

CHAPTER FIVE
COMMUNISM, DEMOCRACY, AND THE NATIONAL MARITIME UNION

Two closely related assumptions have guided labor historians, economics, and political scientists who have studied the role of Communists in the American labor movement. The first is that the Communists were unique among labor activists in that they were not interested in building a strong movement which could win higher wages and better working conditions. Instead, the Communists are thought to have been primarily concerned with political considerations which they kept hidden from the workers. One political scientist who studied the conflict over the role of the Communist Party within CIO unions discerned a bizarre alchemy whereby "once taken over by the Communists, a trade union ceases to be a trade union, for all that it may retain the charter and outward appearance of a trade union."¹ The second assumption is that whatever influence individual Communists or the Communist Party attained in CIO unions must have been due to deception and manipulation. One result of these two assumptions is the absence of any discussion of the consequences of anti-Communist successes in various unions. It is simply assumed that these victories restored democratic unionism to a grateful membership.

¹Kampelman, CP vs CIO, 249.

Yet if these anti-Communist campaigns and their aftermaths are examined with greater care, a far different pattern emerges. The defeat of the Communists often decreases rather than increases internal union democracy. This paper examines the anti-Communist victory in the National Maritime Union, a union selected for two reasons. First, unlike the campaign in several unions,¹ the anti-Communist drive in the NMU was directed against genuine Communists. Of the six national officers for the NMU's first decade, only the president, Joseph Curran, did not belong to the party, and Curran was clearly pro-Communist. The other officers openly announced their membership, and Blackie Myers, a vice-president of the union, served on the national committee of the Communist Party. The second reason is more important. Anti-Communist scholars have singled out the NMU as an example of the undemocratic and manipulative leadership of the Communists, and have indicated their support of the drive against them.²

¹For a discussion of an anti-Communist campaign directed against non-Communists, see James R. Prickett, "Communism and Factionalism in the United Automobile Workers, 1939-1947," Science and Society, XXXII (Summer, 1968), pp. 257-77.

²Philip Selznick, The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960), pp. 184-96; Jack Barbash, The Practice of Unionism (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), pp. 324-66; Philip Taft, The Structure and Government of Labor Unions (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 201-205.

If the standard view of anti-Communism within the CIO does not fit the NMU, then it is at least questionable whether it could be made to fit any CIO union.

I

The genesis of the split in the NMU leadership is unclear, but it was clearly exacerbated by the immediate crisis and split in the American Communist Party in the postwar period. In an article first published in France and later translated for the *Daily Worker*, French Communist Jacques Duclos criticized the wartime dissolution of the party and praised a statement written by William Z. Foster protesting the dissolution. This was the first American Communist had heard of Foster's statement because the national committee had refused to release it to the membership.

The publication of the Duclos article caused a furore in the party.¹ Party members wanted to know why Foster's views, now deemed correct, had been suppressed. More important, they drew connections between the opportunism of the war years and the undemocratic structure of the party. As one Communist put it, "no

¹See the *Daily Worker*, May 24, 1945 for the translation of the Duclos article. See also the statement of the Communist Political Association, "The Present Situation and the Next Tasks," *ibid.*, June 4, 1945, and the debate on the statement between Earl Browder and William Z. Foster, *ibid.*, June 10, 1945.

political inventory would be complete . . . which did not deal with the mechanics of our policy making. "¹ But the last thing the leadership wanted discussed was the mechanics of policy making. The party leaders were perfectly willing to confess some sins, and even anxious to reconstitute the party free of Browderism, but they also wanted to end the widespread questioning and ferment within the party. In addition to Browder's followers, a group of extreme Fosterites were also expelled.² In 1945 the expulsions reached the waterfront when NMU leaders Hedley Stone, Charles Keith, Thomas Ray, and Harry Alexander were all expelled from the party.³

¹Letter from "An Association Member," ibid., June 13, 1945. Other letters making a connection between the undemocratic structure of the party and its opportunist policy during the Second World War appeared throughout the month of June in 1945: June 11 (B. C., C. Soloman, Samuel Greengerg); June 16 (Al Lowe); June 17 (Lester Moss); June 20 (E. Selden); June 21 (Jno Peters); June 23 (Benjamin Cheskis); June 27 (E. Van Haagen); June 28 (Ruth Dombrowski, Tanya M.); June 30 (Abe Straus).

