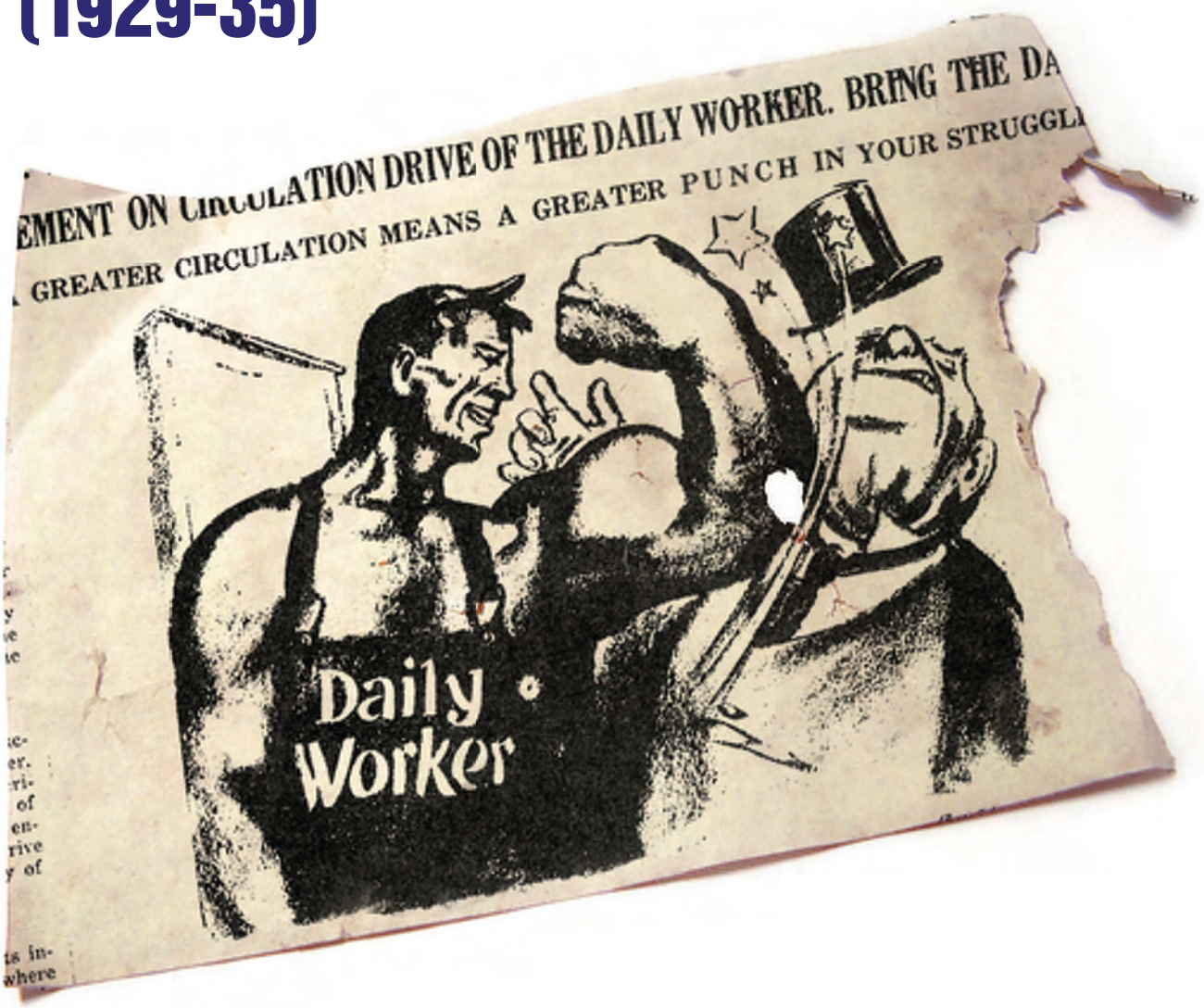
SLIPPING INTO DARKNESS

The Communist Party's Last Revolutionary Years (1929-35)



by Mike Ely

KASAMA
ESSAYS FOR DISCUSSION

Author's Note:

This analysis examines the period considered by some the "good years" (i.e. the more revolutionary period) of the Communist Party USA . The piece was originally written in 1980 right after I had left the coalfields. It was based on research into this history and then our own experience of trying to develop revolutionary organization among workers.

