, Communists sponsored a mass funeral march based on the slogan, "Smash the Ford-Murphy Police Terror." Both Communists and their opponents agreed that the massive march was impressive. Josephine Gomon, Mayor Murphy's secretary, remembered it as

> a very dramatic scene in Detroit. The paraders marched down Woodward Avenue behind the four red-flag draped caskets; and as they came, they sang the Internationale. It was said that 60,000 people marched and the volume of singing could be heard all over the city. It reverberated.[2]

The Detroit Times reported that "thousands of right arms, with fists

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[1]Roger Baldwin to Frank Murphy, March 30, 1932, Robert W. Dunn Papers, ALHUA. Murphy replied that "there has been much abuse of the free speech policy of the city recently by the Commu nists." Quoted in J. Woodford Howard, Mr. Justice Murphy: A Political Biography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 47.

[2]Josephine Gomon, Oral History Interview, December 22, 1959, p. 7, ALHUA.

clenched, were raised in the Communist salute."[1] The Ford section of the Communist Party reported that "the police and fascist militia, taken by surprise, were powerless" to prevent workers from sacking an Italian Ford plant as a protest against the massacre. Similar attacks were reported throughout South America and in Germany.[2] The girl friend of one of the murdered marchers "pledged over his dead body that I shall never rest until his murderers will pay—and pay dearly."[3] When it became clear that no indictments would be brought against the murderers, the party organized a "workers' jury" to publicly try Ford, his security chief Harry Bennett, and Murphy.[4] Without diluting either their criticism of liberal politicians or their support for Communism, the party was able to build a demonstration ten times as large as the original march on the Ford plant.[5]

IV

Communists realized that the ability to organize thousands of workers in massive demonstrations meant little without organizing inside the factories. Months after the massive funeral march, both

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[1]Detroit Times, March 13, 1932.

[2]Ford Worker, VII (April 20, 1932), 1.

[3]Mary Gossman, "Bloody Monday at Ford's," Labor Defender, VIII (April 1932), 63.

[4]Workers Defense Committee leaflet, Joe Brown Papers, ALHUA. The leaflet, and a picture of the march protesting the murders, are available in James R. Prickett, "Communists and the Automobile Industry in Detroit Before 1935," Michigan History, LVII (Fall 1973), 198, 195.

[5]The original march had 5,000 demonstrators; the funeral had over 50,000.

the Ford Motor Company and the Briggs Manufacturing Company put through wage cuts without any serious resistance from the workers.[1] Following the wage cuts, Communists intensified their efforts to build the Auto Workers Union. It was a slow, difficult, unglamorous task. A meeting called after the wage cuts in the Briggs Waterloo plant drew only two workers. A week later, a second meeting was held with only four workers. They decided to organize first around a single grievance: the practice of having men work two lathes. A poster signed by the AWU ridiculing any worker who would consent to working on two lathes was distributed throughout the plant. The poster, Raymond recalled, "resulted in considerable commotion in the shop; and a few days later the practice of running more than two lathes at a time was discontinued." The small nucleus of workers continued to meet and regularly distributed small leaflets which were passed hand-to-hand inside the plant.

In January, 1933, the AWU learned that tool and die makers at the larger Briggs plant on Mack Avenue had been forced to sign rate change slips authorizing the company to cut their wages. The AWU began immediately to organize against a possible wage cut at the Waterloo plant. Passes were issued to trusted workers inviting them to a meeting on January 9 which drafted a statement urging workers not to sign any rate change slips and warning of an impending wage cut. Twenty-eight workers attended the meeting. The following day Raymond spoke at the shop gate during the lunch break and urged

[1]Jack Stachel, "The Strikes in the Auto Industry," Labor Unity, VIII (March 1933), 4.

workers to attend a mass meeting that night. Some workers objected to Raymond's leadership at the evening meeting because of his widely known affiliations with the Communist Party (he had been the Communist candidate for Mayor in 1930), but the majority of the sixty workers defeated an attempt to remove him.[1] The workers voted to strike immediately if any wage cut was announced and to begin now to organize for a future strike even if there was no wage cut. Demands

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[1]See Joe Brown's notes on the Briggs strike, page 7, Joe Brown Papers, ALHUA. Since Brown's papers are the major source for the Waterloo strike, and the strike wave which followed quickly, something more should be said about the scope of the collection and the attitudes of Brown himself.

As the Detroit correspondent of Federated Press, a news service to which labor and radical newspapers subscribed, Brown closely covered strike activity. His papers include extensive notes on the progress of strikes, the activities of various radical groups, and the events which occured during strikers' meetings. Occasionally, Brown dissected the reporting of the commercial press based on his own first-hand observations. In addition to his personal observations, the most valuable part of the collection, Brown's papers include clippings from the commercial press, dispatches which Brown filed, and leaflets published by strikers or left-wing organizations.

Since Federated Press included Communists, one might assume that Brown was sympathetic to the Communist Party. In my view, this would not disqualify Brown as an objective observer, but it would help to locate him politically. Actually, although it is not possible to determine his political sympathies precisely, he was extremely critical of the AWU and the Communists. In one of his numerous critical asides, Brown bitterly commented that "Communists attacked every one who opposed their leadership [in the Hudson strike] as being company stool pigeons." On several occasions, Brown criticized what he regarded as an over-emphasis on racism in Communist strike propaganda. His own sympathies appear to have been with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In his notes on the Murray Body strike, which the IWW had led unsuccessfully, Brown had typed the following: "the IWW was beginning to increase membership in Detroit and [sic] on its way back to its old position as the most aggressive and revolutionary union organization in the region." Perhaps as an afterthought, Brown added in pencil "one of" between "as" and "the", but even in that form the sentence indicates strong support for the IWW. Brown's independence of the Communist Party as well as his close observation of it makes him an excellent source.

were drawn up and a strike committee was elected.

On January 21, the company announced a twenty per cent wage cut in one department. Work stopped in that department as strike committeemen confronted the plant manager to demand that the wage cut be rescinded. When the manager refused, the committee called for a walkout "which was promptly obeyed by practically the whole shop."[1] That evening a mass meeting of the strikers expanded the strike committee to include three AWU leaders and representatives from each department and formulated strike demands. Two days later strikers returned to work after the company verbally agreed to restore the original wage scale.[2] Following the "clean cut victory," Joe Brown, who covered the strike for Federated Press, noted privately:

> The effect of the strike on the auto industry was electric. Wage cutting in other plants ceased. It was apparent that the auto workers were sullen and that other strikes were impending.
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> The strike proved that strikes could be won even during a depression. At this time a city registration of the unemployed revealed that about 160,000 workers were unemployed in Detroit.
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> The strike victory caused an intensification of organizational work by the Auto Workers Union.[3]

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[1] Raymond, "Briggs Auto Strike Victory," 22.

[2] Brown's notes contain the following entry for January 13: "The company not only offered to rescind the wage cut but promised that no striker would be discriminated against for strike activity. . . . The offer was debated for some time [by the strikers]. The decision was that as they had gained the settlement of their immediate grievance that they would return to work." It is not clear whether those who opposed returning to work wanted additional concessions or simply a written agreement or what position the AWU took. In any case, once the decision to return to work was made, the AWU supported it.

[3] "Briggs Strike," 7, Brown Papers. Brown also noted that "while the strike was led by the AWU the majority of strikers were not members."

The Briggs Waterloo strike was only the first of a series of ten strikes to erupt in Detroit's auto plants in less than one month.[1] The AWU concentrated its efforts on building a conference "of all workers, fraternal, and other organizations" committed to the organization of auto workers into an industrial union planned for January 22. On the morning of the conference, metal finishers walked off their jobs at the Highland Park plant. Raymond advised them to return to work in the afternoon and organize for a complete walkout the following day.[2] On January 23, the metal finishers led a walkout of all departments at the plant. On the sidewalk in front of the factory, workers met informally and selected a committee to talk to the management. Anthony Gerlach, one of the leaders of the AWU,[3] addressed the workers while the committee went inside to negotiate. Leon Pody, one of the workers elected to the negotiating committee, reported that when Walter Briggs was told that a Communist was speaking to his workers, he verbally guaranteed a fifty cent minimum raise. Pody told Briggs that a written statement of the offer would bring the men back to work, but Briggs refused to commit anything to paper.[4]

On January 24, the strike spread to the Briggs Mack Avenue plant. That evening a mass meeting of strikers was held with

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[1] A list of all ten strikes is available in the Central Weekly Letter, Federated Press, February 9, 1933, Dunn Papers.

[2] Brown, "Briggs Strike," 1, Brown Papers.

[3] Daily Worker, May 20, 1930.

[4] Leon Pody, Oral History Interview, November 28, 1959, and January 11, 1960, p. 4, ALHUA.

Raymond in the chair. Most observers agree that Raymond skillfully brought order out of confusion at this very important organizational meeting.[1] Raymond divided the group into smaller, departmental groups to formulate demands. When the meeting reassembled, workers agreed on a series of demands including the abolition of "dead time, the practice of having workers wait for work while on duty without being paid for the time spent," increased wages, and the elimination of compulsory company insurance. As the strike progressed, more of the workers' grievances came to light. The company charged men for broken tools, and "in the case of repairs which had to be made to defective bodies, the wages of the repairer would be deducted from those of the men on the line." A woman who broke her finger was told to keep working. She worked for a week and was finally sent home when she fainted on the job.[2]

The AWU pressed for a strategy of mass picketing in an effort to close down both the Highland Park and Mack Avenue plants. The company was determined to keep both plants open. Clashes between strikers, police, and strike-breakers were frequent. At the Highland Park plant, outside the Detroit city limits, where "there were many, many arrests and many injuries" and "a great deal of violence," local police made several unsuccessful attempts to break up the picket

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[1]Brown, "Briggs Strike," 2; Josephine Gomon, Oral History Interview, 15-16; Report of the Mayor's Non-Partisan Committee on Industrial Relations in the Matter of the Strike at the Briggs Manufacturing Company, February 21, 1933, p. 21, Mayor's Papers, 1933, Briggs folder, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

[2]Mayor's Committee Report, 8, 16, 48, 14, 46, 17-18.

lines.[1] The lines held, but police arrested some workers on charges of "intimidating persons seeking to return to work."[2] At the Mack Avenue plant, there was less violence, since police made no attempt to break up the picket lines. At both plants, however, police protection was accorded strike-breakers. Although Detroit Mayor Frank Murphy insisted that he "ordered that the police not be used against the strikers in any way," his concept of neutrality favored the employers: "you must understand that . . . as long as a plant operates, and workers go to and from it, these workers are entitled to a certain amount of protection."[3]

Although both plants remained open, production was severely reduced. On January 27, the Detroit Free Press, which had ignored earlier strike developments, reported that the Ford plants were forced to shut down because Briggs was no longer supplying bodies for Ford cars.[4] The corporation announced its intention to begin hiring workers to replace strikers on January 30.[5] By February 1, Briggs claimed that production had been resumed with twelve hundred workers in the Highland Park plant.[6] On the same day, one thousand

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[1]Josephine Gomon, Oral History Interview, 14-15.

[2]Detroit Times, January 31, 1933.

[3]Frank Murphy to Bryan McCloskey, February 3, 1933; Frank Murphy to Polish-American Political Club, February 27, 1933, Mayor's Papers.

[4]Detroit Free Press, January 27, 1933.

[5]Ibid., January 28, 29, 30, 1933.

[6]Ibid., February 1, 1933.

strikers voted to continue the strike.[1]

As the strike continued, there was considerable tension within the strike committee over the role of Raymond and the AWU. A few members of the committee fully supported the AWU and some were friendly to the Communist Party. A much larger minority opposed working with Communists from the beginning, and some carried that opposition to extreme lengths. One of the strike leaders ordered Paul Pentye, allegedly a Communist, "out of the picket lines . . . and asked police to arrest him."[2] But the majority of the strike committee adopted a sort of compromise which Jack Stachel described disdainfully in the following, confusing sentence: "They [the strike committee] told the workers that they [the Communists and/or the AWU leaders] were the 'hired experts' to help them [the strikers] win the strike instead of bringing forward the Auto Workers Union as the organization that organized the strike, as the only union of the workers in the auto industry."[3] Both the strike committee and the Communists adhered to this formula. The executive committee of the strikers, after denying any Communist affiliations, stated that "we called upon Phil Raymond only as an organizer of the Automobile Workers Union and it is only in this capacity that he is acting."[4]

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[1]Detroit Free Press, February 2, 1933.

[2]Detroit Times, January 31, 1933; Brown, "Briggs Strike," 4.

[3]Stachel, "Strikes in Auto Industry," 5.

[4]Newspaper clipping, Kraus Papers; Detroit Free Press, February 2, 1933. Unfortunately, neither the name nor the date of the newspaper is visible, and there is no notation. This is true of other clippings in the Kraus collection cited throughout this chapter.

Raymond told reporters that "he had been hired by the strikers to organize their forces and that when his work is ended he will have no further connection with the Briggs men."[1]

The company made Communist affiliations of the AWU its major public reason for refusing to negotiate with the strikers. As Briggs put it, "we will not allow the Communist-led strikers to hang Philip Raymond's red flag on the Briggs Manufacturing Company." "Should we allow these people to continue with their strike," Briggs went on, "it would be another victory for the Communists." Another company official proclaimed that the strike was a "clear-cut issue between capital and communism."[2] When Raymond was mentioned in the newspapers, he was usually described as the "former Communist candidate for Mayor."[3] Company pressure, then, with its implied promise that negotiations would begin in earnest once Communists were removed was one factor weakening the position of the AWU. Strikers also believed that the presence of known Communists in the strike would weaken public support for their cause. AFL leaders and Socialist Party spokesmen, who had been absent in the first week of the strike, began to offer advice and assistance to the strike committee.

On February 3, the Daily Worker discussed, for the first time, dissension within the strike committee. As the Communist paper saw it, "the chief danger to the strike lies now in the fact that

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[1]Newspaper clipping, Kraus Papers.

[2]Newspaper clipping, Kraus Papers.

[3]Newspaper clippings, Kraus and Brown Papers.

unstable elements, who have fallen under the influence of the AFL and 'socialist' misleaders, are now in control of the Mack Avenue strike committee." The workers "must elect a new strike committee at once."[1] A leaflet signed by the AWU charged that the "leaders of the strike committee refused to accept the help of the unemployed, refused to close up the gates with a mass picket line, and permitted thousands of scabs to enter the Briggs plants." The leaflet called on workers to hold department meetings, re-elect a strike committee, and "reunite your ranks under the leadership of the Auto Workers Union."[2] No new elections were held. Even so, the outcome of the struggle inside the committee was in doubt. Norman Thomas came to Detroit and was presented as a speaker by strike leaders at a Mack Avenue strikers' rally. Thomas probably expressed the Socialist Party's pro-AFL and anti-AWU position.[3] But throughout the month of February, the Socialist New Leader was silent on who was leading the strike.[4]

On February 5, two days after the Daily Worker announced its opposition to the leadership of the Mack Avenue strike committee, the AWU called a mass rally. The Daily Worker listed the speakers as "Phil Raymond and Anthony Gerlach, leaders of the Auto Workers Union, John Schmies, Detroit organizer of the Communist Party, Bill

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[1]Daily Worker, February 3, 1933.

[2]Undated leaflet, Brown Papers.

[3]Daily Worker, February 2, 1933; New Leader, February 11, 1933.

[4]New Leader, February 4, 11, 18, 25, 1933.

Gebert, Chicago district organizer of the party, and Earl Browder, secretary of the party."[1] In other words, aside from local strike leaders from the various plants, all the speakers were Communists. Presumably, the rally was called to counter anti-Communist attitudes among the strikers, but the exclusion of representatives of other political parties and the presentation of so many Communists as speakers may have engendered more anti-Communism than it combatted. A strike leader sympathetic to the IWW saw the rally as "an attempt to recruit workers into the party" rather than an effort to build support for the strike.[2] The AFL claimed that strikers resented mass meetings where "practically the only speakers were active Communists."[3] IWW and AFL adherents would probably criticize any open Communist involvement in the strike, since both opposed the AWU. Still, holding a rally in which all the politically active speakers were Communists after making little effort to build the party previously was probably a serious tactical error.

Despite the precarious position of the AWU in the Mack Avenue strike and the close identification of the AWU with the Communist Party, the AWU continued to play a major role in the strike movement. On February 7, two and a half hours after the Hudson Motor

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[1] Daily Worker, February 4, 1933. An AWU leaflet gave the same list of speakers except that Schmies was identified as an AWU leader rather than a Communist official. Leaflet, Brown Papers.

[2] John W. Anderson, Oral History Interview, February 17, March 7, 17, 23, 31, April 8, 13, 27, 29, May 11, 21, 1960, p. 11, ALHUA. See Anderson's contribution to Alice and Staughton Lynd, Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 61.

[3] Detroit Labor News, February 17, 1933.

Car company re-opened its plants, which had been closed to avert a strike, three thousand Hudson workers promptly went out on strike. At the first mass meeting, according to Joe Brown, Raymond's leadership was "protested by about a dozen strikers because of his C. P. affiliation." Although some strikers waged a "long and persistent . . . fight against Raymond's leadership, the Auto Workers Union had control of the strike from beginning to end." On February 8, the negotiating committee selected John Schmies to lead the negotiations. On February 13, strikers returned to work after winning a wage increase and other concessions.[1]

Gradually through the month of February the AWU lost its position of leadership in the Mack Avenue plant. The eclipse of the AWU in the strike committee paralleled the general weakening of the strike. By March, the New Leader was able to write that "the strike is in the hands of a rank and file committee, and the Socialist Party, the IWW, and the AFL are cordially cooperating in it."[2] But as Sidney Fine noted, "by the beginning of March . . . the strike . . . had for all practical purposes come to an end."[3] What the New Leader failed to mention was that the rank and file committee was led by George Cornell, a former Briggs foreman who adopted an extremely pro-management position. After the strike, Cornell became a conservative Detroit politician.[4] Two key events which occured after the

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[1] Brown, "Hudson Motor Car Company Strike," Brown Papers.

[2] New Leader, March 4, 1933.

[3] Fine, Automobile Under the Blue Eagle, 28.

[4] Lynd and Lynd, Rank and File, 63.