²"Statement by the National Board of the Communist Party on the Recent Expulsions of Vern Smith, Ruth McKenney, Bruce Minton, and William F. Dunne, Political Affairs, XXV (November, 1946), p. 1011.

³The precise politics of the expelled seamen is not clear. When the so-called "ultra-leftists" were expelled they were accused of having "ties with the open renegade cliques grouped around Sam Darcy . . . and Charles Keith." Ibid. This would place the seamen in the party's ultra-Left. More likely is the possibility that the NMU Communists had different disagreements with the party, and that their expulsions had more to do with their activity in the NMU than with their general political outlook.

Despite this ferment within the party the discord at the NMU convention of 1945 was muted and almost indiscernible. The no-strike pledge and the hard line taken by Communists against wartime strikes,¹ which had provided a focus for anti-Communist leftists in other unions, had few opponents in the NMU, and Alexander and Jack Lawrenson both endorsed the resolution upholding the pledge. The only open dispute was over Curran's proposal to limit NMU office-holding to those seamen who had their first citizenship papers. Lawrenson, an NMU vice-president and Ray, a founder of the union, both spoke in favor of the amendment. Curran's speech was perhaps the most significant because it was filled with a new-found conservatism:

At the outset, let me remind you that we are governed by a certain system. We may not like it. We may not like its laws, but we have to live under them . . .

We have got to be real about these things. We haven't got a revolution on the horizon.²

The amendment was defeated.

More important than Curran's desire to limit the political rights of aliens within the union was his increasing uneasiness in the Committee for Maritime Unity (CMU). The CMU was a federation of off-shore and dockside CIO unions, chaired jointly by Harry

¹Prickett, "Communism in UAW," 267-69.

²National Maritime Union of America, Proceedings of the Fifth Convention (New York, 1945), 81, 75-76, 331, 332, 327-28.

Bridges, of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, and Curran. It was an ambitious attempt to end the long history of costly and sometimes violent conflict among the maritime unions.¹ At first, the CMU ran smoothly. In his report to the NMU National Council, Curran said that the CMU has "actually accomplished, for the first time in our industry, unity of action of all seamen, longshoremen, and officers." Speaking of the September, 1946 strike, Curran remarked that "we were able to achieve the greatest gain in the industry, and to prove, once and for all, that the ship-owners were not going to get away with their policy of pitting one union against the other."²

Yet the day before the December National Council meeting of the NMU, Curran announced his resignation from the CMU. He asserted in justification that the NMU was "in an intolerable situation. . . being governed by the actions of three small craft unions, 3,000 miles away, and representing one-fifth of our membership." Actually, it was not the three small craft unions which disturbed Curran, but the growing rift with ILWU leader Harry Bridges. Realizing that

¹Robert Eugene Randolphe, "History of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union," (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1952), pp. 22-53; Selznick, Organizational Weapon, 196; Kampelman, CP vs. CIO, 79-81.

²Randolphe, "ILWU," 45-46.

the Communists in the NMU were likely to support Bridges over Curran, Curran began to single out Communists for attack. When the Daily Worker endorsed the CMU, Curran argued, "it was giving orders from the Communist Party to its members in our union, particularly the leading ones, such as (Howard) McKenzie and (Joseph) Stack, who as I said before have officially spoken for the party."¹

The resignation touched off a furious controversy within the union. In the first issue of the NMU newspaper in which the resignation was discussed by members, there were twenty-three letters supporting the resignation and twenty-two letters opposing it. The letters critical of the move generally were signed by ports or entire ships, while those supporting Curran usually were signed by individuals who assumed the move was the beginning of an internal attack on the Communists. Communist influence will soon be gone, one member gloated, adding that "if the Commies think otherwise, what a stiff jolt they are in for." Another pledged Curran "my support in your fight to keep the NMU American."² Although the original vote to affiliate with the CMU was 18,129 to 773, the

¹Joseph Curran, "Passing the Word," NMU Pilot (New York), January 3, 1947. Hereafter cited as Pilot.