The piece addresses how revolutionary consciousness develops among the oppressed. And I believe it speaks to an interest in trade union organizing that has re-emerged among a new generation of revolutionaries.

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Kasama
is a communist project that, in theory and practice,
fights for the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.

website: kasamaproject.org
email: kasamasite@yahoo.com

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Slipping Into Darkness

"Left" Economism The CPUSA and the Trade Union Unity League (1929-1935)

by Mike Ely (1980)

I. INTRODUCTION

August 1928—On the campaign trail, Herbert Hoover pompously announced, "We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. The poor house is vanishing from among us . . . We shall soon, with the help of God, be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation."[1] There were many who actually believed him. These were the heady days of a "chicken in every pot." U.S. imperialism had come out of World War I as the only genuine victor. It got fatter and cockier as it elbowed older rivals out of the way and gorged itself on the peoples of the world. For the first time whole nations were in debt to the finance capitalists of Wall Street. The American economy revved its way through the 1920's in explosive speculation and expansion. Politically American capitalism seemed invincible.

Despite exploitation, oppression and the fact that even during the boom years many millions lived in desperation, despite resurgent lynch terror meant to preserve the sharecropper system in the South and fierce repression against Black people in the North, no one could deny that capitalism was, at least, providing steady employment and allowing most people to put food on their tables. For a small upper crust of skilled workers, the expanding empire actually meant that they could win more privileges over the masses of workers. And their reactionary gratitude toward "Americanism" poisoned the political climate in the whole working class, especially the section organized into the craft unions. Professors solemnly declared, "Ford has defeated Marx."

Never before had illusions penetrated so deeply into the American working class.

October 1929—in a blinding flash, the bloated stock market collapsed, and world capitalism quickly sank into a chaotic depression unprecedented in its scope and severity. In three years of straight downward slide, whole branches of industry collapsed. 5,761 banks failed. By 1933, industrial production was cut in half.

For the millions of wage-slaves, the inability of capitalism to profitably exploit them meant that starvation itself stared them in the face. One third of the working class was turned out without hope of finding a job. Wages for those still working were slashed as each capitalist fought the gruesome battle to cut costs to survive. In the scramble for cheap production, work intensity climbed. In the cotton mills of the Carolinas, even young workers started dropping dead on the mill floors from overwork and heart failure.

This catastrophe was not confined to the industrial working class. Huge numbers of white collar workers found themselves with their hands thrust deep into their suit pockets in the soup kitchen lines. Hundreds of thousands of farmers went bankrupt and were driven from their land, migrating in great waves across the country (a process that actually began before the Depression hit the cities). Small businesses fell like dominoes. Students prolonged their schooling (especially in the free universities) because there were no jobs waiting at the end of it.

Black people were driven out of the first toeholds they had established in Northern industry. In Chicago, where Black people were 11% of the population, they made up a quarter of those on relief. In the West, Mexicans and suspected Mexicans were shipped out of the country in boxcars.

A river of men flowed through the railroad yards, the hobo jungles and along the endless rails, looking for work, looking for a way out, just looking. Every major city had its "Hoovervilles," colonies of the displaced, driven to living in tarpaper and tin can shacks. Nothing seemed permanent any more, not for anyone. All of society, from top to bottom, had been hit by an earthquake.

The illusions built over decades were deeply shaken.

In the first years of the Depression the capitalists simply urged patience and faith. "Prosperity is right around the corner." They made a hit song out of the ditty "Happy Days Are Here Again!" But now fewer and fewer believed them. Anger and desperation filled the workers. Never before had the religion of "Americanism" seemed so hollow and deceitful. Millions were looking for answers and radical ideas won a tremendous and growing audience.

Two years into the Depression, the bourgeoisie nervously sensed the political danger the crisis posed for their whole established order. President Hoover whined to Congress on Dec. 8, 1931, "Within two years, there have been revolutions or acute social disorders in 19 countries, embracing more than half the population of the world."[2]

NATIONAL EDITION

Daily Worker

Price 3 Cent

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1929

UNION CENTER FORMED!

Masses of Workers in Convention Launch Trade Union Unity Leagu

CLEVELAND, Ohio, Sept. 2.—With the adoption of the platform and constitution and the election of officers and national committee initial convention of the Trade Union Unity League closed this evening and the delegates started for their places of work to put into effect the cisions. The convention itself was a great success in every sense of the word, there was never for a moment any of that flippancy that characte American Federation of Labor conventions.