Communists were ejected from the strike committee were recalled by an anti-Communist worker:

> Once when we were holding a mass meeting we received a call from the Highland Park strike committee saying that the Michigan State Police were about to break up the picket lines there. We rushed all the strikers we could get to reinforce the Highland Park picket lines. Our forces were too small to defy the State and Highland Park police. Picketing came to an end there the latter part of March.
>
> We [the negotiating committee] sat down across the table from Mr. W. O. Briggs, president, and other company officials. Mr. Briggs being the owner of the Detroit Tigers, it was natural to open the conversation with a few words about the Tigers and the coming baseball season. To my surprise this conversation continued for about fifteen minutes. When I became convinced that neither Mr. Cornell nor any other member of the committee was going to raise the issue of the strike I decided to do so. The response to my question was stunned silence. Mr. Briggs and Mr. Cornell looked at me as if to say, "You have broken the agreement." After a few moments the other members of the committee resumed the polite discussion of subjects that had nothing to do with the strike. . . . Since we were no longer having mass meetings, few of the strikers learned of what took place at the meeting.[1]

These two events reveal fundamental differences between anti-Communist radicals (the worker, John W. Anderson, was a partisan of the IWW and later a member of the Socialist Workers Party) and Communists. Communists would have fought police despite numerical weakness. If they were badly outnumbered, they would have retreated quickly and mobilized for a larger picket line the following day. The strike committee was unable to mobilize a larger picket line partly because it had rejected the AWU strategy of unity between employed and unemployed workers[2] and partly because it allowed the line to be

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[1]Lynd and Lynd, Rank and File, 62, 63-64.

[2]"The membership of the Auto Workers Union was largely unemployed. The workers on strike didn't feel that their interests were the same as those of the unemployed." Consequently, unemployed were excluded from the picket lines. Ibid., 58.

dispersed without a struggle. Communists would have relied on the workers to mobilize against the police assault; the new strike leaders made no such efforts. Similarly, when the strike negotiators sold out the strike, the elements of mass, democratic struggle which Communists had forged—mass picketing and daily strike meetings—were absent. Non-Communists did not have the perspective of reliance on the workers which characterized the Communist approach.

This raises an important question: did Communists present a revolutionary program? Some historians have argued that Communists injected irrelevant political propaganda in their trade union work and others have criticized them for a narrow, trade union perspective. Neither criticism is totally unfounded, but both are misleading. One incident which Brown observed during the Hudson strike may clarify the point:

> At the first strike meeting an attempt by Raymond to put over CP propaganda was quickly dropped. Raymond said, "We must have solidarity between the workers both white and black—" when he was interrupted by a striker who evidently had come to Detroit from Arkansas, "We don't want any of that nigger lovin stuff, etc."[1]

While the incident raises a number of interesting question (why was Raymond so quick to drop the matter and why did Brown think it was irrelevant to the strike?), it provides an example of the sort of point which Communists made in strike situations.

Communists viewed their program of militant mass picketing, unity with unemployed workers against the bosses, solidarity between black and white workers, and rank and file control of strike actions not as narrow trade union tactics but as highly political measures

[1] Brown, "Hudson Motor Car Company Strike," 3.

designed to increase the combat effectiveness of the working class during a period of intense class struggle. The disparate tactics were unified by a strategic vision: reliance upon the strength of the united working class. That program had two key elements: overcoming divisions within the working class, and creating the institutions in which workers could exercise power. In terms of the Detroit strikes, Communists pressed for large, democratically elected strike committees and daily mass meetings of the workers, mass picketing conducted by both employed and unemployed workers, concrete strike demands in the interest of unemployed workers, anti-racist and anti-sexist demands centering primarily upon unequal wage scales and discriminatory promotion practices, and so on. Each of the Communist proposals can be seen as an attempt to either overcome divisions within the working class or ensure mass participation in the strike by rank and file workers.[1]

By the end of the summer of 1933, the party's trade union director estimated that between fifteen and twenty thousand automobile workers had gone out on strike. More important, most of the victorious strikes had been led by the AWU, and none had been led by the AFL.[2] This impressive achievement has gone virtually unnoticed by historians. The claim of the AWU to be "the victor in the automobile

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[1]For more on the issue of whether the AWU program was revolutionary, see below, pages 225-28. This issue is also examined in chapter eight.

[2]Jack Stachel, "Some Lessons of Recent Strike Struggles," The Communist, XII (August 1933), 790.

strikes of early 1933," Fine asserted in his careful study of the automobile industry in this period, was made with the union's "customary disregard for the facts."[1] Fine is in error on this point. While the AWU, like many other organizations, may have exaggerated its role, its basic claim of leadership is reasonable. Brown's observations revealed the decisive role of AWU leadership in both the Briggs Waterloo strike, which triggered the strike wave, and the large and successful Hudson strike. In addition, the AWU played a major role in the early stages of the Mack Avenue and Highland Park strikes. The AFL, as Fine conceded, played no role. The IWW led two strikes, but both were unsuccessful. Only the AWU could point to successful leadership or, to put it another way, only the AWU could claim to be "the victor in the automobile strikes of early 1933."

V

Before examining the evolution of Communist labor policy in the automobile industry leading to the dissolution of the AWU, it is necessary to describe briefly some of the events which shaped labor relations in auto during this period. In this section, the discussion will focus on the role played by the federal government, the AFL, and the employers; the next section will examine the role Communists played. The crucial events are the National Industrial Recovery Act, the approval of the Automobile Code under the National Recovery Administration, the settlement of the proposed national auto strike in March,

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[1]Fine, Automobile Under the Blue Eagle, 40-41.

1934, and the famous and militant Toledo Auto-Lite strike the following month.

On June 16, 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The NIRA provided for codes of fair competition, including maximum hours and minimum wages, to be written by trade or industrial associations and approved by the President. The law included an important section on labor relations:

> Section 7. (a) Every code of fair competition, agreement, and license approved, prescribed, or issued under this title shall contain the following conditions: (1) that employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor, or their agents, in the designation of such representatives or in self-organization or in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection; (2) that no employee and no one seeking employment shall be required as a condition of employment to join any company union or to refrain from joining, organizing, or assiting a labor organization of his choosing; and (3) that employers shall comply with the maximum hours of labor, minimum rates of pay and other conditions of employment, approved or prescribed by the President.[1]

The AFL hailed section 7a as a "magna carta" for labor; Communists, as we shall see, were less enthusiastic. In part these differences reflected more fundamental differences about the nature of the State under capitalism, but in part the differences were a product of the enormous ambiguities of 7a. What constituted employer interference and how would it be punished? Were employers obligated to meet and bargain with employee organizations? What was the status of the closed shop and the company union?

The answers to those questions, at least in the automobile

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[1]The text is from an unpublished history of the AWU in the Kraus Papers.

industry, were not very reassuring to labor. The Automobile Code drafted by the employers included a statement that "without in any way attempting to qualify or modify" section 7a by interpretation, "employers in this industry may exercise their right to select, retain, or advance employees on the basis of individual merit, without regard to their membership or nonmembership in any organization." The inclusion of this clause was hailed by Automotive Industries as "the first victory of industry over organized labor under the Industrial Recovery Act."[1] Although AFL leaders were strong supporters of the President, he ignored their intense objections and approved the code with the controversial merit clause intact.

Although Roosevelt had sided with the employers on the Automobile Code, the strategy of AFL leaders continued to stress reliance on the Roosevelt administration, rather than, as the Communists advocated, reliance on the strength of the workers. As the leaders of federal AFL locals in auto pressed for a national strike to guarantee nondiscrimination against union members, increase wages, and lower maximum hours, the chief AFL organizer in auto, William Collins, anxiously sought the intervention of the President. Although Collins never intended to allow a strike, he let local leaders organize to strike as a lever to gain presidential intervention. Hearings by the National Labor Board won a postponement of the strike, but when the board was unable to recommend a settlement, workers prepared to walk off the job. Roosevelt then invited AFL and company

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[1]Sidney Fine, "President Roosevelt and the Automobile Code," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLV (June 1958), 24.

representatives to Washington. Collins won reluctant consent from automobile workers for deferring the strike.

Wages and hours issues were soon forgotten (by the negotiators if not the workers) as the dispute centered around the form of employee representation and the issue of discrimination against union workers. The AFL argued for majority rule: if a majority of workers, in an election conducted by the National Labor Board, voted for a particular union to represent them, that union should be certified as the bargaining agent for all workers. The employers argued that 7a required them to deal with all groups of workers, no matter how small (including those who wished to bargain individually). Furthermore, employers believed that it could not require them to meet with any group which did not present employers with a complete list of those workers for whom it spoke. The AFL argued that the submission of membership lists would invite discrimination.

On the question of employee representation, employers won a complete victory. "The government," the settlement stated, "favors no particular union or particular form of employee organization or representation." Unions inspired and dominated by the company, then, were as valid as those formed by the workers. "The government's only duty," the settlement continued, "is to secure absolute and uninfluenced freedom of choice without coercion, restraint, or intimidation from any source." Thus, union coercion was condemned along with management coercion. Most important was the settlement's endorsement of proportional representation. If there was more than one group of workers in a plant, each group would receive

"total membership pro rata to the number of men each member represents." In opposing majority rule, Roosevelt had broken with what appeared to be precedents established by his National Labor Board.[1]

The decision on union discrimination was not so clear-cut, but here again workers suffered a defeat. Cases of union discrimination would be submitted to a board composed of one union representative, one company representative, and one neutral arbitrator. The Automobile Labor Board (ALB) proved another disappointment to the AFL. The ALB's chairman, Leo Wolman, consistently favored the employers.[2] Richard Byrd, the AFL representative, soon left the AFL, but remained on the ALB; in any case, he proved to be a "totally ineffective defender of the trade union point of view."[3] The immediate reactions of workers and employers reflected the character of the settlement. "Unionists in the automobile plants felt that they had been sold out," Bernstein noted, while "the manufacturers were, in the words of Donaldson Brown of GM, 'tremendously happy' with the settlement Roosevelt had got for them without having to pay the price of a strike."[4] When terms of the settlement were announced, recalled Wyndham Mortimer, masses of members tore up their union books or

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[1]The quotations from the settlement, as well as the basic analysis, is taken from Irving Bernstein, Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 184-85; see also Fine, "President Roosevelt," 34-35.

[2]Fine, Auto Under the Blue Eagle, 230-58.

[3]Ibid., 233-34.

[4]Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 185.

made huge bonfires with them.[1] Anger over the settlement did not abate easily, as more and more evidence of the pro-management position of the ALB mounted.

The AFL's refusal to strike in March, 1934 was a strategic, rather than a tactical, decision. AFL leaders did have strong tactical arguments against a strike at that time and it is possible that auto workers would have been defeated had the strike taken place. The federal locals may have been too weak to conduct a national strike. The point, however, is that the AFL had no strategy for overcoming those weaknesses and no sense of organizing for a successful strike. Since it expected to win its gains without striking, primarily through the good will of government and management, it never adequately prepared for a strike. When workers pressed for a strike, the AFL could always reply that conditions were unfavorable, that no preparations had been made, and that a strike "at this time" would be a mistake. Workers within the AFL struck without the guidance or support of the AFL leadership. Two of the most important of those strikes in the automobile industry occurred in Toledo: the Auto-Lite strike of 1934, and the 1935 Chevrolet strike.

In August, 1933, workers at the Bingham Stamping and Tool

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[1]Mortimer, Organize, 73.

Company, the Electric Auto-Lite Company, and the Logan Gear Company formed an AFL federal local union. The local, FLU #18384, [1] was led by business agent Thomas Ramsey, president Floyd Bossler, and financial secretary George F. Addes. In February, after a short strike in which the workers demanded recognition, a ten per cent wage increase, and the establishment of a seniority system, a settlement was reached granting an immediate 5 per cent wage increase in addition to promising that a contract would be negotiated in April. After the deferring of the national strike, however, the corporations went on the offensive. Ramsey "was practically thrown out of the Auto-Lite office." Workers were fired, the company refused to negotiate, and the subregional labor board did nothing. On April 11, FLU #18384 stuck Bingham, on April 15, Auto-Lite, and on April 17, Logan Gear. All companies continued to operate as perhaps less than half of the workers in those three companies walked off the job. [2] On April 17, an injunction

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[1] FLU was the way the AFL referred to these unions. The abbreviation stands for Federal Labor Union. The intention of the AFL was to disband those units after parcelling out their membership to existing craft unions.

[2] According to Fine, "the union succeeded in pulling out at least 75% of Bingham's 538 employees, about five hundred of the seventeen hundred Auto-Lite employees, and a minority of the eight hundred Logan Gear workers." Fine's source appears to be the daily press which often underestimated the extent of strike participation during this period. Fine, Auto Under the Blue Eagle, 275, 494, fn #42.

prohibited picketing by the Unemployed Council, the Unemployed League, the Socialist and Communist Parties, and all those not working at the stuck plants, and limited picketing by the strikers. Lucas County Sherriff David Kriegel asked the county commissioners for appropriations for special deputies; when the commissioners refused, Kriegel appointed 150 men anyway, and Auto-Lite and Bingham paid their expenses.

By May, the strike appeared to be defeated, but two new forces were to give it new life. The first, surprisingly, was the Toledo Central Labor Union, which saw the strike as the opening of an anti-union offensive. The CLU instructed members of its unions not to cross the picket lines, protested the prohibition of mass picketing, and threatened a general strike. The CLU set up a committee of 23 to prepare for a possible general strike. William Green was horrified. He wrote CLU secretary Otto Branch that he had depended on persons like Brach "to prevent strike action at a time when conditions were unfavorable." The second new force was the Lucas County Unemployed League, led by members of the American Workers Party (AWP). The League's activities began rather feebly. On May 5, it announced that it would violate the injunction; on May 7, four members engaged in "mass picketing" in front of the Electric Auto-Lite Company. They were arrested, held for twenty-four hours, and released, whereupon they immediately returned to the picket

line. A few days later, forty-six men were arrested. The League packed the courtroom and the men were acquitted.

On May 15, a local judge granted a permanent injunction against mass picketing. Ramsey, who had earlier denounced outsiders for appearing on the picket lines, called for obediance to the injunction, and even, according to the party's District Organizer for Ohio, pointed out Communist Party members on the picket line to the police department, now announced that mass picketing would continue in spite of the injunction. On May 22, several thousand picketers ringed the plant, and those working inside were unable to leave for several hours. There were bitter, violent clashes when the non-strikers were escourted from the plant. Order was not restored until 7:30. On May 23, thousands of demonstrators stopped workers from leaving the factory again. Sherriff Krieger decided to, as he put it later, "take the offensive." Picket leaders were arrested. Deputies fired tear gas guns into the crowd, now numbering close to ten thousand, and the crowd fought back. Fighting continued from mid-afternoon to past midnight; at one a. m. strikers and their supporters broke into the plant.

At dawn, May 24, National Guard troops entered Toledo. The Guardsmen cleared the area surrounding the plant in the morning, but by mid-afternoon, thousands of men and women returned to the

area. Using bayonets, tear gas, and several volleys of shots, Guardsmen tried to clear the area. Two demonstrators were killed; about fifteen more were wounded by gunfire. The crowd stood its ground, and after night surged again toward the factory. Guardsmen again opened fire, wounding two more demonstrators.

By May 24, it was clear that the working class of Toledo had seized the initiative. The first moves in the dispute had come from management. After the deferment of the proposed national auto strike, the corporations decided to eliminate the union. By May 7, before the mass picketing, it appeared that they had succeeded. Their plants were operating with non-strikers and strike-breakers, and the union was demoralized. But mass picketing turned the situation around. As thousands of workers turned out in support of the Auto-Lite strikers and in opposition to the injunction, the labor movement, in spite of AFL conservatism, began to take the offensive. Thousands of picketers made it extremely difficult of Auto-Lite to operate. The Toledo local of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) was scheduled to strike Toledo Edison on May 28, and the CLU was pledged to support a general strike if necessary. Government mediation agencies swung into action, however, and all three strikes (Auto-Lite, Toledo Edison,

and the proposed general strike) were settled.[1]

In the winter of 1935, local leaders again pressed for a national strike, but AFL leaders successfully blocked the move. The auto workers, Green told the AFL Executive Council, "wanted to engage in a general strike, but I stopped that." Green and Dillon, as Fine suggested, "probably thought of the strike drive and strike vote as simply a means of strengthening the AFL in its efforts to bargain with the automobile manufacturers and to gain support for the passage of the National Labor Relations Bill."[2] The militant local leaders, who were serious about a strike, faced enormously difficult problems of communication and organization which they did not overcome until they were part of an international union. Although there was to be no national strike, the amalgamated local which had conducted the Auto-Lite strike called a strike in the Toledo Chevrolet plant which halted Chevrolet production and forced the corporation to abandon its refusal to negotiate with strikers. The strike has been analyzed at length elsewhere,[3] but for our purposes the strategic and tactical conflicts between the strike committee

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[1] Fine, Auto Under the Blue Eagle, 74-82; Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 218-29; A. U. Muste, "The Battle of Toledo," The Nation, CXXXVIII (June 6, 1934), 639-40; John Williamson, "The Lessons of the Toledo Strike," The Communist, XIII (July 1934), 639-54.

[2] Fine, Auto, 385.

[3] Sidney Fine, "The Toledo Chevrolet Strike of 1935," Ohio Historical Quarterly, LXVII (October 1958), 326-56; Fine, Auto Under the Blue Eagle, 387-403.

and the AFL leadership are most important.

The strike committee consistently urged expansion of the strike to achieve the principal demands--a signed contract and exclusive bargaining right--and to build the union throughout the GM chain. The AFL leaders successfully blocked efforts to expand the strike. When a settlement which, according to Fine, "did not, on paper, differ greatly from the company's proposals," was presented to the strikers, the strike committee urged rejection while the AFL recommended acceptance. Strikers met on May 13, 1935, in Toledo's Civic Auditorium to decide on the contract. A resolution passed at the beginning of the meeting limited speakers to members of the strike committee and specifically excluded Dillon. Dillon declared that the local was no longer part of the AFL and stalked from the hall. The executive committee then asked Dillon to return and he spoke for half an hour, arguing that the contract was the best possible under the circumstances. Strike leader James Roland took the floor after Dillon to urge that the contract be rejected, and Dillon told Roland that Roland would be "out" if the contract was turned down. As the ballots were being distributed, Fred Schwake went over the agreement, indicating the gains which had been made, but not urging either acceptance or rejection. This may have turned the tide in favor of the agreement. In any case, the strikers voted 732 to 385 to return to work.