²"Voice of the Membership," Pilot, January 3, 1947.

Communists refused to press the issue. A referendum on Curran's resignation was abandoned and the CMU voted to dissolve.

II

Communist abdication on the CMU issue probably encouraged Curran's next move. When Blackie Myers, facing harassment from the federal government, decided not to run for re-election, Joseph Stack, then the agent of the Port of New York and a member of the New York State Board of the Communist Party, was elected instead.¹ Immediately after the election, Curran preferred formal charges against Stack and demanded his removal from office. The major charge was that Stack had been "making false, vicious and irresponsible statements aimed at discrediting the president (Curran) before the membership and the labor movement," but in addition Stack was accused of opposition to the Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War, opportunism in the NMU elections of 1938, incitement of racial conflict, and, significantly, "membership in the Communist Party for opportunistic purposes."² The grab-bag of charges was just for the record: it soon narrowed down to the major charge. James Drury, a radical Curran supporter and mem-

¹Kampelman, CP vs CIO, 85-86.

²"Stack Trial--Minority Report," Pilot, April 4, 1947.

ber of the trial committee which had voted to remove Stack, noted correctly that it was "the slanderous, irresponsible statements made against the President of the Union" that were at the heart of the anti-Stack case. To allow Stack to remain in office, Curran argued in a revealing statement, would mean that "the president of your organization . . . will be looked at by the shipowners as a man who has no control over any of his staff officers."¹ Curran apparently considered the elective post of NMU vice-president as one of his staff officers rather than as a union official responsible to the membership.

What were those "slanderous, irresponsible statements" that Curran and the radical anti-Communists found so disturbing? They were simply the vigorous expression of the argument that the demise of the CMU was detrimental to the NMU membership and beneficial to the shipowners. According to the anti-Stack faction of the trial committee, Stack had stated that "the actions and manner in which the president of our union resigned as co-chairman on the Committee for Maritime Unity and his statement to the press and the Pilot amount to reason against the membership of the National Maritime Union." When questioned about another controversial

¹National Maritime Union of America, Proceedings of the Sixth Convention (New York, 1947), pp. 973, 982.

statement, Stack told the trial committee that "the manner in which the president resigned and handled the whole affair in CMU, I say yes, it was a Christmas present--the greatest Christmas present the shipowners ever got and probably will get for a long time."¹

Stack's defense was based primarily on civil libertarian grounds.

The Appeals Committee of the NMU convention of 1947 reported:

The Committee . . . feels compelled to call to the delegates' attention that a Union official, elected by secret ballot, by members of this union, cannot be gagged and prevented from freely expressing his views. He has a right to freely express his view as an official and as a member of this union. To decide otherwise is to set a precedent where an official or member of the Union who may say something that some other official does not like may find himself in danger of either being removed from office or thrown out of the Union. The right of each official and each member to speak his mind must be protected.²

The civil libertarian argument was a strong one, but its use revealed the political weakness of the Communist position. If Stack's statements were correct, then the Communists were wrong in not taking the issue to the membership. If Curran's withdrawal from CMU amounted "to treason against the membership of the National Maritime Union," then Communists clearly should have pressed for a membership referendum to reverse Curran's decision. If the withdrawal from CMU was justified or not particularly destructive,

¹"Stack Trial--Minority Report," Pilot, April 4, 1947.