The conference of various industries took up much of the time of the convention. In these conferences the problems of various indu were taken up. The convention itself planned the campaigns for mobilizing and leading great mass struggles against rationalization, the spe imperialist war, etc. But the completion of the work depends entirely on the action of the delegates when they return home, their ability to into the factories, mines, etc., the spirit of the Cleveland sessions. The convention burst into spontaneous demonstration when William Z. Foste nominated secretary by Pat Toohey, president of the National Miners' Union.

The demonstration lasted for fifteen minutes. John Schmies, of Detroit, an auto worker, is assistant secretary; Jack Johnstone is n organizer; James Ford is negro organizer. A national committee of approximately 55 was selected upon the basis of nominations fro indu trial groups.

* * *

CLEVELAND, Ohio, Sept. 2.—The American working class has organized a militant trade union movem three crowded days, of convention in Slovenian Auditorium, over 700 delegates from the most basic industrie country, delegates representing whole fighting national industrial unions and militant local unions in re unions, others representing the masses of the unorganized who have gathered together in their shops to se their fellow workers to represent them, delegates from Trade Union Educational League groups in many citi workers' representatives, those who represent the working youth and the working women in industry, have themselves on a national scale for class war against the capitalist system and for a real fight under their ers against exploitation and discrimination.

The necessity of a new labor movement was entirely clear to the representatives of the America class, assembled in this convention, after they had heard, and themselves reported on the steady offensive ployers, centralized into larger and larger corporations and mergers of corporations, and in control machinery.

Worker after worker reported on wage cuts, unem creasing, increased profits for the bosses going hand i increased poverty of the masses. The present labor m A. F. of L. unions and the railroad brotherhoods and suc ents" as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, it was clea proceeding on a totally wrong basis, limiting themselves and to sections only of these, corroded with craft spirit tional quarrels, and led by gangs, machines, of traitor

Picked at ... er Judge's Questions

h Examination in ill Orders Speed-up

ng Preventing De- dice; Attack Union

MOSLEM RULER FEARS 60,000 JOINING REVOLT

Pro-British Chiefs Not Able to Stifle Rebels Thruout Colonies

12 Battles Overnight

India, Turkey, Persia, Egypt, Nejd, Restless

MILITIA TO AID MARION EVICTION, BAR ALL PARADES

Labor Defense Offers Help to Arrested

COAST WORKERS AID GASTONIA 16

Coal Miners in Battle to Save Prisoners

"They're All Guilty," Is Cry of One Charlotte Venireman

Sidelights on Great Trial Show How Mill Boss Press Has Roused Opinion Against Prisoners

By SENDER GARLIN

BEHLER, DUNNE AND DEFENDANTS GO TO CLEVELAND

Third Delegation From Southern Textile Mills

ZIONISTS PLAN TO ATTACK MEET

Cleveland Communists Will Defy Them

CALL FIGHT ON CAR SELL-OUT

T.U.E.L. Expose N. J. Fakers' Plans

LAND OF SOVIETS NEARING PACIFIC

On Last Leg of Siberia Part of Hop

GERMAN YOUTH HOLDS RED DAY

Recover 35 Bodies of Italian Workers in Algiers House Wreck

Gastonia Defense Greets the TUUC in 2nd Week of Trial

Effigies of Gastonia Bosses Burned by British Workers

...tional Protest Against Manville-

TUUL

In 1932, two distinguished guests at Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration were overheard discussing their growing fears:

"Gentlemen," one of them began, "It's revolution. I'm telling you. . . I can see 'em now, howling up Fifth Avenue with blood in their eye, howling up Market Street and Beacon Street and Michigan Avenue!"

"Who?"

"Why, the birds that get hungry, that's who!"[3]

In the crisis, the stench of capitalism became overpowering. There was no place to hide from the major questions of society and the future. Self-proclaimed "armies" of jobless workers converged on Washington, D.C. looking for help and relief. Populist "share-the-wealth" movements sprang up everywhere. In 1932, the Communist Party wrote, "The masses are beginning rightly to sense that Communism has an important message for the human race and they want to know what it is."[4]

The CPUSA rushed into the 1930s determined to create a revolutionary movement. It declared "the Communist Party must raise before the toilers in the United States the revolutionary way out of the crisis," "only the destruction of the capitalist system, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, of Soviet power, can free the millions of toilers."[5]

In the decade that followed, millions took up the struggle against the effects of the crisis. Hundreds of thousands passed through the ranks of the Communist Party, and the whole working class—in fact the whole country—was influenced by its work.