Both Toledo strike settlements were described as sell-outs by the left (both the AWP and the Communists), although many labor historians now view them as victories. What is crucial about the strikes in retrospect, however, is not so much the debatable issue of whether the strikers could have obtained better settlements, as the undeniable fact that the unions emerged stronger and more powerful after the strikes. Equally important, rank and file unionists were strongly opposed to AFL leaders and favored a more militant approach. The attitudes of those workers, as we shall see, helped to shape the evolution of Communist labor policy during those years.

VI

In the summer of 1933, the leadership of the Communist Party convened what they called an "Extraordinary Party Conference" to discuss the situation in the party. The Open Letter, which served as a call to the conference, set forth five basic weaknesses in the party. First, recruiting was done considerably from the preceeding year. Second, the social composition of the party was undesirable: the majority of party members were unemployed and the proportion of unemployed was consistently rising. Third, those new members who were recruited were usually not "from the most important strata of workers," that is, those employed in basic industry. Fourth,

shop work "remains disgracefully weak." Finally, the work of lower units was not sufficiently aided by concrete plans and suggestions from higher party units. Running through this analysis, and much of the rest of the Open Letter, was the notion that unemployed struggles had become the major aspect of the party's work not from conscious political strategy, but simply because the party was "drifting along the line of least resistance."[1] It was obviously easier for a party organizer in Youngstown to become part of Youngstown's unemployed masses than to become a steel worker. Similarly, since most members were unemployed, they could not recruit other unemployed workers. While unemployed work was important, it was far more important to build a base for the party in the nation's mass production industries.[2] The Open Letter, and the party conference which followed it, laid out an enormous two-pronged task for the small, radical party: the organization of the hitherto unorganized industrial working class, and the creation of a solid base of industrial workers for the Communist movement.

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[1]"Excerpts from the Report to the Extraordinary Party Conference, New York City, July 7, 1933," reprinted in Earl Browder, Communism in the United States (New York: International Publishers 1935), 120-21.

[2]The effects of the Open Letter on the unemployed movement have been analyzed perceptively in Neil Berger, "The Communist Party and the Unemployed Councils, 1930-1936 (Unpublished paper, 1970). While Berger showed that the Open Letter weakened unemployed work, he conceded that it probably strengthened the overall work of the CP.

The Open Letter, and the intensive Communist activity which followed it, reveals Communist leadership at its most effective as well as the enormous organizational power of democratic centralism. Party leaders diagnosed a weakness within the party and summonded the membership to correct it, but not by fiat or, to use Communist terminology, commandism. Instead, an open letter was issued to the party, a conference was convened, and party members throughout the country endorsed the new emphasis and participated in making plans to implement the change. The precise strategy for each industry was shaped by the comrades in the various industries, but the conference as a whole formulated the overall direction of the party. This approach to democratic centralism stands in sharp contrast to the approach adopted during the 1937 Chrysler strike and the 1939 UAW convention. [1]

An article in the issue of the Party Organizer which appeared during the month of the Extraordinary Party Conference analyzed the position of the AWU. [2] The analysis revealed that the AWU had not been consolidated despite its impressive performance in early 1933. During the two month strike wave approximately 4,000

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[1] See below.

[2] "Developing Shop Work in Detroit," Party Organizer, VI (July, 1933), p. 10-14.

workers joined the AWU, including a majority or near-majority at the Briggs Waterloo and Motor Products plants. By the summer of 1933, however, only 1500 workers, 37.5% of those recruited, re-mained in the union. In no plant did the union retain a near-major-ity of the workers. None of the companies signed agreements with the AWU. It continued to be a force in the industry, particularly strong in certain plants and departments, but it had not won a signed contract or even a majority of the workers in a single shop. A majority of the union's members were unemployed workers: there were eight shop locals and twenty-two territorial branches.

Communists ascribed the failure of the AWU to consolidate its gains to political weaknesses in the party's work during and after the strikes. Three specific criticisms were made. First, AWU leaders did not work closely with union comrades in branches and locals to develop new leaders. More experienced leaders like Raymond tended to take over negotiations and strike settlements, thereby depriving local leaders of the chance to gain experience and confidence enabling them to lead the union after the strike. Second, in the Highland Park and Mack Avenue strikes, "the indi-vidual comrades acted in the strike merely as individuals "from outside" and "the Union as the organizer of the strike from the

inside of the shop was not continuously brought forwards."[1] The AWU presence during the strike in those two plants derived from the acceptance of Raymond and Schmies as individual advisers rather than through departmental organization or other inside-the-plant strength.[2] Finally, the Communists were unable to respond to red-baiting with a forceful affirmation of the party's role in the movement:

> We were not able to meet such questions as "the Union is a Communist union." . . .
>
> During the strikes it was the policy of the comrades in the leadership of the strikes to keep the face of the Party covered and at many of the meetings, those comrades selling the Daily Worker were told to leave. The whole atmosphere in the strike was one of "Don't mention the Party."[3]

This analysis, helpful as it is, raises one basic question: to what extent did these weaknesses cause the AWU failure and to what extent were those weaknesses symptoms of a more basic problem? Specifically, was Raymond's posture of an individual advisor a cause of the union's weakness or did it reflect a compromise on Raymond's part in view of that weakness? A similar question can be asked about the refusal to raise the party. Did the

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[1]"Developing Shop Work in Detroit," Party Organizer, VI (July, 1933) p. 10-14.

[2]See above.

[3]"Developing Shop Work," 12, 14.

reluctance of party members to raise the party create an atmosphere conducive to anti-Communism or was that reluctance a result of anti-Communist attitudes among auto workers? Perhaps a little of both: hostility to the party by some workers led to a reluctance to raise the party which in turn reinforced anti-Communism. Ultimately, it did not matter which came first: if anti-Communism was not confronted directly, it would destroy Communists in the long run.

But it could be avoided in the short run. Only a minority of the strikers were anti-Communists. Over and over again, challenges to Raymond's leadership were defeated, except in Mack Avenue and Highland Park. Thousands of workers, then turned to a union whose most widely known leader had been the Communist Party's candidate for mayor in 1930, and which openly supported the CP. While some workers were willing to join a Communist organization, and virtually all workers were willing to work with Communists, it is likely that a Communist union could not have succeeded in organizing the vast majority of the industry unless it had no competition. Yet there seemed no alternative. The IWW was even smaller than the AWU and had, in any case, no successes to its credit, and the AFL was uninterested in an industrial union for automobile workers. The Communists were not blindly committed to the AWU or other TUUL unions. Whether workers are organized in "the Red

Trade unions or in the AFL or in a separate organization," wrote Earl Browder in early 1933, "depends entirely upon the particular situation and upon the relations of forces."[1] This tactical flexibility and the inability of the AWU to consolidate its position despite relative success and in the absence of competition meant that another vehicle for automobile unionism would have to be found. The AWU remained in existence for another year, serving primarily as the mouthpiece for Communists on industry-wide issues, but it led no important strikes.

Another issue which the party had to discuss was the National Industrial Recovery Action, and particularly the meaning of section 7a. This measure posed some problems for Communists. The party saw the NIRA primarily as an attempt by big capital to abolish anti-trust laws, consolidate their position within the economy, and curtail the growing strike movement. The measure was designed, according to Communists, to appear as a victory for the working class,[2] but its actual intent was to shift the burden of the depression

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[1]Earl Browder, "The End of Relative Capitalist Stabilization and the Tasks of Our Party," The Communist, XII (March 1933), p. 239.

[2]The description of the Communist analysis of the NIRA and the early New Deal by liberal historians has been highly superficial and one-dimensional. Since it sheds some light on the general approach of even the best liberal historians to the Communist movement, it is useful to analyze the presentation of the Communist po-

away from the large capitalists and to curb working class militancy.

The difficulty was that the effect of what Communists considered "illusions" about the NIRA was not entirely negative. As an

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sition in Sidney Fine's work. The basic characteristics of this passage are unfortunately typical of liberal, anti-Communist scholarship. The full paragraph from Fine's book follows:

> Whereas the AF of L welcomed the NIRA as providing an opportunity for it, at long last, to organize the automobile workers, the Communists, then in the midst of their so-called "social-fascist" period, heaped scorn upon the measure as upon the evolving New Deal as a whole. The Michigan Worker castigated "the semi-Fascist Roosevelt" NIRA and warned that the AF of L would use the statute "to smash the struggled of the workers." At the AWU convention of June 24-25, 1933, Phil Raymond, in dutiful conformity with the party line, attacked the NIRA as designed to reduce working standards and to place laborers in organizations designated by the employers. Fine, Auto Under the Blue Eagle, 40.

There is no serious attempt here to convey, let alone analyze, the Communist position. To be more specific:

1. The quoted comments are too brief to understand. The phase "semi-Fascist Roosevelt", for example, seems clear enough, unless one knows that Communists sharply criticized views which equated the New Deal with fascism. In the context of this paragraph, "semi-Fascist" is little more than a mindless term of abuse, but in realty it represented a well thought-out position.
2. Since we are not told why Raymond believed that NIRA would depress working standards or why he thought it would spur company unionism, we can not evaluate his arguments. The only reason for Raymond's statements which Fine provides was Raymond's "dutiful conformity with the party line."
3. Similarly, the only reason given for Communist hostility to the early New Deal was that they were in their "so-called (by Fine, not the Communists) social-fascist period." The implication is that there was nothing in the New Deal which a Marxist worker might oppose. Fine knows better.
4. The first sentence implies that it was the AFL which was interested in organizing workers, while Communists were only concerned with ideological hair-splitting. This is false.

I am not suggesting that Fine should be "more objective" if that phase is interpreted as meaning less critical of the Communists. The

unsigned article in the party's monthly magazine noted, "the very attempts of the government further to maintain and create new illusions regarding the role of the 'new deal,' while not entirely ineffective and representing a great danger which must be counter-acted, simultaneously increases the fighting spirit of the workers."[1]

In a speech before the Extraordinary Party Conference, the party's trade union director elaborated on the problem:

> Secondly, Roosevelt talks higher wages, against sweatshops, and carries on investigations against Morgan and Company, etc. As far as the workers are concerned, they have great illusions, they believe in all that, and precisely because of their illusions, they become indignant and are more ready to take up the struggle. Roosevelt says no sweatshops. Good, we fight against them. Roosevelt says high wages. Very good, let's get high wages. The trouble is that we don't understand sufficiently how to utilize that. The Recovery Bill and the Roosevelt program are a double-edged sword which we can utilize for the shattering of the very illusions he is trying to create.[2]

In 1933, the working class had suffered over a decade of major defeats. The smashing of the steel strike in 1919, the success of the so-called American Plan in the 1920's, the annihilation of the garment and mining unions, the defeat of the great Communist-led

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issue here is not Fine's hostility to the Communists, but his tendency to substitute sneering for serious criticisms and his unwillingness to include enough information for the reader to evaluate the Communist position.

[1]"The Rising Strike Movement," The Communist, XII (June 1933), p. 517-18.

[2]J. Stachel, "Some Lessons of Recent Strike Struggles," ibid., (August 1933), p. 785.

strikes in mining and textiles, and, above all, the demoralizing effect of the years of unemployment all helped to shape a defeatist attitude in large sectors of the working class. Communists and such old line AFL leaders as John L. Lewis and David Dubinsky both realized that workers would be more willing to join unions if they believed that they would be protected from employer reprisals by the government. If workers saw the government as an ally, they would naturally believe that their chances for victory were greater. Thus, NIRA "illusions" could combat defeatism. At the same time, Communists believed that it was dangerous for workers to rely on arbitration, government commissions, or any other device besides the united strength of the workers. They encouraged workers to claim the rights promised them by the NIRA, but consistently stated that the only way those rights could be guaranteed was through strong, independent workers' organizations.

At the Extraordinary Party Conference, Communists were still committed to building the TUUL unions. Following the conference an organizer for the Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union reported that the SMWIU had grown "from a small sectarian organization of 1,200 members to over 15,000 members throughout the country." This, of course, was significant only as a beginning: 15,000 was approximately .003% of the number of workers later organized by the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. But in

1933 it compared favorably with the membership of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers (AA) in the nation's steel mills. In auto the situation was less favorable: membership in the AWU had declined in the several months following the conference, but the party was still committed to the idea of building an independent union. One of the veterans of the Detroit strikes in 1933 outlined the rationale for continuing to build the AWU. Although the remarks are in the form of slogans to be placed before automobile workers, they accurately reflect the concerns of the party:

> Instead of company unions, rank and file unions of the workers. Instead of unions controlled by open-shoppers and AFL leaders, who endorse the slavery program of the auto bosses, a union in every shop, organized and controlled by the workers themselves. Instead of a union where the company forces upon the workers officials and representation, we must have a union where the workers elect their officials out of their own ranks, and elect those workers who have shown their loyalty and sincerity to their fellow-workers in the shop. Instead of a union that is led and guided by the AFL leadership, which is taking the lead in forcing the auto bosses' code upon the workers, we must bring forward the militant Auto Workers Union.[1]

Here the AWU is being presented not as a revolutionary union, but as the only militant and democratic union in the industry. Anti-Communists might assume that this was a pose on the part of the Communists, but they would be wrong. The AFL, as numerous

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[1]John Meldon, "Swinging to the Offensive Against the NRA in the Steel Mills," and John Schmies, "The Open Letter and the Tasks of the Detroit District," The Communist, XII (October 1933), 982, p. 991-92.

studies have demonstrated, was neither militant nor democratic, and Communists sincerely feared that it would put a straight-jacket on the growing movement. They saw the AWU as the only existing union which could adequately represent the aspirations of the workers. At the same time, they understood that their earlier conception of a "revolutionary union" was far too narrow and sectarian. For a union to adequately represent workers in a given plant, it had to be able to organize the vast majority of workers in the plant, not just the most radical or militant. Communists began to emphasize that TUUL unions were open to all workers and to downplay their connection with the Communist Party.

Wyndham Mortimer has provided an interesting example of how workers evaluated the TUUL and the AFL. In 1932, Mortimer and two other workers went to the local AFL to seek help in organizing the White Motors Company in Cleveland. Harry McLaughlin, executive secretary of the Cleveland Federation of Labor, told Mortimer that "no one can organize that bunch of hunkies out there." After a short but loud discussion, Mortimer and his friends left in disgust. After that meeting, a group of workers met at Mortimer's home and decided to organize an independent union. In 1933, Mortimer read about the Detroit strike wave and was impressed with the performance of the AWU. He sought out John Williamson, Ohio District Organizer of the Communist Party, and obtained

Raymond's address. Mortimer found Williamson a sympathetic and committed working class activist. Williamson probably brought Mortimer into the party. Raymond came to Cleveland to address a meeting Mortimer set up, and Mortimer convinced the group of workers he had organized to join the AWU.

As Mortimer and the group around him brought more workers into the AWU, the AFL finally went into action. The AFL Metal Trades Council offered White Motors workers a federal union charter and invited them to "choose between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin." The Metal Trades Council promised that "all White Motors production workers" would be "under one charter now." Mortimer objected to the AFL campaign on two grounds. First, the claim that all workers would be under one charter was highly misleading, since that charter granted the workers only a temporary federal AFL local whose membership would later be parcelled out to existing craft unions. The AFL, in Mortimer's view, promised the workers unity and industrial unionism, but actually gave them neither. Second, the AFL's campaign centered around anti-Communism. By this time, Mortimer had either joined the Communist Party or was at least reasonably friendly to it as the result of the contrast he saw between Williamson and McLaughlin.

But the AFL campaign achieved some success, and those in the

AWU faced a difficult problem. Some of the workers had been won to the AFL because of their hostility to the Communist Party, but most were attracted to the possibility of a united industrial union. After serious talks with workers committed to the AFL, Mortimer's group called a meeting of all the workers in the plant. Mortimer opened the discussion with the following remarks:

> They [the employers] have won in the sense that they have succeeded in dividing us over the question of union affiliation. We must find a way to restore unity among ourselves. . . .
>
> I am personally interested in one thing. I want to see a united and strong union at White Motor, and a union that is run by the membership. It will matter little what we call such an organization as long as it is ours, and as long as we, the membership, determine its policy.
>
> I, therefore, propose the following, and I want a thorough discussion of this proposal. I propose that we dissolve the independent union and that we all join and become members of the federal union of the AFL. I am fully aware that the federal union is not the complete answer to our needs. It is not an industrial union, but under it we can organize our plant. And if we fight for and retain real democracy in our ranks, we can, I am sure, use the federal union as a base to build the kind of union we need and must have. Whichever road we choose, let us all stay together.[1]

Similar decisions were made by Communist automobile workers particularly those in Toledo and Cleveland; only in Detroit did some workers remain in the AWU.

By December, 1933, it was clear to Communists that AFL advances had displaced the TUUL in a number of basic industries. Stachel reported that the AFL had re-established its unions in gar-

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[1]Wyndham Mortimer, Organize: My Life as a Union Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 54-60.

ment, textiles, and mining--the industries which had first given rise to TUUL unions--and that TUUL unions had lost members in crucial industries like steel and auto. Since even at this late date some TUUL unions remained able to conduct important strikes and faced little opposition from AFL unions in their industries. Stachel concluded that both the TUUL and the AFL opposition had to be built.[1] The Toledo Auto-Lite strike of 1934 revealed both the weakness of the TUUL union (the AWU, Williamson noted, "played no role in the strike") and, more important, the willingness of workers in the AFL to challenge the AFL leadership and to fight for militant and democratic unionism.[2] By the summer of 1934, Communists noted, "hundreds of thousands" of workers had joined the "AFL and done so in the basic industries--mining, steel, textile, automobile, garment (and) oil."[3] The TUUL unions continued to exist, but the actions of workers in joining the AFL meant that very few separate unions could be maintained. At first, Stachel indicated that the furriers and seamen's unions would remain as "models for all workers," but later it was decided that

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[1]J. Stachel, "Recent Developments in the Trade Union Movement," The Communist, XII (December 1933), p. 1162.

[2]Williamson, "Lessons of Toledo Strike," ibid., XIII, 639-54.

[3]J. Stachel, "Some Problems in our Trade Union Work," ibid., XIII (June 1934), p. 527.