²Sixth NMU Proceedings, 969.

then Stack's statements were excessive at best. Communists could not defend Stack without attacking Curran strongly, but many Communists still hoped for some kind of reconciliation. Stack told the 1947 convention that he would have no trouble working with Curran if retained in office. After Curran announced that the convention must choose between Stack and himself, Stack was removed from office by the narrow vote of 353 to 351 with four ballots voided.¹

III

It is misleading to focus on the ouster of Stack and the dissolution of the CMU because this obscures the fact that the Curran forces made a conscious effort to make the campaign against the Communists almost issue-less. Any attempt to criticize the role that the Communists had played in the NMU would mean criticizing their own role in the union. The major issue, whether there should be a wave of repression against the Communists, was never openly discussed by those favoring that repression. Curran obscured his move to the right with civil libertarian rhetoric and a cautious, but still clearly anti-imperialist posture. He was, for example, willing to criticize President Harry Truman's foreign policy as one which used "relief as a political weapon to bolster crumbling, unrepresentative govern-

¹Pilot, October 17, 1947. See also April 4, and April 11, 1947 issues of the Pilot for more on the Stack controversy.

ments abroad," and doled out "military aid to be employed against the peoples striving for democracy."¹ Along with other anti-Communists, Curran voted for a boycott of ships bound for Greece and a resolution on Indonesia charging that "imperialist Dutch interests backed by giant American corporations and an interventionist foreign policy are waging murderous warfare against 70 million Indonesian people."²

Although Curran echoed the Communist position on most if not all international issues, he also argued that the democratic machinery of the NMU was insufficient to deal with the Communist threat. In August of 1947, he proposed a special investigating committee to fight Communism within the union. Curran admitted that "this proposition will require some drastic changes in the trial procedure of our union constitution." At the same time "it will go a long way towards making it extremely difficult for members of the Communist Party or any other members or officers of our union to continue activities contrary to the principles upon which the union was founded."³

¹Pilot, March 21, 1947.

²Kampelman, CP vs CIO, 87; Grange Bowen McKinney, "Communism in the National Maritime Union, 1937-1948," (Unpublished Master's thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 1963), 49-50.

³Curran, "Passing the Word," Pilot, August 1, 1947.

At the convention of 1947, Curran and Keith, chairman of the Constitution Committee, tried to obtain delegate approval for an extensive purge of the Communists. Keith proposed an amendment to the NMU constitution which read:

No religious, political or any other organization shall be officially permitted to interfere with the affairs of the NMU. The membership shall determine by secret ballot when such an organization is interfering in the affairs of the NMU to the detriment of the best interests of the Union and in violation of the fundamental principles, objectives and democratic procedures laid down in the constitution.

The amendment, which needed a two-thirds vote to pass, failed to obtain even a simple majority.¹ On the only substantive issue that Curran's caucus had raised, whether being a Communist disqualified a man from being a good union official, Curran had been soundly defeated.

But that battle turned out to be a minor skirmish at the convention. Curran's forces wisely concentrated their efforts on organizational matters, and here the Communists were oddly incompetent. There were a series of tests of strength at the convention: the Stack ouster, the battle over the seating of Josh Lawrence as a delegate from the

¹Sixth NMU Proceedings, 725-65.

Great Lakes, and the charges brought against Alexander.¹ Curran's forces won every one of these battles and convinced the delegates that Communists were on the way out. In every union, local and secondary leaders often shift their position to retain their jobs. In the NMU, there was far more at stake in retaining a job than in most unions. Generally a defeated official must return to the shop and take a cut in pay. But in the NMU he would have to go to sea and that meant leaving his family and friends. For many, it must have been a terrifying prospect. These men and women saw that Curran's machine had the organizational muscle necessary to impose its will on the convention. Although nothing remotely anti-Communist had been passed at the 1947 convention, Curran's caucus clearly emerged as the victor. In the NMU elections of 1948, "in the balloting for 131 posts, not a single candidate backed by Curran was defeated."²

¹Alexander was charged with undermining preparations for a strike and with tolerating racial discrimination in the Port of New Orleans. Ibid., 1115-55, 1194. The evidence was so weak that the Communists split on the vote: Stack spoke against the charges, and Ferdinand Smith called for a conviction. Ibid., 1118-19, 1141-42. For discussion of the ouster of Stack, see ibid., 968-88, 1074, 1370-74. On the seating of Josh Lawrence, see ibid., 122, -54, 173-80, 226-30.