When the smoke of the decade cleared, *there was no trace of a mass revolutionary movement among the American people!*

This article will dig into the roots of how this happened. And for that reason, it will most definitely not be a nostalgic trip through the past battles of the CPUSA's "better days." In fact, the lessons of the thirties are overwhelmingly *negative* lessons for revolutionaries today. Even in the period of 1929-1935, when the CP was clearly a revolutionary organization that upheld the goal of proletarian revolution, the line it held on how to do political work in the working class helped set the stage for the later move into open revisionism. Here we are not attempting an overall summation of the CPUSA, its work in other major fields and all the factors that contributed to the rise of revisionism. We are focusing on the line, "*left*" *economism*, that led the work of the CP in the early Depression, and especially the way that line got carried out in the trade union work of the Party, the building of the Trade Union Unity League.

For years, the revolutionary movement that grew out of the 1960s has been plagued by the tendency to resurrect the lines of the thirties uncritically. Xerox machines and old documents have kept dogmatists busy all through the last decade. New and old revisionist parties promote now one, now another, of the "old" CPUSA's political lines and organizational plans. At times it seems like we are watching a competition over which group can most quickly re-enact the CP's slide down the road to hell.

Even among genuine revolutionaries, there still exists a tendency to swallow uncritically the revisionist CP's historical summation of its own past.

In the last years there have been a whole series of books published by the CP and its admirers to establish its organizational "lineage" to the "glory" of the past, and to spread its summation of the thirties: The works of William Z. Foster (*American Trade Unionism, History of the CPUSA, Pages From a Worker's Life*); John Williamson's *Dangerous Scot*; and *Labor's Untold Story*, by Morais & Boyer, among others. In addition there is a collection of memoirs by social-democrats formerly in the CP: Peggy Dennis' *The Autobiography of an American Communist*; Al Richmond's *Long View from the Left*, etc. Add to this *Black Bolshevik*, by ex-CP (and present CPML) figure Harry Haywood, who manages to uphold every wrong line the CP ever had on trade unionism, even when some of these conflict with each other. In all these upside-down accounts, the economic struggle the workers waged before World War 2 was the greatest heights the class could aspire to, and the CP's role in organizing that struggle the pinnacle of communist work.

All history is written to fight for a political line. The pro-revisionist histories present a certain (narrow) picture of the economic struggle of the '30s in order to glorify economism; the fanatical anti-communist social democrats (such as Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, and Theodore Draper, whose books are standard bourgeois texts on the period) paint a picture of some perfectly good trade unionism ruined by "Stalinist" zealots who insisted on tainting it with politics on "orders from Moscow." The history we have written here is written to root out economism, not praise it.

Any nostalgic attachment to the *political lines* of this period, because of the breadth of the motion among the workers or because some of the leaders of the struggle called themselves communists, completely misses the point of studying history. It is not an accident that almost every opportunist line to emerge within the revolutionary movement today wrapped itself in the mantle of one period or another of the "old" CPUSA. This includes the Mensheviks who split from the RCP in January 1978. Of course, these particular opportunists consider the CP of 1929-1935 a little too "left"—they base themselves on the CP's more openly rightist periods.[6] However, the "left" economism so characteristic of the CP in the early Depression has been taken up lock, stock and barrel by some today (the Communist Workers Party, for example[7]), and it remains a deviation quite suited to the present period, especially since it is so able to disguise itself with revolutionary phraseology.

The CP lost its bearings right at the moment of its greatest opportunity. For us, in the 1980s, the practical relevance of these historical lessons is obvious.

II. CP's INTERNAL STRUGGLE, PREPARING FOR CRISIS

For a full year before the stock market crash, the Communist Party raced against time to shake up its own ranks and prepare to play a revolutionary role in the turmoil it knew was coming.

Seven years of "peaceful prosperity," with its accompanying reaction and repression, had cut away at the broad influence the Party had won in the post WW1 upsurge and the early 1920s. Its numbers shrank to a few thousand members, concentrated especially among foreign-born workers, who, because of their involvement in the revolutionary movements of Europe, tended to have a much higher political level than many native-born workers. These losses were inevitable, to one degree or another, during such a period of ebb. But within the Party there arose a strong rightist tendency that thrived on and in turn fed an intense demoralization.