"only those revolutionary unions whose entrance into the AFL is impossible in practice will temporarily continue to exist.[1]

This explanation of the shift from TUUL unions to opposition work in the AFL, as many readers will realize, omits the factor generally cited by historians: the popular front political line of the Seventh World Congress. The omission is intentional for two reasons. First, the shift began in 1933, and the Seventh World Congress was held in 1935. Second, throughout the 1928-1935 period, Communists always stated that opposition work within the AFL should not be ignored. In practice, however, that work was difficult work: there were no AFL unions in most of the basic industries, and AFL unions in other industries had expelled Communists. Third, the shift to work within the AFL was a tactical, not a strategic, shift: Communists did not abandon their opposition to the federation's leadership or their commitment to militant, rank and file unionism. More specifically, the program which the AWU put forward during the Detroit strikes in 1933 was put forward by Communists within the AFL in 1934 and 1935. Only after the CIO was formed (by people who were willing to accept large segments of the program Communists advocated) did Communists become

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[1]J. Stachel, "Our Trade Union Policy," ibid., XIII (November 1934), p. 1103; "On the Immediate Tasks of the Communist Party, United States of America," ibid., XIV (February 1935), p. 119.

supporters of a national trade union leadership. That support was indeed part of the popular front, but the decision to work within the AFL was not

VII

"Every time I hear the words 'international industrial union,' fumed AFL leader William Collins, "I know exactly where it comes from. It comes straight from Moscow."[1] In a sense, Communists had earned Collins' tribute: they were the most ardent, if by no means the only, supporters of the drive for an industrial union. As the long-awaited, first convention of auto workers approach, George Morris posed four questions which reveal the Communists' central concerns. First, he asked if the AFL leadership was committed to militant struggle rather than class collaboration. Throughout the tremendous upsurge in 1934, AFL leadership had consistently acted as a brake on working class militancy, and Communists were anxious to reverse that policy. Second, Morris asked if the union's officials would be elected by the membership or appointed by AFL leaders. Third, Morris wondered if the members would be parcelled out to existing craft unions or allowed to form an organization embracing all workers in the industry.

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[1]Mortimer, Organize, 71.

Finally, he asked if the new union would unite the various independent unions in the industry or try to destroy them. Communists urged a conciliatory attitude toward independent unions and an effort to bring their members into the AFL.[1]

On the opening day of the convention, the Daily Worker predicted that Green and Dillon would try to appoint the new officers of the organization. In addition, "Green and Dillon" will likewise attempt to enforce a ruling that machinists and maintenance crafts in the auto plants be handed over to their respective internationals, thus stripping the new locals in many instances of their most advanced members, and splitting the auto workers."[2] The prediction was accurate. Green presented the delegates with a charter which stated that "the jurisdictional authority of other organizations, particularly over skilled mechanics in tool and die shops, must be respected and observed." Delegates argued that it was crucial to embrace all auto workers, but amendments to the charter were ruled out of order.[3] Similarly, in the face of strong opposition,

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[1]Daily Worker (New York), August 17, 1935. See also the three articles by "a progressive auto worker," ibid., August 6, 7, 8, 1935.

[2]Daily Worker, August 26, 1935.

[3]International Union, United Automobile Workers of America, Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention (Detroit, 1935), p. 15.

Green announced that "the officers [of the UAW] . . . shall be designated by the President of the American Federation of Labor." When delegates objected, and called for a vote, chairman Dillon ignored all protests:

> As the president of your union, clothed with the authority to speak, I must now say that if there be those here who cannot conform to the terms and provisions of this document, then they must leave. . . . Now you are affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, and you all understand it, and it is done in a perfectly legal, orderly way.[1]

Throughout the convention, the AFL leadership made a number of strong attacks on the left. Green told the delegates that the "avowed purpose" of the Communists was "to destroy the American Federation of Labor." Dillon presented a report on the Chevrolet strike in which he complained that a "group of workers had permitted themselves to become inspired and dominated by men speaking a philosophy of political and industrial revolution." AFL organizers, he continued, had to put up with "the poison and slime which emanated against them from the foul lips of self-appointed Messiahs, would be progressives, deserters, Musteites, and Communists." In the closing minutes of the convention, without debate, a motion was adopted "condemning the communistic centers of the world in meddling with the internal affairs of this country."[2] The

[1] Ibid., 36-44, 70, 71.

[2] Ibid., 18-19, 27-30, 116.

Communists ignored these attacks, focusing instead on the need for the union to elect its own officers and enroll all auto workers. At the close of the convention, the delegates elected a committee of seven to appeal the terms of the charter. Wyndham Mortimer was elected chairman.[1]

The UAW's second convention occured during a period of intense conflict within the American labor movement. The AFL leaders committed to industrial unionism had been defeated at the 1935 AFL convention, and their organization, the Committee for Industrial Organization, had been ordered to disband. At this point, CIO leaders had not been expelled from the AFL, nor were they committed to organizing a separate federation. CIO representative Adolph Germer advised auto unionists to wait until after the convention, and the election of new officers, before they agitated for industrial unionism. In the interim, federal locals should quietly ignore the restrictions embodied in the charter extended by the AFL. Germer also urged Mortimer and vice-president Homer Martin not to divide the union by campaigning for the presidency. Mortimer agreed that auto workers should "lay quiet" until after the convention, but Martin openly worked to remove Dillon and insure his

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[1] Daily Worker, September 2, 1935. George Addes of Toledo was also elected to the committee.

own election.[1] As the second convention opened, Dillon bowed to the inevitable by relinquishing the chair to Martin who was then elected president. Mortimer was elected first vice-president, and Addes was selected as secretary-treasurer. The remaining vice-presidential positions were filled by Ed Hall and Walter Wells.

The five men elected to executive positions at the convention were similar in only one respect: all worked in auto plants. Martin and Mortimer were perhaps the most different. Martin had been a Baptist minister until 1932, when his congregation ousted him for radical economic views. He worked briefly in the Chevrolet plant in Kansas City where he became involved in the movement for auto unionism. He became a leader through his oratorical ability, but, as one historian has noted, "his incompetance as an administrator was monumental and his judgment was dreadful.[2] Mortimer's commitment to the labor movement was of much longer duration. His father had been the president of a local Assembly of the Knights of Labor and one of his earliest memories was of a long strike led

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[1]Lorin Lee Cary, "Institutionalized Conservatism in the Early CIO: Adolph Germer, A Case Study," Labor History, XIII (Fall 1972), p. 484-87.

[2]Bernstein, Turbulent Years: 508. See also Howe and Widick, UAW, 52; Walter Galenson, The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement, 1935-1941 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 131-32.

by his father in 1893. Three years after the strike, Mortimer, then a twelve year old boy, went into the mines. After working in coal mines, steel mills, and railroad yards, he settled down at the White Motor Company after the First World War. In the early years of the depression, after working more than a decade at White Motors, he organized a local union affiliated with the Communist-led Auto Workers' Union (AWU), and later was a leader of the AFL federal local at White Motors. While Martin seemed "to have had no convictions beyond self-interest," Mortimer "was both a dedicated industrial unionist and a confirmed Communist."[1]

The remaining three officers were all long time auto workers, Addes had worked since 1923 as a metal finisher in Toledo. He had won a reputation as a militant rank and file leader in the 1934 Auto-Lite strike, and was known to be friendly to the left while unaffil-

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[1]Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 508, 520; Mortimer, Organize: 10-12, p. 54-68. For other assessments of Mortimer, see Howe and Widick, UAW, 71; Edward Levinson, Labor on the March (New York: University Books, 1938, 1956), p. 268; Benjamin Stolberg, The Story of the CIO (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), p. 164; Clayton Fountain, Union Guy (New York: The Viking Press, 1949), p. 68-69; Len DeCaux, Labor Radical: From the Wobbies to CIO (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, p. 207, 251, 253-54; Sidney Fine, Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969).

iated with any of the left-wing parties.[1] Ed Hall had spent most of his adult life working in the auto industry as a welder. His politics were conservative. He had voted to allow Green to appoint officers for the UAW at the 1935 convention, was appointed secretary-treasurer by Green, and had earned the enmity of numerous unionists for his part in leading a group of AFL members through a picket line in the Motor Products strike in 1935.[2] Walter Wells was president of a small local at the Gemmer Gear Company, where he had worked for five years. He appears to have been "elected

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[1]Labor journalist Carl Haessler described Addes as "the hero of the Toledo strikes." Carl Haessler, Oral History Interview, November 27, 1959, October 24, 1960, pp. 4-6, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, hereafter cited as ALHUA. See also Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 220, and Galenson, CIO Challenge, 131-32.

[2]Haessler interview, 7; Jack Skeels, "The Background of UAW Factionalism," Labor History, II (Spring 1961), p. 166, 168. As Hall recalled, "we found ourselves thrown into company with the left-wing element of the organization. . . . some of them were definitely communist. . . . And I care not whether it be Democrat. . . Republican . . . Socialist, Communist, or what not, I've always contended . . . that there is no place in the labor movement for political combinations." Hall believed that "these highly trained geniuses" could not appreciate the gains won by trade unions, and he was critical "of the trend of Reuther's thinking toward dictation of management's policy." Ed Hall, Oral History Interview, October 26, 1959, pp. 16-19, ALHUA. Hall distrusted Communists acting as Communists, but had no objection to working with Communists for trade union goals and was impatient of those who raised the Communist issue.

because he was a Mason."[1]

One of the more interesting debates during the 1936 UAW convention centered around a proposal calling on the UAW to denounce Communism and to expel Communists from the union. Mortimer opened the debate with a civil libertarian argument:

> This question at bottom and basically is, do we have the right to think as we please or do we not have that right? That is the question. If any individual wants to believe in Communism or Socialism or any other kind of "ism" . . . he has a perfect right to do so. If you deny this right to the Communist, then you automatically deny it to all.

He continued with an analysis of Communism which was remarkable for its liberalism:

> Communists are not born, they are made . . . If economic conditions have forced many people to look to Communism . . . it is because they are poverty-stricken, their standard of living is lowered, their opportunities are abolished, and their future is black. . . . if we will rectify those conditions . . . there will be fewer Communists in the country.[2]

No delegate admitted membership in the Communist Party, and one of the recurring arguments against the amendment was that it was not possible to determine who was and who was not a Communist.[3]

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[1] Haessler interview, 4-6.

[2] International Union, United Automobile Workers of America, Proceedings of the Second Convention (South Bend, 1936), pp. 124-25. He did not say that the ability of the Communist Party to fight injustice accounted for its growth, and implied that improving conditions would be good because it would decrease the number of Communists.

[3] Ibid., 128, 132.

The resolution was tabled, allowing the constitutional provision granting membership "regardless of religion, race, creed, color, political affiliation, or nationality" to stand. But in the closing moments of the convention, a resolution condemning Communism and Fascism was adopted by a voice vote with the left abstaining.[1]

Radical sentiments dominated the convention. A resolution calling on the UAW to "give support to the formation of a Farmer-Labor Party" passed unanimously, and a resolution to endorse the re-election of President Franklin Roosevelt since "a Farmer-Labor Party national ticket is unlikely" was defeated by a two to one margin. CIO Representative Adolph Germer publicly complained that "Communists and Socialists have taken over the convention and are voting not as auto workers but according to their political views."[2]

Partly as a result of pressure from Germer, Martin proposed that the delegates reconsider their refusal to endorse Roosevelt. There was little debate. The Daily Worker reported that "only about a quarter of the convention stood up for Martin's proposal to reconsider, the rest remaining seated and abstaining from

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[1] Daily Worker, May 2, 4, 1936. The Worker was critical of "the progressives" for allowing the resolution to pass.

[2] Ibid., May 4, 1936; Cary, "Germer," 493.

voting." Martin "thereupon declared the decision on Roosevelt reversed."[1]

Two points stand out in an examination of the 1936 convention: the united front between Communists and Socialists, and the absence of any attempt by Communists to run Mortimer for UAW president. Members of both parties worked for the passage of the resolution in support of a national Farmer-Labor Party, and both first opposed, then abstained on, the resolution endorsing Roosevelt. Rose Pessota, a Socialist leader of the strongly anti-Communist ILGWU,[2] was a featured guest speaker. She told the delegates that fascism, not Communism, was the danger faced by Americans, noting that "some of you might subscribe to some principles of the Communists, but none of you can accept anything in fascism." The Worker commented that "her remarkable analysis of dangers in the red scare contributed greatly to bring about a united spirit that prevailed at the convention today and brought delegates on their feet with loud cheers."[3]

The refusal to run Mortimer for president runs counter to most

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[1] Daily Worker, May 2, 1936.

[2] See above, chapter two, for a full discussion of anti-Communism in the ILGWU.

[3] Daily Worker, May 2, 1936.

conceptions of how Communists operated in organizations in general and in the labor movement in particular. It is often argued that Communists, by brilliant, usually devious, organizational techniques obtained influence far out of proportion to their actual strength in organizations. Yet at the 1936 convention, and, as will be seen, at the 1939 convention as well, Communists settled for far less influence than they could have gained by a more aggressive approach. Mortimer was one of the most popular figures in the union, and he probably would have beaten Martin had he campaigned for the presidency. He did not run because Communists thought that a contested presidential election might weaken the central thrust of the party's work in auto; the drive for a democratic union, affiliated with the CIO, and committed to organize the entire industry. The UAW was the first of the new industrial unions and Communists saw its success as crucial in the campaign to organize the nation's basic industries. Believing that the fate of industrial unionism hung in the balance, Communists decided that the benefits the party might obtain from Mortimer's election were of lesser importance.

VIII

None of the national leaders of the UAW came from Detroit, the center of the industry. Only a thousand workers had joined the

union in Detroit, and, Walter Reuther, "a delegate who had trouble even being seated was elected to the national board for want of anyone else from Detroit."[1]

Walter's father, Valentine Reuther, was a German Socialist immigrant who taught his four sons the virtues of socialism and trade unionism. From their father, Walter recalled later, "we got the struggles, the hopes and aspirations of working people every day." His lessons were not always pleasant. Victor, one of Walter's brothers, remembers receiving a painful whipping when he purchased a Hearst newspaper during a labor boycott of Hearst publications. When Eugene V. Debs was convicted of sedition for making anti-war speeches, Valentine took Walter and Victor to the federal prison at Moundsville, West Virginia to see Debs. Victor could not forget "those enormous iron bars" outside the prison and "this kindly man" inside. Valentine's major contribution to his sons' education were a series of "bedroom debates" which he organized and moderated. Valentine assigned topics to the four brothers in advance which they researched at the public library. During the weekly debates, Valentine served as time-keeper, judge and critic. To train the boys in thinking on their feet, he would

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[1]Murray Kempton, Part of our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 280.

sometimes reverse their assignments so that the team which had prepared the affirmative would have to take the negative.

Valentine advised his sons to learn a trade. Ted took a job in an office in Wheeling, Walter learned to be a tool and diemaker, Roy an electrician, and Victor tried plumbing for a short time. Ted remained in Wheeling, and the other three brothers moved to Detroit to try to find work in auto. Walter was hired first as a tool and diemaker at the giant River Rouge Ford plant. He worked hard, and was soon promoted to foreman. In 1932, he was perhaps the sole Ford foreman to campaign for Norman Thomas. In January, 1933, in the midst of the Detroit strike wave, he was laid off. With the assistant of an ex-Ford worker who had been fired for Communist activities and was now working for the Amtorg Trading Company the business arm of the Soviet government, Walter obtained jobs for himself and his brother Victor at the Molotov Automobile Works in the Soviet Union. The Russians needed American skilled workers and technicians to help teach Soviet workers to use American machines. While Roy Reuther walked the picket line at the Briggs Manufacturing Company, Victor and Walter toured Western Europe before settling down in the Soviet Union.

The trip abroad intensified Reuther's radicalism. They were repulsed by German and Italian fascism, and depressed by the apathy displayed toward the fascist threat by English labor. And

they were, although they later denied it, tremendously impressed by the Soviet Union. In a letter which was to become an embarrassment to the two men, Victor Reuther described his perceptions of the Soviet Union:

> What you have written concerning the strikes and the general labor unrest in Detroit, plus what we have learned from other sources, makes us long for the moment to be back with you in the front lines of struggle. However, the daily inspiration that is ours as we work side by side with our Russian comrades in our factory, the thought that we will forever end the exploitation of man by man, the thought that what we are building will be for the benefit and enjoyment of the working class, not only of Russia but of the entire world, is the compensation we receive for our temporary absence from the struggle in the United States. And let no one tell you we are not on the road to socialism in the Soviet Union. Let no one say that the workers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics are not on the road to security, enlightenment and happiness. . . .
>
> Here are no bosses to drive fear into the workers. No one to drive them in mad speed-ups. Here the workers are in control. Even the shop superintendent has no more right in these meetings than any other worker. I have witnessed many times already when the superintendent spoke too long. The workers in the hall decided he had already consumed enough time and the floor was then given to a lathe hand who told of his problems and offered suggestions. Imagine this at Ford or Briggs. This is what the outside world calls the "ruthless dictatorship in Russia." I tell you . . . in all the countries we have thus far been in we have never found such genuine proletarian democracy. . . .
>
> We are watching daily socialism being taken down from the books on the shelves and put into actual application. Who would not be inspired by such events?

The Reuther brothers did not find the Soviet Union perfect. Walter, especially, was annoyed by the inefficiency of the auto plant. More seriously, they had become friendly with an Italian Trotskyist who disappeared one day. He was either deported, executed, or imprisoned; in any case, there was no trial. But

shortcomings in Soviet justice counted for little against the impressive day-to-day exercise of what the Reuthers regarded as workers' power. The country was ruled by the Communist Party, but party members were quite different from the rulers the Reuthers saw in Germany and the United States. "Those who are members of the Party, "Victor recalled, "are compelled to sort of stand public trial by their contemporaries in the shop and be answerable for their conduct." To men who had worked at Ford and Briggs, the Ford plant in the Soviet Union was extremely impressive.[1]

When they returned to Detroit in late 1935, Walter threw himself into organizational work for the newly-formed UAW. He worked closely with a group led by Bill McKie, a Communist veteran of the AWU. He was assigned, or choose, to work with a group in the General Motors Ternstedt plant. Only thirteen Ternstedt workers belonged to the union, and only five attended the meeting which selected Walter as a delegate to the 1936 UAW convention. His credentials were challenged by delegates who charged that he had never worked at Ternstedt. Reuther, supported by the left, claimed that he had worked under an assumed name. He was seated

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[1]Frank Cormier and William J. Eaton, Reuther (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), pp. 1-140; Philip Bonosky, Brother Bill McKie: Building the Union At Ford (New York: International Publishers, 1953), pp. 135-36.

and then elected as an executive board member to represent Detroit. Following the convention, Reuther convinced the six local unions on the west side, which had a combined membership of 78 workers, that they should amalgamate, and he became the president of the amalgamated local. By December, 1937, this amalgamated local had 30,000 members, and Reuther had an enormous power base.