²Taft, Labor Unions, 202.

IV

Curran's sweep of the 1948 elections meant that, for the first time in the NMU's history, none of its officials were members of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, Communists still had widespread support, and hundreds of Communists were still members of the union. The manner in which Curran, often praised as a labor statesman,¹ dealt with his Communist opposition provides interesting contrasts with the previous, pro-Communist leadership.

"It is not the intention nor the objectives of the rank and file committee," Curran wrote after the 1947 convention but before the 1948 elections, "to eliminate from the Union members because of race, color creed, or even political belief, although the Communists in the Union attempt to confuse you, the membership, into believing those things to save their own skin and they have failed miserably."² Curran, then, recognized that the NMU rank and file would oppose the expulsion of Communists from the union. The Communists accused Curran of planning to expel them and Curran vigorously denied the charge: "I am against, and will always be against, any

¹Kampelman, CP vs CIO, 90.

²Curran, "Passing the Word," Pilot, January 9, 1948.

type of repression, discrimination, or any brand of witchhunt."¹

When incomplete election returns indicated that Curran's caucus was going to win a substantial victory, he introduced the idea of expulsion: "the party officials know that they are on their way . . . out of the Union because of their crimes against the membership."² Since political expulsions were contrary to the platform of Curran's caucus, he was careful to assure the rank and file that no one would be expelled for being a Communist, and "only those who violated the constitution" of the NMU would be subject to expulsion.³ In early September of 1948, three former officials identified with the Communist Party were expelled from the union for "misconduct and malfeasance" by a vote of 1,462 to 523 at a meeting of the Port of New York.⁴ A dispute over the legality of that meeting and a subsequent meeting led to the expulsion of Stack.⁵ The expulsions were accompanied by a move to the right. With the elections successfully

¹Quoted in M. A. Verick, "Rebel Voices in the NMU," New Politics, V (Summer, 1966), 31-33.

²Curran, "Passing the Word," Pilot, January 9, 1948.

³Ibid., July 30, 1948.

⁴Pilot, September 3, 1948.

⁵Ibid., September 17, 1948, December 31, 1948.

concluded, Curran endorsed Truman for president and urged signing the non-Communist affidavits required by the Taft-Hartley Act.¹

Curran did not limit the expulsions to the national leaders of the Communist caucus. Literally hundreds of NMU members were brought up on charges and expelled.² Although it was possible to appeal the expulsions at the biennial national convention, the immediate effect was to eliminate most of the active opposition to Curran. Many seamen did not bother to appeal, and even those who did appeal could not play any role in the union until the appeal was granted. Curran still maintained that no one would be expelled for being a Communist, but the charges on which the members were expelled indicate that Communism was definitely a factor:

Charges: Making false statements against the Port of Houston, the Trial Committee, and the membership; bringing the Union into ill repute through his misconduct; belonging to a radical organization that is dedicated not only to overthrow the constitutional rights of

¹Pilot, September 10, September 17, 1948.

²The actual number of expulsions can not be determined with any precision, but by the early 1950's it reached into the thousands. At the time of the NMU convention of 1949, Jesse Gray and Dow Wilson estimated the number of expelled seamen at five hundred. National Maritime Union of America, Proceedings of the Seventh Convention (New York, 1949), 364, 349. The fact that Gray and Wilson, both teenagers at the time, were floorleaders for the Communists at the 1949 convention indicates that most of the Communist activists had already been expelled. Both Gray and Wilson gained prominence in the 1960's. Gray organized the city-wide New York rent strike in 1963, and Wilson led a rank and file revolt in the Painter's Union until he was murdered.

this Union, but also the democracy in which we believe.