Reuther was publicly known as a member of the Socialist Party, but there is evidence that he was affiliated with the Communist Party as well. Nat Ganley, the leading Communist spokesman in the UAW in the 1940's, in a series of comments about a proposed book on Bill McKie, wrote as follows:

> Propose to eliminate references to Reuther joining the CP, altho its true he was a member-at-large and I collected his dues. Reasons: We can't prove his membership, Reuther would deny it and possibly sue for libel--We take no particular pride in his membership in our Party and should avoid the charge of inverted red-baiting that Reuther would make against us. . . . Reuther agreed to remain in Socialist Party and bore from within in agreement with us (course we were silly to do this).[1]

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[1]Nat Ganley Papers, ALHUA. The passage is quoted and analyzed in Martin Glaberman, "A Note on Walter Reuther." Radical America, VII (November-December 1973), pp. 113-17. Glaberman's assessment of the authenticity of Ganley's remarks is cogent: "The internal evidence. . . weighs very strongly in favor of the authenticity of Ganley's statement. These are notes written to fellow Communists. They are not for publication and they remain unnoticed in Ganley's files for twenty years. And, of course, they propose that Reuther's membership in the CP not be openly stated. It would be difficult under all these circumstances to explain why Ganley might have wanted to lie about Reuther's relations to the Party. . . . The dates of his possible membership remain unknown although it can be assumed that the period involved was no more than parts of 1936 and 1937." The text of Ganley's comments in Glaberman's article is identical to the copy of those remarks which I made in the summer of 1972.

By late 1937 Reuther had probably dropped out of the Communist Party, but he did not publicly attack the party. That would come later.

IX

Following the convention, Martin assigned Mortimer the difficult talk of organizing a strong local at the General Motors factories in Flint, Michigan. While Martin may have expected, or even hoped, that Mortimer would fail, thus reducing his prestige in the union, for his part Mortimer was anxious to accept the assignment. He had long realized that White Motors in Cleveland stood on the periphery of the industry, and that General Motors was at its heart. From John Anderson, president of local 155 and a member of the Communist Party, Mortimer learned that General Motors had only two sets of dies. One set was installed on the presses in the Fisher Body plant in Cleveland. Since the Cleveland plant was relatively well-organized, Mortimer saw Fisher Body #1 as the key to General Motors.

In the summer of 1936, Mortimer slipped secretly, he thought, into the company town of Flint, and checked into a hotel room. As he was taking off his coat, the phone rang, and a man told him, "You better get back to hell where you came from, you S.O.B., or we'll take you out in a box." Mortimer attributed the threat to the Black

Legion, a semi-fascist organization widely credited with the murder of several union organizers. There were other difficulties in organizing in Flint. City ordinances forbade the distribution of leaflets and the use of sound equipment. The five locals in Flint had a total membership of 122, out of a potential of 45,000, and most of those were considered company spies by the workers. Open meetings were out of the question, since only company spies and ardent unionists would show up. The spies would report the unionists, and the company would fire them. So Mortimer simply went door-to-door in Flint, talking to workers and their wives, discussing their grievances, and signing them up in the union. Their membership cards were sent directly to Addes in Detroit, thus by-passing the spy-infested local leadership. Some of the workers visited by Mortimer would invite him back for a second meeting with their friends present.

Before the summer was over, Mortimer was mailing a weekly mimeographed newsletter to seven thousand working class families in Flint. Since a number of these letters have been preserved, they offer a unique opportunity to examine what Mortimer said to workers during this important organizing drive. Perhaps the major theme was that the employers were class conscious and well-organized, and it was necessary for workers to follow that example:

ALL THE EXPLOITERS OF LABOR HAND TOGETHER. THEY ARE

CLASS CONSCIOUS. . . . the Automobile Manufacturers Association is a CLASS ORGANIZATION . . . It uses its vast economic power to fix wages, hours and working conditions . . . and jealously guard their interests as exploiters of the automobile workers and the general public. We the exploited workers must learn this lesson. We MUST build a labor movement that will do for us what the Automobile Manufacturers Association does for them.[1]

Join the union of your class as your employer has joined the union of his class. He is taking care of his family, how about yours?[2]

[The employer] is doing what you should do. He is organized to protect his interest . . . Through their organizations, they have succeeded in monopolizing the earth and enslaving the vast majority of its inhabitants, so that we have on the one hand a small group of the privileged few who live by owning things, and on the other hand, the vast majority must live by doing things.[3]

A second theme was that "freedom" meant little under the present system. "With the boss owning our jobs, the bank owning our homes, living with a life of insecurity and worry, just where," Mortimer asked, "does the free American fit into the picture?" He insisted that "freedom is not possible when a few exploiters can meet at a banquet table, and fix the wages of millions of people."[4]

A third was that individual solutions to the problem were impossible.

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[1]Wyndham Mortimer to Fellow Workers, October 6, 1936, Henry Kraus Papers, ALHUA, emphasis in original.

[2]Ibid., October 15, 1936.

[3]Ibid., November 10, 1936.

[4]Ibid., October 6, 1936, emphasis omitted.

Rugged individualism was defined as "that doctrine taught by the capitalist to the worker whereby the worker is told he can take care of himself without a union," while the capitalist "believes in unions of his fellow capitalists."[1]

After building a following, Mortimer decided that it was time to distribute the United Auto Worker at the plant gates. He first turned to the executive board of the spy-infested local 156. The board readily agreed to handle distribution, but no papers were ever passed out. The first week Mortimer found them in an abandoned elevator shaft, and "the following week they were thrown under a culvert on Dort Highway." Then he turned to Charles Killinger, a former Buick worker who had been blacklisted as a Communist. He and his wife and seven children distributed the papers. Although they were sometimes arrested (on one occasion Mrs. Killinger chained herself to a railing and continued to pass out papers while the police tried to remove her), the papers were distributed regularly.[2]

The local leadership accused Mortimer of trying to build a "red empire" in Flint. There is no doubt that Mortimer worked closely

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[1]Wyndham Mortimer to Fellow Workers.

[2]Unless otherwise indicated the material on Mortimer is taken from Mortimer, Organize, 103-22, but see also Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 519-23.

with Flint Communists. They were the logical first contacts for any organizer. They could be trusted not to be in the pay of the employer. Many had already proven their willingness to sacrifice in the cause of industrial unionism. Unlike the organizer, they had roots in the plant and the community. Immediately, the organizer could be put in contact with a nucleus of dedicated union partisans. They had a good idea of who was trustworthy and who was not. They knew the tactics of local management. If they were still employed, so much the better; if unemployed or blacklisted, they could be brought into volunteer work with the union or hired at a nominal salary.

As Martin watched his first vice-president and potential presidential rival gain more and more members in Flint, he got more and more nervous. In an effort to win executive board approval for a transfer of Mortimer, Martin invited local 156 leaders to an executive board meeting and neglected to notify Mortimer. Mortimer found out about the meeting, and most board members were unimpressed with the men from local 156, but Martin continued to press Mortimer to accept a transfer. He agreed to leave when Martin accepted Toledo left-winger Robert Travis as his successor. Like Mortimer, Travis largely ignored the local 156 leaders and concentrated on forming small groups of workers in key departments. In Fisher Body #1, the core of the nucleus were three close friends,

Bud Simons, Walter Moore, and Joe Devitt. All three had worked with the AWU in Grand Rapids before coming to Flint, and two of them, Moore and Simons, were Communists. Devitt was known as a left-winger and may have been a Communist. Moore was the party's section leader in Flint.[1]

By November, Travis had key men selected in each of the forty departments where the union had members. Simons was convinced it was time to strike. "Honest to God," he told Travis, "you've got to let me pull a strike before one pops somewhere that we won't be able to control." Travis asked if Simons was sure the men were ready. "Ready," Simons echoed, "they're like a pregnant woman in her tenth month."[2] And yet the union still had not come out into the open. On November 12, three workers, not in the union, refused to work when one man was removed from their work group. The foreman told them that the day shift had already accepted the smaller crew, but the workers insisted that this was another example of speed-up. Finally, they agreed to return to work, but

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[1]For information about Simons, Moore, and Devitt, see Henry Kraus, The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers (Los Angeles: The Plantin Press, 1947), pp. 32-35; Sidney Fine, Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 116.

[2]Kraus, Many, 42-45; Fine, Sit-Down, 116.

"union buttons began to sprout like dandelions everywhere."[1]

By December, Travis was eager to call a strike. He waited until the Christmas bonus had been paid, but he could not wait too long. If a current flat-glass workers strike continued, unionists estimated that GM would have to shut down. A company layoff would make it far more difficult to bring workers out on strike later that season. At the same time, Flint strategists were worried about the Fisher Body plant in Cleveland. After its militant activity in 1934 and 1935, two thousand workers had been laid off, and it was feared that this plant would not be able to go out again, at least not alone. Hopefully, once other GM plants went out, Cleveland would be able to join them. Workers proved more militant than expected. On December 28, a sitdown in a single department spread throughout the entire plant. Louis Spisak, president of the Cleveland local, called Mortimer and was told to inform plant officials that the international union would settle the strike. Mortimer urged Travis to strike Flint as soon as possible, and left for Cleveland.

Two days later, Flint officials gave Travis the reason he needed to call a strike. A worker in Fisher One reported that GM was loading dies out of the plant and shipping them to weakly unionized

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[1]Kraus, Many, 55.

vowed to talk to the day shift. The following evening, the Perkins brothers, who had led the short-lived work stoppage, found their time cards missing from the rack. They told Simons who announced, "The Perkins boys were fired. Nobody starts working." When the whistle blew and the line began, workers stood motionless at their work stations. The foreman was furious, and grabbed the third worker who had been active the night before and started for the office.

Then Simons took charge. He called out, "Come on, fellows, don't let them fire little Joe," and about a dozen workers left the line and moved toward the foreman. He let go of Joe, and headed for the manager's office. Simons selected a committee to go see Evan Parker, the plant manager. After some discussion, Parker agreed that the Perkins brothers could come back to work on Monday. After all, it was Friday night, the Perkins brothers had gone home, and it was important to get the line moving. Parker even agreed to pay the men for time lost during the strike. It was a reasonable offer, but Simons did not accept it. He called the men together, recounted the negotiations, and asked if they should trust the company or wait until the Perkins boys were brought back to work. Moore and Devitt called out, "Bring them back first," and others took up the cry. Simons then called for a vote, and the men voted to wait until the Perkins brothers were back on the job. One

was easily contacted at home, but the other was on a date. Police radio broadcast his license number to all scout cars, and the local radio station announced several times that the brothers were wanted back at the plant. He returned to the plant, was told what happened, and then left to take his girl home and change his clothes. And a thousand workers waited an extra half-hour until he returned.[1]

The decision to reject what was, after all, a reasonable company offer might have been based on distrust of the company, but it is more likely that it was a sound, stategic decision. Fear still permeated the plant. Workers could be fired for wearing union buttons. The union was still afraid to hold open meetings because it was not strong enough to defend workers who might be dismissed. As unionists and Communists, Simons and Moore wanted workers to feel a taste of their own power, to show them that, simply by standing together, they could force the company to grant their demands. The story spread quickly throughout the plants. Shortly after, the first open meeting was held. Management began to bargain with union departmental committees. The stewards system was being perfected inside the plant, and, as Henry Kraus put it,

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[1]Kraus, Many, 47-54; Fine, Sit-Down, 116-17.

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[1]Kraus, Many, 55.

plants to minimize the consequences of a strike in Flint. After the 1935 Chevrolet strike in Toledo, which Travis had led, GM had transferred work resulting in the elimination of two-thirds of the jobs in the plant. Travis immediately called a stewards meeting for the lunch hour. After a short discussion, stewards voted to strike. That afternoon, when the final whistle blew, male workers remained in the plant. Women workers were sent home.[1] The most important strike of the decade had begun.

Inside the plant, strikers developed a cohesive, well-organized community. Some observers compared it to the army. The editor of Mill and Factory, after visiting Fisher Two, described the "system of organization" as "a completely military type." "It was," one of the Chevrolet Four strikers recalled, "like war. The guys with me became my buddies."[2] In important ways, however, it was

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[1]Most women workers agreed with this decision. "But not so Pat Wiseman who had wanted to sit in like the men and was angered at the discrimination of being ordered out. Heck, for six years she had done men's work in the plant, most of the time as a striper when she had carried the heavy apparatus on her hips like any man, working near the baking furnaces where even those 'superior males' had sometimes toppled over in a faint. . . . [Pat] spurned such womanish work as kitchen duty during the strike. If she couldn't sit in she'd picket outside and she never missed a day." When a male worker asked what she expected to get out of this, she replied, "You're getting fifteen dollars a week more than I am for the same number of hours and I'll be damned if I don't work as hard as you." Kraus, Many, 97-98.

[2]Quoted Fine, Sit-Down, 156-57.

very different from the army. Key decisions were made by the basic unit of government: twice-daily meetings of all 1200 strikers. In addition, strikers had elected a strike committee made up of fourteen members selected from the various plant departments. Simons was elected chairman. According to Sidney Fine, "the available records indicate that the strike committee recognized the strikers themselves as the final authority in the plant and that it sought their consent for virtually all its decisions."[1] Workers set up a reading room, performed plays, conducted court, set up food distribution, and in general, fashioned a smoothly functioning, democratic society.

GM's reaction came quickly. On December 31, GM executive vice-president William S. Knudsen announced that it would not bargain as long as the strikers were in "illegal possession" of the plants. More important, it set to work obtaining an injunction from Judge Edward Black ordering strikers to leave, refrain from picketing, and allow strike-breakers to enter the plant. Black ordered the injunction, but it proved worthless. CIO attorney Lee Pressman,

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[1]Quoted Fine, Sit-Down, 156-57.

a Communist sympathizer if not a party member,[1] discovered that Black owned 3,365 shares of GM stock valued at 219,900 dollars. Pressman pointed out that Michigan law barred judges from participating in cases in which they had personal interests and petitioned the legislature for Black's impeachment. Black insisted that his GM stock had not affected his decision and overruled Pressman's objections, but GM was too embarrassed to press the injunction. It transferred the case to another court, but did not immediately press for an injunction. More ominously, Flint city manager James Barringer and former Buick paymaster George Boysen formed the Flint Alliance which GM hoped could build a back-to-work movement.

On January 11, 1937, after the strikers had held the plant without incident for thirteen days, Barringer and Harry Gault, a GM attorney, met secretly with a small group of business leaders and policemen to plan strategy. They decided to seize Fisher Two. Fisher Two was by no means a key plant, nor was it a union stronghold. Only one hundred men were in the plant. Seizing the plant

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[1]Pressman admitted to being part of a group of Communists in the Agricultural Adjustment Agency led by Harold Ware. In 1936, he severed organizational, but not ideological, ties with the party. It may be that his break was suggested by party leaders. Len DeCaux told this writer that party officials discouraged him from joining the party in view of his "sensitive" position with national CIO. A similar decision may have been made with regard to Pressman.

would not enable GM to resume production, but it would give the corporation a strong psychological edge by making it appear that the momentum had shifted to the company. At the same time, any resistance by the strikers could be used to lay the basis for calling the National Guard to restore order.

Unlike those sitting in Fisher One, Fisher Two strikers occupied only the second floor. Plant police controlled all entrances and the entire ground floor. Company guards had allowed supporters of the strikers to bring in food and other supplies. But this evening, when union members and friends brought food to Fisher Two, company guards refused to let them enter. Outsiders brought in a 24-foot ladder, placed it next to the building, and brought food to a second floor window. Company guards seized the ladder. They blocked all entrances to the plant, cleared the surrounding area, and, with the temperature at eleven degrees above zero, turned off the heat. Company guards planned to close off all contact between strikers and outside pickets, forcing strikers to starve or abandon the plant.

Strikers realized that they had to gain possession of the gate to remain in the plant. Twenty Fisher Two men, armed with plant-made clubs, approached company guards and demanded the key. After a short discussion, the guards ran away and hid in the ladies' room. Strikers broke through the locked doors and mingled with

the outside pickets. As the men, who had not been outside the plant in thirteen days, chatted with friends and supporters, city police mobilized to sezie the plant. Squad cars carrying approximately thirty policemen arrived at the plant. Protected by gas masks, they fired tear gas guns into the plant and tried to enter. Workers, using fire hoses, door hinges, bottles, stones, and assorted weapons, drove police back. After receiving reinforcements, which brought the number of police to forty-five,[1] they attacked the plant again and again were forced to retreat. Fourteen strikers were injured, thirteen by gunshot, one died, but the plant had been held. In a pun on another important battle in American history, the union christened the area around the plant as "Bull's Run" for, as Victor Reuther told Fisher Two workers, "it was here that we put the bulls on the run."[2]

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[1]Sidney Fine had some interesting observations on the size of the police contingent: "It may be argued that if it had really been the intention of the police to seize the plant and thus to deal a shattering blow to the strikers' cause, a larger force would have been assigned to the task. It must be noted, however, that the forty-five men sent to the plant, which constituted about half of the city's entire 'effective' police force, were the total number available to Wills and Barringer at that moment, that Fisher No. 2 was a small plant, that the company before the battle controlled the main gate while the sit-downers held only the second floor, and that the strikers did not possess firearms. The police were also more than likely aware that the number of strikers inside the plant probably did not exceed one hundred and that their morale was poor." Fine, Sit-Down, 12.

[2]Quoted in Kraus, Many, 165.

The morning after the battle, National Guard troops arrived in Flint. Governor Frank Murphy, who had been elected with strong labor support, refused to use troops to clear out the plants or to serve the 1200 John Doe warrants zealously prepared by the Flint prosecutor. Instead, Murphy hoped that the union victory, and the bad publicity GM received, would make a quick settlement possible. He formally invited both GM and the UAW to negotiate. The UAW, which had been pressing for negotiations from the beginning of the strike, was happy to accept, and GM, which had previously refused to negotiate while strikers remained in the plants, felt unable to refuse Murphy's invitation. The settlement reached, however, favored GM. Strikers agreed to evacuate the plants in return for a company pledge to not remove machinery or resume operations for fifteen days. But as UAW leaders prepared to evacuate the plants, they discovered a press release, meant to be issued after the evacuation, indicating that GM had agreed to negotiate with the Flint Alliance as well as the UAW. This rather crude double-cross forced the UAW to rescind the evacuation, and the strike continued.

In late January, GM filed requests for injunctions in Cleveland and in Flint. The Flint injunction demanded that workers immediately leave the plants and refrain from mass picketing. The Cleveland injunction, where no sit-down was being conducted, argued that the company had been "dispossessed" by mass picketing

from outside the plant." The union expected both injunctions to be granted. The strike was in serious danger. GM had re-opened the unstruct plants, and it had obtained a second injunction. Murphy, although he repeatedly expressed sympathy for the strikers, had been equally adamant in his contention that the sit-down was illegal. The union did not know how long Murphy would resist company demands to clear the plants.

If the union was to win the strike, it had to take the initiative. But how? Travis decided to seize the giant Chevrolet Four plant, which made engines for a million cars a year. With the exception of Fisher 1, Chevy 4 was the most important plant in the complex, but it appeared invulnerable. It was located only one hundred feet from the headquarters of the plant police. Although there was considerable dissatisfaction among Chevrolet workers, the plant had relatively few union members. But Travis was determined. He met with Chevrolet workers Kermit Johnson, Howard Foster, and Ed Cronk to discuss possible ways of taking the plant. Johnson suggested that taking the plant was possible only if plant police could be diverted to another part of the complex. Johnson's idea became the basis of an elaborate plan by which Travis turned the company's strength--its extensive espionage network--against it.

Sunday evening Travis addressed a meeting of Chevrolet workers. Plant manager Arnold Lenz, possibly the most bitterly

anti-union of GM's officials, had recently discharged three union men, one for wearing a button, one for "soliciting," one for his own "protection" against alleged anti-union workers. Chevrolet workers approved an ultimatum demanding that Lenz rehire the three workers. (Actually, Travis hoped that Lenz would refuse, so there would be a strong justification for the strike.) He then told the meeting that plans would be made among the stewards which, unfortunately, could not be discussed openly. Chevrolet workers should just keep alert and watch for "developments." Each of the more than one hundred stewards was filed by Travis. Thirty were given slips of paper admitting them to a meeting later that evening, while the rest were told to "watch for the American flag" and "follow the man who takes the lead." The thirty stewards at the meeting were supposed to be the most trustworthy; actually, a few suspected of being company spies were included. Travis told the group that they were going to take Chevrolet Nine. Those from other plants, however, should remain in their plants, since the union group in Chevy 9 was strong enough to take the plant alone. After the meeting, he told three leaders from Chevy 9 that they only had to hold the plant for a half hour, since the union was really planning to take Chevrolet Six.

At approximately 3:20, ten minutes before the day shift ended, night-shift unionists entered Chevy 9 and began calling for a strike.

Day-shift unionists echoed the strike call. Plant police, ready for the assault on Chevy 9, quickly entered the plant. Using clubs and tear gas, they forced strikers to the rear of the plant. Members of the Women's Emergency Brigade fought their way to the front of the plant and broke windows to help clear the plant of tear gas. Workers outside had to be restrained from entering the plant to help. When the fighting stopped at 4:00, strikers left the plant, nearly all of them, as Fine noted, "assuming that they had been defeated and unaware that they had performed their assigned role to perfection."[1] While the struggle at Chevy 9 was taking place, Cronk, carrying an American flag on a lead pipe, led workers from Chevy 6 to Chevy 4. They entered the plant with no trouble, and clashed with foremen, non-striking workers, and the small contingent of company police stationed in the plant. When the main body of company police realized what had happened, they tried to enter the plant, but strikers drove them back with pistons, connecting rods, rocker arm rods, and fire hoses. By 5:30, Chevy 4 belonged to the union.

In the courts, however, GM was more successful. While workers defeated GM's police in Flint, Judge Paul V. Gadola held

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[1]Fine, Sit-Down, 269.

hearings on GM's petition for an anti-strike injunction. Gadola ruled that strikers had, simply by going on strike, severed their employment and were therefore trespassing on company property. He cited Michigan court decisions to support his view that all picketing was illegal. He ordered the strikers to evacuate the plants by 3:00 on February 3, and prohibited picketing as well. Strikers prepared to resist any attempt to enforce the injunction. Workers from Detroit and Toledo left their jobs to stand with the strikers in fighting efforts to remove them. Auto-Lite in Toledo, and several other plants in Detroit and Toledo, shut down as the result of the withdrawal of so many workers. Fisher Body strikers wired Murphy of their determination to stay in the plant, noting grimly, "we fully expect that if a violent effort is made to oust us many of us will be killed and we take this means of making it known to our wives, to our children, to the people of the state of Michigan and the country, that if this result follows from the attempt to eject us, you are the one who must be held responsible for our deaths."[1]

As the deadline approached, thousands of workers marched out-

[1]Kraus, Many, 233. Fine considers it unlikely that the strikers "were even consulted in the preparation of the wires." Fine, Sit-Down, 278-79. Actually, there is no reason to believe that the wires would have been written without their consultation.

side the plant. The pickets, both men and women, carried clubs, pieces of pipe, claw hammers, iron bars, sod cutters, spades, and various body parts. At 3:00, the sheriff announced that no attempt would be made to evict the strikers until GM sought a writ of attachment against them for remaining in the plants. About one thousand of the pickets joyfully left the line and staged a noisy automobile parade through downtown Flint. One of the women on the line summarized what many felt when she wrote that "to be a part and feel the spirit of many thousands, all battling together for a better life, is an exciting, overwhelming feeling that probably comes to each person but once." "In plain words," she added, "I was just thrilled, through and through." City manager Barringer was considerably less than thrilled. He deputized several hundred "special police" and threatened to use that private army against the strikers. A GM executive informed Barringer that "the last thing we want is rioting in the streets" and, while he did not dissolve the special police force, he denied any intention of using it against the strikers or of provoking violence.

Negotiations resumed on February 3, but little progress was made on the key issue of union recognition. The union demanded recognition as sole collective bargaining representative through GM plants, and GM offered recognition for members only. On February 4, Lewis, representing the UAW, asked for exclusive representa-

tion only in twenty plants; GM offered recognition for members only in those plants, but promised not to aid a competing organization of employees or grant a more favorable agreement with another organization. On February 5, according to Irving Bernstein, Murphy fashioned the outline of a possible settlement: GM would unofficially recognize the UAW for a limited time, and the ultimate decision on recognition would be deferred. February 5, however, was also the day Gadola granted GM its writ of attachment. Murphy, who thought agreement was near, was in no hurry to enforce the injunction. On February 6, GM offered to promise Murphy, that it would not negotiate with any employee organization other than the UAW for three months without first getting Murphy's permission. This granted the UAW exclusive bargaining rights for three months, while allowing GM to avoid signing any pledge of recognition with the union. On February 8, Lewis asked for six months, and Knudsen said he would have to check with his superiors. On February 9, in an attempt to get Lewis to agree to three months, Murphy threatened to use troops to clear the plants. Lewis replied that he would enter the plants along with the strikers.[1]

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[1]See Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 545-49 for an interesting discussion of this episode. Bernstein argues, correctly, I think, that by this time both Murphy and Lewis knew that the threat was hollow. If Murphy had not used troops on February 3 or earlier, when the two parties seemed hopelessly deadlocked, he would hardly do so now when agreement was near. Lewis' flamboyant gesture was by no means as important as the steadfast courage of men in Fisher 1.

Finally, GM agreed to six months. With the recognition issue settled, the union agreed to evacuate the plants while negotiations on other matters continued. The strike was over; GM had been forced to recognize the UAW.

The victory over GM was particularly significant in view of the enormous size of the corporation. GM operated 110 plants in fourteen states and eighteen foreign countries. By most standards, in fact, GM was the largest manufacturing corporation in the world. While United States Steel's assets were slightly higher, GM had a larger work force, higher sales, and, most important, much larger profits. It was also one of the most bitterly anti-union companies in the United States. Between January 1934 and June 1936, GM spent close to one million dollars on anti-union espionage.[1] On the executive board of the Flint local, before Mortimer re-organized it, were three Corporation Auxiliary agents and two Pinkerton men.

Before leaving the GM strike, certain observations should be emphasized. First, the strike was led by Communists. Although Socialists like Roy Reuther and Kermit Johnson played a role, the main strategists were Communists. Second, at key points during

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[1]Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 510-11, 516-17. Bernstein puts this figure in perspective listing expenditures by other corporations: Alcoa $35,000; Bethlehem $70,000; Firestone $2,000; Goodrich $7,000; Republic Steel nothing; Standard Oil of California $200, and Texaco $30,000.

the strike Communists made important tactical decisions. Third, when it was reported that Murphy was going to use troops to evacuate the plants, Communists led the opposition to strategies of "passive resistance" and "symbolic protest." They called for fighting troops which Murphy might send, although their general political posture was pro-Murphy. Fourth and most important, the strike was the major breakthrough in the CIO's campaign to organize the basic industries. After the defeat of General Motors, U. S. Steel signed a contract with the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee without a strike.

X

If the Flint strike demonstrates the party's strengths, the Chrysler strike suggests one of its weaknesses. Following the victory at General Motors, the UAW pressed for an agreement with Chrysler granting the union sole bargaining rights. When Chrysler refused, workers sat down in the plants. Chrysler workers, historian Walter Galenson noted, faced "mounting public clamor against the sit-down strike."[1] Congressmen and newspaper editors ferociously denounced sit-down strikes. Murphy repeatedly threatened to use force against the strikers. Workers responded

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[1]Galenson, <u>CIO Challenge</u>, 148-49.

militantly to these attacks. After an injunction was issued, ordering strikers to leave the plants, the strikers voted to remain inside, and forty thousand sympathetic workers picketed Chrysler plants. When Murphy ordered the sherriff to enforce the injunction, 150,000 workers joined a protest rally in Cadillac Square.[1] Despite the spirit shown by the workers, John L. Lewis agreed to have the plants evacuated without a settlement and Chrysler agreed not to continue production while negotiations were in progress. Strikers evacuated the plants rather reluctantly, and Germer and Martin attributed the reluctance to the influence of Communists among the strikers. Two weeks later, an agreement was reached in which Chrysler recognized the UAW as the bargaining agent for its members only. Since the corporation had previously made this offer, the strike failed to attain its objective.[2]

The leadership of the Communist Party supported the evacuation of the plants and the final settlement. Michigan party chairman William Weinstone stated that the evacuation "was made solely on the condition that the plants remain inoperative during further negotiations." While Weinstone endorsed the decision to leave the plants, he partially defended those workers who opposed it and

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[1]Daily Worker, March 18, 19, 20, 24, 1937.

[2]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 148-49.

gently criticized Germer and Martin:

it is to be regretted that some red-baiting crept into the remarks of some of the leaders in their discussions in the plants. It was natural that some resistance would be present to the idea of the evacuation in view of the high-handed stand of the Chrysler executives in the negotiations and the bitter attacks upon the sit-down strikers in the past weeks. But this militancy is one of the strong points of the union upon which it has prided it self only as recently as last Tuesday when a resolution of solidarity and support of militant unionism was adopted at the Cadillac Square demonstration. Democratic discussion which admits of differing viewpoints is always the best way of satisfactorily solving the problems of the union. A continuation and broadening of the practice is what is required. [1]

When the agreement was announced, the Daily Worker endorsed it in an editorial and Weinstone stated that "no doubt the Chrysler workers will give their approval to this agreement and will live up to their pledge not to interrupt production, expecting in return that management will fully uphold its part in both spirit and letter." Yet the Worker's account of the ratification meeting suggested considerable rank and file dissatisfaction with the settlement:

Then he [Homer Martin] asked, "Are you convinced as we are that this is a good agreement? Are you in favor of accepting this agreement?"

Applause was extremely light and scattered, but swelled to full proportions again when Martin proceeded by declaring, "We are going back for more and better agreements. This is one step toward that end."[2]

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[1]Daily Worker, March 27, 1937.

[2]Daily Worker, April 8, 1937.

According to a report to the party's Central Committee by Earl Browder, rank and file Communists had joined with other workers in opposing the evacuation. Browder's description of their activity is worth quoting at length for it reveals the central thrust of Communist activity in the unions and the roots of the problems faced by the party in later years.

> On occasion we see developments which give rise to great uneasiness, when comrades rush into snap judgments on big questions of trade union policy, consider that the trade union leaders have been mistaken or have unnecessarily compromised the workers' demands, and from this conclusion pass immediately into a head-on collision with those leaders and those workers who follow them. There were dangerous moments of this sort in the Detroit district in connection with the Chrysler strike. . . . We are a fully responsible Party, and our subdivisions and fractions do not independently take any actions which threaten to change our whole national relationship with a great and growing mass movement. As it happens, in this particular instance, some comrades were entirely in error in thinking they saw intolerable compromises and wrong methods in the settlement of the Chrysler strike. There was no situation of that kind. There was merely a secondary problem of the impatience of certain leaders in dealing with the rank and file. But even if their fears had more solid foundation, it was necessary to proceed with much more tact, foresight, and consideration in establishing an attitude toward such questions. We do not attempt to estimate such difficult and complicated trade union problems by ourselves, in isolation; but only on the basis of the fullest and frankest discussion with our comrades-in-arms of the general trade union activities, on the basis of trade union democracy.[1]

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[1] This report was published as a pamphlet entitled "The Communists in the Peoples' Front," and was included in Earl Browder, The Peoples' Front in the United States (New York: International Publishers, 1938), pp. 176-77. For another discussion of the report's implications, see Al Richmond, A Long View From the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), pp. 241-45.

The implications of Browder's criticism, which run far beyond the Chrysler strike, are worth examining. Central to the argument is his comment that Communist Party "subdivisions and fractions do not independently take any actions which threaten to change our whole national relationship with a great and growing mass movement." This strategic position inhibited rank and file Communists in several ways. They were unable to speak for the aspirations of rank and file workers if those aspirations ran counter to the plans of the national leaders of the CIO. Since the CIO's reply to red-baiting was usually to deny that Communists played a major role in the organization, many party members in union leadership positions had to soft-pedal, if not deny outright, their party membership. As the basis for strategic decisions was the national alliance with the CIO leadership, the decision-making abilities of local party groups working the plants and the union were severely limited. Later in this chapter an attempt will be made to assess the seriousness of these limitations.

In April, 1937, Martin moved to limit the influence of Socialists and Communists. Henry Kraus, editor of the United Automobile Worker, was fired, Travis and Victor Reuther were demoted, and

Mortimer and Roy Reuther were transferred.[1] In accord with the general line set forth in Browder's report, Communists made little objection to these moves. Locally, some Communists were disturbed by the party's passive stance. One Socialist reported that Walter Moore, one of the leaders of the Flint sit-down strike and a section organizer of the Communist Party, had complained to Kermit Johnson, leader of the Socialists in Flint, "that his party wouldn't let them fight against the political moves of Martin."[2] Another Socialist stated that the Communist Party "was for a policy of peace at any cost" and, as a result, more workers were looking "to the Socialists for aggressive leadership." Although "the CP had a real base in auto long before we did," the Socialist continued, "by the time of the [1937] convention it was our people who were leading the so-called 'Unity Caucus" against the Martin-Frankensteen group."[3]

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[1]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 153. For Kraus' dismissal, see Homer Martin to Henry Kraus, March 29, 1937, and George F. Addes to Henry Kraus, April 28, 1937, Henry Kraus Papers, ALHUA. The Reuther brothers were Socialists, while Travis, Mortimer, and Kraus were all members of or sympathetic to the Communist Party.

[2]Letter to Frank Trager, July 13, 1937, Daniel Bell collection, Tamiment Institute. Unless otherwise indicated, the portion of the Bell collection cited in this chapter consists of the papers of Ben Fischer, Socialist Party leader in Michigan.

[3]Hy Fish to Ben Fischer, September 2, 1937, Bell collection.

At the 1937 convention, Martin and Frankensteen, leaders of the "Progressive Caucus," presented a series of constitutional changes designed to give the union president greater authority over the locals. Virtually all the proposals were defeated. In addition, the Progressives planned to replace Mortimer and Hall with Thomas and Frankensteen. Lewis convinced both caucuses to accept a compromise which would avoid a contested election. The number of vice-presidents was increased to five, and the three incumbents were elected along with Thomas and Frankensteen. On the new executive board, Martin had a majority of 16 to 8.[1] Althcugh Walter Reuther concluded the convention with a plea for the dissolution of both caucuses,[2] the next two years were marked by intense and bitter factional struggle.

XI

"What you don't understand," Michigan Socialist Party chairman Ben Fischer wrote irritably, "what no one outsidc of Michigan does seem to understand, is that the Unity Caucus is not run by the CP or

[1]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 156.

[2]International Union, United Automobile Workers of America, Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention (Milwaukee, 1937), p. 286.

by its line."[1] The Unity Caucus included Socialists and Communists, as well as most of the leaders of the large locals in the union. The caucus stood for the elimination of factionalism, and the representation of all groups within the union among the leadership. At the 1937 convention, the Unity Caucus had supported a resolution calling for the banning of national pre-convention caucus meetings.[2]

The Progressive Caucus was led by Martin and Frankensteen and had its major support in the smaller locals. Included in its leadership were members of the Communist Party Opposition (CPO), a curious organization of ex-Communists led by Jay Lovestone. The Trotskyists, while not included in leadership positions within the caucus, supported the Progressive Caucus. Despite the presence of individuals who considered themselves radical, like the Trotskyists and the Lovestoneites, the major appeal of the caucus was to the more conservative union members. According to a letter sent out with ballots for local elections by officials in the Progressive Caucus, it stood for "consideration of public opinion" while the Unity Caucus was commited to "fostering class consciousness and hatred." The Progressives charged that the Unity Caucus was led by men who "cooperate with and follow the Communist Party line" and promote

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[1]Ben Fischer to Judah Drob, March 19, 1938, Bell collection.

[2]Second UAW Proceedings, 83-86.