Charges: Anti-Union activity; being aboard ship without being cleared through the Union hall, for the purpose of distributing leaflets put out by members of the Communist Party to be used for confusing and disrupting the membership. ¹

One seaman was charged with missing a ship and causing it to sail short-handed. The usual penalty for this offense was a twenty-five dollar fine, but since this was "the same Boehm who was a member of the Communist Party," the recommendation was expulsion from the union. ² Many other charges had political overtones such as "working with a group that was out to wreck Union," and "accusing the agent of being detrimental to the welfare of the Union and membership." ³ The political expulsions were all upheld at the 1949 convention. ⁴

Just prior to the 1949 convention, Curran proposed an amendment to the NMU constitution which would deny membership to "any individuals, whether present members or future applicants," who adhered to Communist doctrine. Communist doctrine was defined in the amendment as any doctrine that would permit "such anti-union acts as, but not limited to, participating in, conspiring, following,

¹Seventh NMU Proceedings, 529, 535, 560.

²Ibid., 528.

³Ibid., 527, 528.

⁴Ibid., 524-90.

writing, or distributing untrue and false statements against the NMU, its officers, and membership."¹ Curran did not propose that amendment at the convention. Instead he put forward a milder resolution which did not affect current members but which denied membership to applicants who were members of "Nazi, Fascist, or Communist organizations." Although Curran's former supporters Keith and Lawrenson bitterly fought against the amendment, it passed by a vote of 403 to 195. Another amendment declared that membership in the Communist Party "shall not be considered legitimate political activity." The second amendment did not receive the two-thirds vote necessary for passage, but even without it Curran was able to have Communists expelled on a variety of other charges.²

Curran's tactic of mass expulsions drove some of the radical anti-Communists to break with him and form the Independent Caucus which, although formally excluding members of the Communist Party, demanded "the right of every individual member to his own political beliefs without fear of reprisal or expulsion."³ The

¹Kampelman, CP vs CIO, 89.

²Seventh NMU Proceedings, 335-64, 366-86.

³Verick, "Rebel Voices," 32-33; Taft, Labor Unions, 203-205; Joseph P. Goldberg, The Maritime Story: A Study in Labor-Management Relations (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 259.

Independent Caucus led the struggle against the anti-Communists amendments that Curran proposed. Once again the letters column in the Pilot was filled with controversy. However, the letters reflected a new consensus as a result of the expulsions. No letters defended Communism or Communists. Those opposed to Curran contained such arguments as:

These amendments would wipe out the victory of the rank and file over the Communist Party machine.

This ill and hastily prepared amendment plays right into the hands of the defunct waterfront section of the Comintern.

I did help break the tenacious hold that the Communist Party had on our union. But I surely never thought, in my wildest dreams, that after the job was completed the union would be turned into a witchhunt.¹

After the 1949 convention, Curran was in an extremely strong position. Although the campaign against the Communists had been led (apart from Curran) by a group of ex-Communists who still considered themselves radicals, radical anti-Communists had almost no organizational strength outside of New York. The Communist caucus had been decimated by the mass expulsions, but the major port of the union, New York, was led by the radical anti-Communists who now had joined the Independent Caucus. When Curran's

¹"Voice of the Membership," Pilot, May 6, May 20, 1949.

anti-Communist amendment was put to a vote in New York, it was defeated by a vote of 3,000 to 10.¹ As leaders of both the major opposition caucus and the largest branch of the union, the Independent Caucus represented an obvious alternative to the Curran administration. When the other port officials objected, Curran removed them as well. Four hundred seamen responded by seizing control of the local headquarters. With the help of busloads of seamen from other ports and of the New York Police Department, the Curran forces gained control of the port machinery and the last obstacle of Curran's total control of the NMU was removed.² It was now relatively easy for Curran to have the New York radicals expelled from

¹H. W. Benson, review of The Maritime Story by Joseph Goldberg, Labor History, 1 (Spring, 1960), 213.

²Philip Taft has offered several arguments in support of Curran's actions. First he has argued that it was "quite irrelevant that Curran brought in busloads of seamen since it is "only an accident that certain members are in port at a particular time, and they have no preemptive right to decide issues which affect the entire organization." But does one party to the controversy have the right to ship in its supporters, send them to the meeting with fare and expenses paid, and outvote the members of the local port? While locals in the NMU are not as sharply defined as they are in unions where the membership is more stationary, the leadership can hardly be said to have the right to snuff out opposition in local ports by bringing in workers from other areas.