"sudden and continuous unauthorized strikes."[1]

Against a background of economic depression and increased factionalism and rank and file assertion, Martin negotiated an agreement with General Motors which provided no gains for the union and which gave the company the authority to discipline or discharge wildcat strikers.[2] The Unity Caucus denounced the agreement, and Martin, although he had negotiated it, urged a conference of General Motors locals to reject it. Workers at the Fisher Body plant in Pontiac, Michigan sat down in the plant and would not leave until Martin personally appeared at the plant and called for an evacuation. The union newspaper printed verbatim and without comment an article from the New York Times ascribing the sit-down to the Communist Party, and Martin claimed that "there is every reason to believe that professional provocateurs were mixed up in the calling of the Pontiac strike and its continuation."[3]

On 12 March 1938 the UAW renewed the contract with General Motors unchanged and with no termination date. In a supplementary agreement, not presented to the membership for ratification, the

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[1]"To All Members of Local #159," undated, Kraus Papers.

[2]Wildcat strikes are strikes which are either in violation of a contract or conducted without the authorization of the international union.

[3]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 158.

number of committeemen, and the amount of time they were allowed to do union work, was reduced. Unity Caucus members noted that "the old agreement provided that the company would pay the committeeman for the first four hours of necessary committee work, but after that he could put in as much time as necessary," but "under the new agreement he is paid for only two hours and he is forbidden to put in additional time away from his machine." Since the agreement had been signed, "we therefore have no other alternative but to reluctantly make the best of a bad bargain, under protest, looking forward to a more favorable opportunity to take advantage of the 30 day clause and reopen negotiations."[1]

Divisions within Martin's own caucus soon appeared. After the 1937 convention, Martin designated Frankensteen assistant president. Prior to the convention, Mortimer had been first vice-president, but at the convention the vice-presidencies were all given equal ranking. In April, 1938, allegedly as a result of a visit of Communist leaders outside the union who offered him Communist support if he ran for UAW president,[2] Frankensteen offered a proposal to end factionalism in the union. The proposal called for the

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[1]Wyndham Mortimer, Ed Hall, Leo Lamotte, Ellsworth Kramer to Homer Martin, March 10, 1938, Kraus Papers.

[2]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 159-60; Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 564.

immediate abolition of all caucuses,[1] specifically, the Progressive and Unity caucuses, and agreement to take "disciplinary action against any party, group, or section of the membership which does not go down the line with the program" or "any member or group of members who are found guilty . . . of spreading rumors or untrue charges against any officer or member of the Executive Board."[2] Martin removed Frankensteen as assistant president, and issued his own twenty point program which the executive board adopted unanimously.

At its June meeting, with Martin not present, the executive board rejected a group insurance plan supported by Martin.[3] Martin immediately returned to Detroit, and suspended secretary-treasurer Addes and vice-presidents Mortimer, Frankensteen, Hall, and Wells. The only remaining officers were Martin and Thomas.[4] Some locals continued to send their dues payments to Addes despite

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[1]Frankensteen had previously opposed this when Unity proposed it at the 1937 UAW convention. Second UAW Proceedings, 86.

[2]The complete text of Frankensteen's proposal can be found in Richard Frankensteen, "To All Officers and International Executive Board Members of the International Union," April 21, 1938, Kraus Papers, ALHUA.

[3]Mortimer, Organize, 155-57.

[4]Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 564-65.

his suspension. A meeting of the presidents of forty local unions in Detroit formulated a compromise agreement "which called for support of Martin's twenty point program, the reinstatement of the suspended officers, cessation of all personal attacks, and the arbitration of all internal differences by John L. Lewis."[1] Martin went ahead with the trials, and on July 8 Addes was expelled from the union. In a radio statement, Martin's main emphasis was on the activities of the Communist Party:

> In the shadows, working its shameful hypocries upon a portion of our membership, stands the Communist Party, whose record for union-wrecking is a matter of history. . . .
>
> There are those within the union who have been working hand in glove with the Communist Party in its nefarious activities within the union. . . . It is high time that those who profess not to be aligned . . . with the Communist Party should quit their company.[2]

There were two general responses which the Unity Caucus could make to Martin's charge: it could deny any connections with the Communists, or it could admit that many members were Communists and defend the right of Communists to participate in union politics. Mortimer, who was indeed a Communist, stated, "We are not Communists."[3] Frankensteen implied that none of the suspended

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[1]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 160-61.

[2]Ibid., 161.

[3]Mortimer statement, WJR, July 28, 1938, Kraus Papers.

officers, including Mortimer, was a Communist:

> There are those who would have you believe that the five suspended officers are dangerous Reds. Who are these five officers? . . . There is Wyndham Mortimer, a veteran labor leader, trained in the labor movement through his services in the United Mine Workers of America and one of the few who as far back as 1933, successfully organized the White Motor Car company of Cleveland, a leader who pioneered our organization at Flint. . . No sensible man or woman will believe [that these men are Communists].[1]

In a letter detailed what the Unity Caucus believed were false charges against it, the following statement appeared:

> He [Martin] will tell you that the Unity group is controlled by the Communist Party. THIS IS UNTRUE. . . . if any criticism is made of his [Martin's] activities you are a Communist. Apparently only the Communists think of the workers first.[2]

The Communists and their allies made no attempt to defend the party directly. Instead they called for

> a resolution in support of retaining the closest cooperation with all progressive forces in favor of preserving civil liberties and American democracy. . . . This is the counter-resolution to red-baiting resolutions . . It will be necessary to take the offensive against fascist reaction.[3]

On August 18 a meeting of anti-Martin locals resolved to request that Lewis appoint an administrator to run the union. Lewis then proposed that all expelled officers be reinstated, and all matters in

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[1]Frankensteen statement, WJR, July 21, 1938, Kraus Papers.

[2]Unity Caucus to Fellow Members, No date, Kraus Papers.

[3]"Suggestions for Resolutions for the Forthcoming Convention of the Auto Workers, August 23rd At Milwaukee," Kraus Papers.

dispute referred to the CIO for arbitration. Martin bitterly attacked the "so-called peace plan," refused to reinstate the expelled officers, and claimed that Lewis was violating the UAW constitution.[1] But he was in a weak position. With UAW locals refusing to pay per capita tax to the international and with the CIO leadership and some of his own allies calling for a compromise, he was forced to concede. After nine days of negotiations, a five point agreement leading to the reinstatement of the expelled officers was reached.[2] However, they did not stay reinstated very long. On 20 January 1939 Martin suspended 15 of the 24 members of the executive board; in turn, the suspended board members constituted themselves as the official board and designated Thomas as acting president.

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[1]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 162.

[2]The actual five points were: 1) The question of reinstating the expelled officers was to be made by Philip Murray and Sidney Hillman. 2) A committee composed of Murray, Hillman, Thomas, and Martin was established to settle any dispute between the UAW and the CIO. 3) The CIO recognized the autonomy of the UAW, and the UAW pledged its support of the CIO. 4) The UAW reaffirmed its suppo rt of the twenty point program which Martin had originally proposed. 5) The CIO pledged its support to the UAW in "any disciplinary action against any violation of the constitution or policies of the UAW." Galenson, CIO Challenge, 163.

Murray and Hillman later issued a statement reinstating the expelled officers. The committee described in point 2 worked to eliminate those who would use the (Assis Chalmers) local for Communist Party purposes." Ibid., 163-64.

Since the suspended executive board had the support of the CIO leadership, Martin made no attempt to mute his increasingly bitter criticisms of Lewis. In his letter of resignation from the CIO executive board, Martin told Lewis that "in your actions you have adopted the methods of your Stalinist allies and you and your agents have resorted to downright misrepresentation and deliberate falsehoods."[1]

> At the last convention the majority of our delegates had the Communist Party whipped. Under the leadership of President Homer Martin a real clean-up was begun. The activities of the Communist faction was about to be done away with. But the Mortimer-Addes-Hall clique seemed to be working hand in glove with the CIO leaders. John L. Lewis promptly stepped in and forced through a compromise which saved the UNION WRECKERS.[2]

Martin and the suspended officials each issued a call for a convention. At the convention called by Martin, the delegates voted to join the AFL. At the convention called by the suspended officials and recognized by the CIO, the Unity Caucus had most of the delegates.

Although the Communists were strong in the Unity Caucus and the Unity Caucus dominated the 1939 convention, no serious attempt was made to place any Communist in high union office. Mortimer,

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[1]Quoted CIO Challenge, 166.

[2]Leaflet, "CIO Meddling." no date, Joseph Brown Papers, ALHUA.

still the most influential leader of the caucus, was proposed for the executive board but when Reuther objected Communists withdrew the proposal. Communists did not even press their plan to run Addes for president when national CIO representatives Murray and Hillman indicated a preference for R. J. Thomas. Thomas had been one of the last officials to desert Martin and was generally regarded as a conservative, while Addes had been in the anti-Martin camp from the beginning. Although Thomas had only a small personal following and Addes and Mortimer were the most popular men in the union, Communists deferred to Murray and Hillman and backed Thomas for the presidency. Addes settled for secretary-treasurer.[1]

The decision of the Unity Caucus to support Thomas had, and still has, its defenders and its critics. Addes recalled that "there was no question that I could have been elected by an overwhelming majority," but "to win over to the CIO union some of the Martin group, I felt it required a neutral such as Thomas, and I therefore declined to run for president."[2] Nat Ganley, the leading Communist spokesman within the UAW after 1939, agreed that "you needed a

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[1]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 172; Kampelman, CP vs CIO, 73-74; Jack Steiber, Governing the UAW (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962), p. 6.

[2]Addes, Oral History interview, 29.

force like Thomas who just most recently broke with Martin" to entice "the remaining 17,000 or so Martin members back into the UAW fold."[1] Two Communist leaders outside of the UAW see the decision as a serious mistake.[2] As important as the decision itself was the way it was made. Mortimer has provided a description of the mechanics of the decision, as seen by a leading Communist in the union:

> I was approached by Sidney Hillman and Philip Murray and was asked who my choice was to succeeed Homer Martin. They indicated their preference for Thomas. I declined to support Thomas. I said I would support whoever was the choice of the Unity Caucus. Hillman indicated that he had talked to Earl Browder, and that Browder was for the election of R. J. Thomas. I said I did not care who Browder was for . . .
>
> The following day the Communist Party appeared in the persons of Louis Budenz, Bill Gebert, Roy Hudson, and Earl Browder. I was approached by Budenz and urged to support the CIO and R. J. Thomas. I refused. I was then contacted by Roy Hudson who tried to tell me that Thomas was the choice of Lewis and the CIO.[3]

The decision to support Thomas was consistent with the implications of Browder's discussion of the Chrysler strike. The decision was not made by Communist auto workers, nor was it made on the

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[1] Nat Ganley, Oral History interview, April 16, 1960, p. 21, ALUHA.

[2] William Z. Foster, History of the Communist Party of the United States (New York: International Publishers, 1952), p. 353; John Williamson, Dangerous Scot: The Life and Work of an American Undesirable (New York: International Publishers, 1969), p. 104.

[3] Mortimer, Organize, 163.

assessment of the relative strength of Communists at the convention. The key factor was the national relationship with the CIO leadership. The Communists in the auto plants were not even consulted. Mortimer was presented with a fait accompli when Hillman told him that Browder supported Thomas. The decision was also consistent with Communist behavior at the 1936 convention. Again, they settled for far less influence than they were entitled to by virtue of their numbers. As a Socialist critic of the Communists noted, far from being power-hungry, the Communists were "so opportunistic and self-effacing" that they provided no threat to the union. [1]

XII

Although numerically tiny, the smaller Marxist parties were significant because they offered a competing radical vision to that of the Communists. Perhaps the most significant in this regard were the Trotskyists which claimed the same background in Marxism and Leninism and presented itself as to the left of the Communist Party. It is important to examine the role of the Trotskyists for two reasons: first, to determine whether the Trotskyists represented a viable, left-wing alternative to the Communists for

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[1] Levinson, Labor on the March, 282.

militant workers, and second, because the behavior of American Trotskyists helped to crystallize Communist attitudes toward Soviet Trotskyism in general and the Moscow trials in particular.

James P. Cannon, the chairman of the American Trotskyist party, the Socialist Workers Party, argued in May, 1938, that "the duty of responsible militants" in the UAW was clear. In what Cannon called "the crisis provoked by the Stalinite bid for power, the militants have no choice but to support the Martin administration as against the Stalinite-Frankensteen combination." Cannon urged that "this support should be given openly, frankly, and aggressively."[1] After Martin suspended Addes and the four vice-presidents, Cannon stated that all of Martin's "bureaucratic missteps fade into insignificance compared to the danger presented by the Stalinist campaign."[2] The attitude of the Trotskyists toward union democracy in the UAW was clearly stated in another article in the Trotskyist press:

> A fresh wind is blowing through the American labor movement. . . .
> In Detroit, three of the suspended officers--stooges of the Communist Party--of the United Automobile Workers were expelled from the union. . . . With these actions, the labor movement is beginning the long delayed but much needed job of cleansing its system of the Stalinist virus that was poisoning its entire body and driving it to certain doom.[3]

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[1]Socialist Appeal, May 14, 1938.

[2]Ibid., June 25, 1938.

[3]Ibid., August 13, 1938.

After it became obvious that Martin was unable to win support from automobile workers, the Trotskyists still considered their approach valid.[1]

Trotskyists tried to obtain a more formal alliance with Martin. Ray Dunne, a leader of the American branch of the Trotskyist movement, the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), and John W. Anderson, an SWP and UAW member, met with Martin and, according to Anderson, "we talked over a few of the things which should be done to rally the union behind him and the forces he represented," but Martin "evidently overestimated the forces that men like [Father Charles] Coughlin and the Lovestoneites could rally in his behalf."[2]

Trotskyist support for Martin helps to explain the willingness of rank and file Communists to believe charges against Trotsky and his supporters in the Soviet Union and the intense hostility directed

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[1] "We are interested in preserving the unions from destruction and that it is the basis for the 'lesser evil' tactic in the unions. . . . Our action, for example, in supporting the Martin administration as against the Stalinists, in the auto workers union was based on these considerations. It was correct to seek to preserve that union from the Stalinists disrupters." Ibid., November 26, 1938. Many of these quotations were first brought to my attention in Arthur Burke, "The Work of Cannon and Shactman in the Trade Unions, Part IV: The Trotskyists in the UAW," The Bulletin of the Workers League for a Revolutionary Party, IX (June-July 1946), pp. 25-38.

[2] John W. Anderson, Oral History Interview, February 17, March 7, 17, 23, 31, April 8, 13, 27, 29, May 11, 21, 1960, p. 82.

at American Trotskyists. Central to the Communist critique of Trotskyism was the notion that the Trotskyists used a left, often ultra-left, theoretical position to mask a fundamentally conservative, even counter-revolutionary political practice. Specific Trotskyist positions were simply not taken seriously since the movement itself was regarded as nothing less than a systematic fraud perpetrated against the American working class. Trotskyists were able to make cogent criticisms of the Communists from the left. No matter what the provocation, the CP refused to criticize Lewis, Murray, and the CIO leadership. The party abandoned any critique of liberalism and the Democratic Party. It carried the popular front so far that the Star Spangled Banner was sung before all public party meetings. The SWP criticized these aspects of the Communists political practice, but it did so in the context of active and energetic pursuit of alliances with Martin and other highly conservative leaders. From the perspective of a rank and file Communist, a group which proclaimed its Communism in theory, but which allied with conservative groups solely to defeat the "Stalinists," was capable of virtually any treachery against the Soviet Union in the name of fighting Stalinism. At best, the valid aspects of the Trotskyist critique were buried by the SWP's conservative practice; at worst, that conservative practice convinced Communists that Trotskyists were guilty as charged in the Moscow

trials.

The Lovestoneites were even more committed to Martin. William Munger, editor of the United Automobile Worker, Francis Hensen, Martin's administrative assistant, Eve Stone, chairperson of the Women's Auxillary, John Tate, publicity chief of the union, and Irving Brown, international representative, were all Lovestone-lites. These men and women never wavered in their support for Martin and their opposition to the Communists.[1]

The Socialist Party was divided and ambivalent. National party leaders urged support for Martin in spite of the expulsions. Frank Trager mentioned "rumors that some members of the party may be taking a position that Martin smells so bad we can't back him." While Trager could "sympathize with such an abstract sense of justice," he believed that it overlooked "the practical consequences of failing to support the union administration." Although "no one prefers to work with such people," Martin "is president until the next convention."[2] Arthur G. McDowell complained that the statements of the Michigan Socialists lacked "any indication that some discipline, if less than suspension, is certainly coming to the conspirators, ringleaders Frankensteen, Mortimer, and possibly

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[1]Galenson, CIO Challenge, 151, 162, -64.

[2]Frank N. Trager to Comrades, undated, Bell collection.

Addes at a minimum."[1] Norman Thomas could not see why Socialists emphasized "the injustice of suspending or expelling Addes" when they admitted that "Addes advised non-payment of dues."[2] Paul Porter argued that "whatever Martin's other faults he now represents the fight for democracy within the CIO and the fight to prevent further CP encroachment."[3]

Prior to the suspensions, Socialists were anxious to support Martin. Michigan party leader Ben Fischer filed a report only a few days before the suspensions noting that "the Frankensteen-CP combination was isolated and on the defensive" in the last executive board meeting and that "Martin's attitude is extremely friendly now." The report claimed that "the administration is beginning to give some support to the prcgram which has been advocated by the SP for some time."[4] But after the expulsions the issue changed. To Roy Reuther the question was no longer "whether we are going to have a union." If Martin was not forced to reinstate the suspended officers, Reuther predicted "civil war in the UAW" and "a prolonged

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[1]Arthur G. McDowell to Walter Reuther and Ben Fischer, June 16, 1938, Bell collection.

[2]Norman Thomas to Ben Fischer, Walter Reuther, Tucker Smith, Art McDowell, August 11, 1938, Bell collection.

[3]Paul Porter to Ben Fischer, August 30, 1938, Bell collection.

[4]Ben Fischer, "Confidential Report of the Socialist Party on the Inner Situation in the Auto Union," June 7, 1938, Kraus papers.

civil war at this time would mean that thousands would drop out in disgust and that, at best, the UAW would no longer be a mass union."[1] Fischer knew "of no Socialist or socialist sympathizer in these parts who endorses the action of the administration or who can think in terms of backing up the administration in its actions."[2] None of this meant that Socialists were at all sympathetic to the Communists. Within caucus and local union meetings, Fischer noted, "our main fight, and often our sole fight, has been against the CP line."[3] After the second wave of expulsions, when Martin broke with the CIO, even national party leaders agreed that Socialists should oppose him.[4]

At the 1939 convention, Socialists helped stop Mortimer from obtaining national office. But the real victories for the Socialist Party came at the 1940 convention. Leonard Woodcock, then a member of the Socialist Party, reported to one of the party's national leaders:

The elections to the International Executive Board resulted in

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[1]Roy Reuther to Comrades, June 17, 1938, Bell collection.