After the controversy, a leader of the seamen who had seized the union headquarters received more than one-third of the vote running against Curran for the presidency. Taft argued that "the decisive defeat of the insurgents in a free election is perhaps the best answer the self-appointed supervisors of the labor movement." But even if Curran had been elected unanimously, the elections of the port of New York would still be valid.

the Union. At the NMU convention of 1951, Keith's expulsion was upheld by a unanimous vote.¹

Ironically, the officials who helped Curran defeat the Independent Caucus were themselves later expelled.² In 1960, one writer who supported the expulsion of the Communists described Curran's methods:

Beatings are administered to union rivals as a routine; seamen have invented their own slang to go with it: "dumping." Men have been dumped at their own union meetings for the indiscretion of asserting a right to criticize.³

A recent article in the Nation described the fate of the latest opposition leader in the NMU, James M. Morrissey:

His program asks for a return of the NMU to democracy through rank and file control, and his openly declared strategy during the summer was that the opposition should organize for the NMU 14th National Convention, then two months away.

On September 14, two weeks before the convention, Morrissey was attacked by three large men with lead pipes, who beat him and broke his skull. He had just left NMU National Headquarters, the Joseph Curran building in New York.⁴

But the major defect of Taft's arguments is his failure to discuss the mass expulsions. Those who opposed Curran, according to Taft, did so because "the administration moved toward stable unionism." Taft, Labor Unions, 201-205. Taft's failure to discuss the expulsions is particularly curious since he was assigned to investigate them for the New York chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. Kampelman, CP vs CIO, 90.

¹National Maritime Union of America, Proceedings of the Eighth Convention (New York, 1951).

²Verick, "Rebel Voices," 33.

³Benson, Maritime Story review, 213.

⁴Dorian J. Fliegel, "Curran's NMU: Headquarters vs the Men at Sea," Nation, CCV (January 30, 1967), 144.

Curran's campaign against the Communists has generally been interpreted as a drive for rank and file democracy. A leading American liberal and Pulitzer Prize winning historian described the Curran victory in this way:

No American trade union leaders made a more wholehearted attempt over many years to co-operate with the Communists than Joe Curran of the National Maritime Union and Mike Quill of the Transport Workers. Each suddenly realized the extent to which he had surrendered his independence to the Party machine. Each turned to fight for personal survival; and, after campaigns of amazing filth and vindictiveness on the part of the Communists, each won.¹

Since it is simply assumed that defeat for Communists equals victory for democrats, there is no real examination of the massive expulsions of thousands of seamen, the brutal beatings of union members, or the erosion of the rights of those workers opposed to the union's leadership. Yet the contrast between Curran's two presidencies--one, as a pro-Communist, the other as an anti-Communist--reveals that far greater internal democracy was present under Communist leadership.

Indeed, if one reads the anti-Communist accounts carefully, a similar conclusion can be reached. Although it is often implied that

¹Arthur M. Schlesinger, jr., The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 135.

the Communists were guilty of violations of democratic rights in the NMU, no specific violations are ever mentioned. One account explains the absence of undemocratic behavior by the Communists by suggesting that "seldom has so meticulous an adherence to the outer forms of democracy so thoroughly violated its spirit and intent."¹ This admission by two of the Communist Party's most consistent and bitter opponents that the Communists meticulously adhered to "the outer forms of democracy" is extremely significant. In practice, this violation of the "spirit and intent" of democracy meant that when Curran was part of a Communist-dominated union leadership, his opponents were able to publish anti-Curran and anti-Communist letters in the Pilot. No workers were expelled from the union for political reasons. Only after Curran rejected Communism and embraced democracy did the Pilot stop printing letters from his opponents and only then were workers who opposed Curran subjected to beatings and expulsions. Only if one assumes that Communist leadership in itself violates the spirit and intent of democracy can one maintain that the elimination of the Communists fostered union democracy. This study offers no support for that assumption.

¹Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party: A Critical History (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 383.