[2]Ben Fischer to Comrades, June 17, 1938, Bell collection.

[3]Ben Fischer to Travers Clement, September 17, 1938, Bell collection.

[4]Arthur McDowell to Ben Fischer, George Edwards, and Tucker Smith, January 21, 1939; McDowell to Fischer, January 24, 1939, Bell collection.

the ending of communist domination. Cody in Wisconsin, Roberts in Indiana, Case in Flint, and Peters in Saginaw-Bay City were replaced by Nordstrom, Atwood, Swanson, and Linwood Smith. All of these represented defeats handed to the CP bloc. Our whole motivation in this convention was to accomplish this. It was obvious that it was in the best interests of the American working class, both politically and economically, to rid the UAWA of communist control. It was the firm belief of all socialists at St. Louis that everything else was secondary to this matter.[1]

What accounts for this extraordinary hostility? Why would any radical, particularly one who proclaimed a belief in socialism, view "everything else as secondary" to the defeat of Communists? The answer lies, at least in part, in the history of the two parties. From the moment the CP was founded, it contested the SP's leadership of the working class movement. At the same time that the SP was losing militant workers to the Communist movement, it was adopting a more conservative policy. As David Saposs noted, after the formation of the CP, the SP strategy was "to sue for the confidence and good will of the entrenched labour leaders," this marking "the end of their leadership of the opposition in the labour movement."[2] That leadership passed to Communists, and Socialists allied with conservative AFL leaders and used grossly undemocratic tactics against rank and file oppositions led by Communists. Similarly, during the depression, Communists led the resistance of

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[1]Leonard Woodcock to Travers Clement, August 16, 1940, Bell collection. Emphasis added.

[2]Saposs, Left-Wing Unionism, 37, 39.

unemployed workers. In numerous cities, including those governed by Socialists, Communist-led marchers were clubbed by police and thrown into jail. As in the garment unions,[1] these Socialists opted for an alliance with conservative forces and took repressive measures against Communists.

This role of defender of the status quo against Communist-led insurgents was not a comfortable one for many Socialists. To justify their use of repressive measures against workers following Communist leadership, Socialists increasingly resorted to anti-Communist formulas. Workers who followed Communist leaders were considered dupes, and Communists were castigated as agents of the Soviet Union rather than exponents of American radicalism. Socialists argued that Communists only defended the interests of American workers when those interests coincided with the needs of the Soviet Union.[2] The argument was not very convincing. Commu-

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[1]See chapter two.

[2]Howe and Widick wrote that "in the mid-thirties the Communist Party . . . was thought of primarily as a radical party rather than a totalitarian annex of the Russian dictatorship, and even the dissident Marxist groups still considered it part of the radical community." Howe and Widick, although they fail to mention it in their book, were themselves members of a small dissident Marxist group led by Max Shactman. Their comment is not entirely accurate. It was the dissident Marxist groups which pioneered the notion that the CP was not part of the radical community. They won few adherents to their point of view, since the CP was the core of the radical community. But their arguments won greater acceptance during the cold war years when the CP was on the defensive. Howe and Widick, UAW, 73.

nists took the lead in fighting for militant industrial unionism, international anti-fascist solidarity, and racial justice. By the mid-thirties few would deny that the Communist Party was the leading force on the left, especially in the labor movement. Both Socialists and Communists worked as CIO organizers, but Communists were clearly the major force in organizing such basic industries as steel, meat-packing, maritime, transport, and electrical, and led the unions formed in the last three of those industries. Socialists led none of the new unions, and were strong in only a handful of local unions, mainly in auto and rubber.

Socialists naturally resented Communist leadership of the left and the weak position of their own party. In an effort to distinguish themselves from the Communists, Socialists stressed Communist dependence on the Soviet Union and asserted that only Socialists represented native American radicalism. The entry of Trotskyists into the Socialist Party fortified anti-Communist and anti-Soviet feeling. Trotskyists had directed their primary energies toward blocking a united front between Communists and Socialists and building anti-Soviet sentiment within the SP.[1] Given the widespread support of the Soviet Union within the working class and the liberal

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[1]Trotskyist objectives in the SP were set forth by James P. Cannon, The History of American Trotskyism (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1972), pp. 234-56.

community, Socialist anti-Communism proved unattractive. But with the signing of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact, Socialists pressed an anti-Communist offensive in the labor movement. Knowing that they could not compete with Communists if both groups had equal rights, Socialists used the pact to argue that Communists and fascists were equally totalitarian and that both should be barred from union office. With Communists barred, Socialists might be able to take leadership of the working class movement.

This is not to say that Socialists were entirely Machievellian, or that they opposed Communists solely for narrow party reasons. Their political differences with Communists were genuine and deep, however irrelevant to the American scene. Socialists moved from a position mildly critical of the Soviet Union to one which held that Soviet Russia was virtually indistinguishable from Nazi Germany. They sincerely believed that no group friendly to the Soviet Union, which they described as a "slave labor state," could play a good role in the American labor movement. The logic of this extreme anti-Communism manifested itself in its purest form in the period following the Second World War when Socialists joined with the most conservative elements in the labor movement to drive out Communists.

XIII

At the outset of this chapter, two themes were mentioned: the long-term effort by Communists to organize a basic industry, and the drastic political shift which took place in the process of that effort. The political shift from the third period to the popular front is well-known, more well-known, perhaps, than any other aspect of the Communist movement. Standard conceptions of this shift, however, are inadequate and misleading. Historians have imagined hopelessly sectarian, third period Communists suddenly transformed, through the magic of the Comintern's Seventh Congress, into opportunistic, democracy-professing, intensely Machievellian, popular fronters. It is often argued that rank and file Communists reversed their positions on virtually all major political questions overnight. This has posed an enormous problem for serious historians of the Communist movement. How could Communists believe that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was a near-fascist one year, and the leader of America's democratic forces the following year? How could workers committed to building independent, revolutionary unions suddenly rush into conservative, AFL unions? Anti-Communists have a quick answer: Communists, as agents of the international Communist movement (some would say conspiracy), respond to Comintern directives

without second thoughts. Those who view Communists as individuals rather than agents or abstractions, however, find those questions perplexing, primarily because they have failed to understand the elements of continuity in Communist strategy throughout the decade. The conclusions which follow consider both the serious political changes and the fundamental continuities.

First, the third period can not be described as a time when Communist trade unionists "burned themselves out in a senseless and irresponsible adventure." The Auto Workers Union, led by Communists, created large, broadly-based, and democratically-elected strike committes in which its supporters were in a minority. In the strikes in which strikers accepted their leadership, they quickly negotiated victorious settlements. The Communist record, while not as successful as they would have liked, offers an impressive contrast to the lethargy or worse of the AFL in basic industries at the time. Many of the men and women who played important roles in the UAW received their baptism in unionism with the AWU.

Part of the confusion results from changes in the character of the Trade Union Unity League. In a sense, there were two fairly distinct TUULs. The first TUUL (and what most labor historians have in mind when they discuss the TUUL) was formed by left-wing oppositions in declining industries: mining, textiles, and garment.

In those industries, workers faced deteriorating wages and working conditions, and a union leadership unwilling to fight to improve those conditions.[1] Communists provided leadership for those militant workers. Most of the strikes would have occured without Communist leadership, but they probably would have been less well organized and more easily defeated. In the end, however, most of the strikes in these industries were lost, and little remained of TUUL or CP strength after those defeats, particularly in mining and textiles. In the rural textile towns and mining villages, most blacklisted workers were unable to find other jobs and remain in the area. They either renounced party and union, or left the area, or both.

In the second TUUL, new unions were formed in basic industry. Detroit, Chicago, Akron, Youngstown, and other growing Midwestern industrial cities replaced the rural coal mines and textile towns as the major areas of Communist labor activity. TUUL unions in auto, steel, meat-packing, and other industries won minor victories. Perhaps more important, they rarely suffered total defeats. Workers fired at the Ford plant often remained in

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[1] Theodore Draper implied that these leaders were right not to resist wage cuts, when he derided Communists for ignoring the wisdom of "traditional trade unionism" which "held that a depression was the worst time to strike and organize." Draper, "Communists and Miners," 391.

the AWU (sometimes the majority of an AWU local consisted of unemployed auto workers) and were likely to be hired later by General Motors or Chrysler. One Communist organizer, for example, was blacklisted by Armour, but hired without much difficulty by Swift.[1] In any case, these workers would be unlikely to leave Detroit or Chicago, since employment prospects would be no better elsewhere. In the course of repeated struggles, including those led by the unemployed councils, TUUL unions trained a corps of working class activists. Some of these activists were able to establish grievance procedures and limited recognition for TUUL unions. Other TUUL activists were unsuccessful, but nevertheless later became key figures in the CIO's organizing campaigns.

Second, Communists developed their basic approach to trade union work during the third period. Their strategy combined left-wing political ideas with sound trade-union principles. Key elements of the Communist approach included militant mass picketing, unity between employed and unemployed workers, solidarity between black and white workers, and rank and file control of the union and the strike. The Communist strategy could be summed

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[1]This was the experience of Stella Nowicki, who organized in the meat-packing industry, first with the TUUL and later with the CIO. Lynd and Lynd, Rank and File, 73, 78.

up in one phrase: rely on the workers. Put negatively, this meant that Communists opposed reliance on government arbitration or employer good will. Put positively, this meant that Communists sought tactics which depended upon concerted action by workers and which sought to make that concerted action more powerful.

Was this part of a revolutionary strategy? That question raises another, more fundamental one: what is the crucial difference between a revolutionary and a reformist strategy? The answer may seem obvious--reformists fight for reforms, and revolutionaries try to overthrow the government--but it is actually a complicated question. One example outside of the trade union movement might clarify some of the basic issues. Both the Communist-led Unemployed Councils and the reformist Urban League counseled workers who had complaints about relief during the depression. An official of the Urban League explained the approach of his organization:

> We find that we are able to settle about 75% of the complaints which come to us without even calling the district office. This is done by patiently explaining to the complainant the situation as we see it after listening to him. Of the remaining 25% most of them are satisfactorily straightened out by telephone conversation with the case worker or her supervisor. [1]

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[1] A. L. Foster, executive secretary, Urban League, to Joseph L. Moss, Director, Cook County Bureau of Public Welfare, December 16, 1932, Raymond W. Hilliard Papers, Chicago Historical Society. See also Moss to Foster, December 17, 1932, and Foster to Moss, December 23, 1932.

The Urban League's strategy was to gain the good will of the city administration. Part of that strategy involved screening complaints. It convinced 75% of the workers who brought complaints that their complaints were unreasonable or impossible to remedy, and sent them home.

A Communist-led Unemployed Council approached the situation differently than the Urban League. It tried to win virtually all the grievances which workers raised. If a worker had no legal case, a Communist organizer would explain that the law was against the worker, but would add that the law was part of a system which had deprived countless workers of their jobs, evicted them from their homes, and forced their families to go hungry. Law or no law, the organizer would continue, mass pressure can force the state to grant your just demands. The demands were hardly revolutionary. They included such matters as stopping evictions, restoring water and electricity services, and getting full relief payments. Communists were distinguished from Urban Leaguers not by their demands (the Urban League may have favored those demands, at least in theory), but by their seriousness in fighting for those demands and their reliance on mass pressure and working class solidarity to achieve them. Their seriousness had two sources. First, Communists regarded the problems of the unemployed with far more urgency than did middle-class Urban

Leaguers. This should not be surprising, since more than 60% of the party's members were unemployed themselves. Second, Communists believed that lessons learned from reliance upon mass pressure and working class solidarity would build a strong, potentially revolutionary, movement.

A revolutionary strategy, then, does not scorn serious struggle for reforms. Instead, it seeks to build a powerful movement out of those struggles, to expose the role of the capitalist state, and to make the need for socialism clear.[1] The evidence is fragmentary, but it suggests that they did. The basic strategy which Communists brought to the labor movement has already been discussed. It was clearly designed to win concessions and to build a powerful movement. Communists did not ignore the State. The AWU consistently exposed the alliance of government and employers against workers in the NRA and the Automobile Labor Board.[2] Nor did they ignore socialism. "Russia drove out the capitalists

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[1]This two-pronged Communist strategy was first advocated in the <u>Communist Manifesto</u>. See above, chapter one, page 40, for the full quotation from the Manifesto.

[2]For an examination of that alliance by an anti-Communist liberal, see the previously cited article on President Roosevelt and the automobile code by Sidney Fine.

and is getting along very nicely," Raymond told auto workers. "We can do the same," he added.[1]

Third, when Communists decided to abandon the TUUL in favor of work in the AFL, they did not see this as a reversal of the work they had done earlier for two reasons. First, key elements of their trade union program remained unchanged. Communists still continued to fight for militant mass picketing, unity between unemployed and employed workers, solidarity between black and white workers, and rank and file control of strikes and unions; in short, they continued to rely on the workers. What had changed was not so much the Communist program, but the arena in which Communists fought for that program. Henceforth, Communists would try to win the AFL to that program, rather than attempt to supplant the AFL with a new federation. Second, Communists did not abandon the TUUL for philosphical reasons. They abandoned it only when workers joined AFL unions in large numbers and conducted strikes. The decision to abandon the TUUL was primarily a tactical decision.

Fourth, the work of Communists in the automobile industry reveals those strengths which gave the CP a commanding position on the left within the working class movement. No radical group was

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[1]Quoted in Fine, Auto Under Blue Eagle, 169.

completely absent from the struggle of the automobile workers; Socialists, Trotskyists, Lovestoneites, the IWW, the Proletarian Party, and other groups made their appearances, however brief and, in some cases, disreputable, on the stage. But only the CP was consistently in the center of the upsurge. Party members earned considerable respect, both for their personal commitment and their tactical skills. Mortimer, Travis, Moore, and Simons in Flint in 1936-1937, Raymond and Schmies in Detroit in early 1933, and scores of other able male and female Communists throughout the industry provided important, sometimes crucial, leadership in the struggle to organize the industry. Two statements by anti-Communist workers illustrate this point:

> Let me say in many instances in the early days of our union they (Communists) were the key people in organizing the unorganized. I will have to admit that in almost all instances they were very successful in establishing local unions and chairing bargaining committees and doing the negotiating for the people on the job. [1]

> I think it has been generally credited to the Commies that while they were not given the distinction, at least they were in the front line doing the organizing. Because it was not too long after the organizing was done that they were shuffled back, and there has been a shuffling back process ever since. [2]

Fifth, the contribution of Communists to the organization of

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[1] Russel Leach, Oral History Interview, July 27, 1961, pp. 19-20, ALHUA.

[2] Al Leggat, ibid., December 4, 1959, p. 17.

basic industry represents the greatest achievement of the American left in the twentieth century. In many industries, Communist activity was even more important than it was in auto: steel, meat-packing, transport, maritime, and electrical are obvious examples. Clearly, no accomplishment of the Socialist Party or the New Left is comparable to the organization of basic industry. Communists, of course, did not organize those industries by themselves, but their contribution was enormous.

Sixth, over the period described in this chapter, a gradual shift took place in Communist strategy of which the precise origins are difficult to determine. Ultimately, it was shaped by the popular front line of the international Communist movement set by the Seventh Comintern congress. But it did not emerge immediately following the congress. The earliest manifestation of the shift came in the 1937 Chrysler strike. The central issue of the strike was the sit-down itself: would it become a regular part of labor's arsensal, or would its use be restricted to extreme cases? City and state officials indicated that they intended to break the strike if it was not called off. A party committed to building working class power and to exposing the State would, it would seem, support the strike. CIO leaders, however, called off the strike. When militant workers, including some Communists, objected, the CIO leaders red-baited all opposition. In spite of the red-

baiting, the Michigan party organization and the Daily Worker supported the CIO leaders.

There were two reasons for the CP decision to back the CIO leaders. First, Communists were not committed to the expansion of the sit-down strike. Ruth McKenney, a writer who belonged to the party, described a meeting of the Northern Ohio section of the party in March, 1936, where the sit-down strike was discussed:

> He (James Keller, section leader in Akron) recited the events leading up to the Goodyear strike. The comrades in steel and auto bent over notebooks as he talked.
>
> "The sitdown is an extremely effective organizational weapon. But credit must go to Comrade Williamson for warning us against the danger of these surprise actions. The sitdowns came because the companies refused to bargain collectively with the union. Now we must work for regular relations between the union and the employees--and strict observance of union procedure on the part of the workers."
>
> The comrades in auto scribbled rapidly.[1]

Second, Communists had become politically subordinate to CIO leaders. Local Communists, Browder insisted, should take no action which might disrupt the alliance at the top with CIO leaders.

By 1939, two other events had occured which indicated that the CP was no longer in contention for the leadership of the working class movement. First, Communists abolished their fractions inside unions. Foster summarized the changes in the party's methods of work in the labor movement:

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[1]Ruth McKenney, Industrial Valley (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1939), p. 340.

The organizational forms of Communist trade union work have changed radically in the present period. Some methods, formerly correct, no longer correspond to the situation in the labor movement. Thus the Party members do not now participate in groupings or other organized activities within the unions. The Party also discountenances the formation of progressive groups, blocs and caucuses in unions; it has liquidated its own Communist fractions, discontinued its shop papers, and is now modifying its system of industrial branches. Communists function in the trade unions solely through the regular committees and institutions of the movement. The Communists are the best fighters for democracy and discipline in the trade union movement and are resolutely opposed to all forms of group or clique control. [1]

Second, Communists refused to run their most able and popular leader, Mortimer, for national office at the 1939 convention. None of these decisions, by themselves, involved a sudden and dramatic reversal of principle. Most local shop papers, for example, were abandoned locally before the national organization formally liquidated shop papers. Taken together, however, these decisions meant that the Communist Party had voluntarily limited the role it was to play in automobile unionism. The results of that limitation, as we shall see in the next chapter, proved disastrous for Communists.

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[1] William Z. Foster, "Twenty Years of Communist Trade Union Policy," The Communist, XVIII (September, 1939), p. 814.