By 1928, this more and more openly

revisionist trend became concentrated in the line of Jay Lovestone (Party head since 1927) and his supporters. Their consistent line had been to emphasize third party coalitions with various reformers, social democrats, farm populists and trade unionists. As these forces, one by one, merged into the political campaigns of bourgeois politicians, like Wisconsin Senator Robert LaFollette's presidential bid, the Lovestoneites fought within the Party to have Communists follow these "progressives" into the clammy waters of the American "mainstream."

"Our big demonstrations and mass meetings are altogether too much confined to events that appeal only to the revolutionary and more progressive worker who, after all, is the exception in the American working class . . . the practically unsophisticated masses of American workers cannot be reached by these mass meetings and mass demonstrations. They can only be reached by discussions of problems and issues which they understand and recognize. Capitalism, unfortunately, is not yet an issue with them, nor is it a problem of theirs."

But surrounded by the signs of rapidly approaching crisis, with the clear analysis of the Communist International that stabilization was coming to an end, the Lovestone leadership of the CP and all that they represented stood out more and more starkly as an obstacle to seizing the opportunities arising.

In 1928, the Communist International launched an international struggle against those determined to stick their heads in the sand and ignore what was coming. It wrote that the "present stabilization period is growing into a period of *gigantic cataclysms*."[9]

A political confrontation was brewing as the two lines sharpened up, driven by events. The three major Lovestoneites (Gitlow, Lovestone and Pepper) produced a thesis of "American Exceptionalism," a smug, agnostic rejection of Marxism-Leninism. They announced the "Hooverian Age," "an epoch of affluence and magnificence, of peace and prosperity . . ."[10] "A powerful technical revolution is taking place in the United States, a tremendous rationalization, an increase in the forces of production, which in its effects can be compared to a second industrial revolution."[11]

The struggle broke out and raged over the question of whether crisis was coming, and ultimately whether there was a possibility of revolution in the United States. When Lovestone and his closest supporters were expelled,* the Party had consolidated itself around a new line that touched every area of its work, on the Black national question, on the question of crisis and the laws of capitalism—and what concerns us in this article—a new view of political work in the working class and the trade unions, the line of "revolutionary unions."

Throughout 1929, this political two-line struggle within the Party was paralleled by a campaign to create a mass revolutionary organization to lead the upsurge of the masses that intensified crisis and impoverishment would bring. September 1, 1929, two months before the crash on Wall Street, the Trade Union Unity League, a federation of "revolutionary trade unions," was gavelled into existence at its Cleveland convention.

The very fact that this struggle took place, that communists anticipated the crisis and fought to prepare their own ranks, is testimony to the science of Marxism, and puts the lie to the scribblings of bourgeois economists and historians who declare that the crash was unforeseen and unforeseeable. At the same time, the new line of the Party showed the powerful weaknesses in understanding that accompanied its renewed revolutionary spirit. And these were weaknesses that were going to have a powerful influence on the ability of the CP to carry through with its plans to build a revolutionary movement.

Changes in Trade Union Line—from TUEL to TUUL

Like every other aspect of the CP's political line, the trade union strategy of the Party was in sharp crisis as the Roaring '20s prosperity drew to a close. Since 1922, the Party had basically followed a policy of concentrating on the economic struggles involving the established trade unions, seeking to build a national movement of left-wing caucuses—"the militant minority"—within them, to amalgamate them into industrial unions, and radicalize the working class by seizing the leadership of the unions and taking them to the left. This was the policy of "boring from within," closely associated with William Z. Foster, a leading member of the CP and the leader of its trade union work for years. Foster's policies were based on the assumption that winning leadership of the majority of workers by leading their economic struggles was the necessary step toward any political movement.

"It may be accepted as an axiom that whoever controls the trade unions is able to dictate the general policies, economic, political and otherwise of the whole working class."[12]

And further, according to Foster, this process had to go through established trade union channels because approaching the workers directly and politically would inevitably produce rejection. As Foster later explained it

"the old trade unions had the vital advantage of speaking the same language as the broad masses in respect of religion, patriotism and general American traditions while the dual unionist revolutionaries were usually anti-religious, anti-patriotic, and altogether scornful of American traditions in general.

"The basic advantage of boring from within as a method over dual unionism was that the militants, by being inside the old unions, negated altogether the adverse affects of several of the above strong mass opinions and predilections and greatly modified those of the rest; with the general result that the militants had a better approach to the workers and were thus enabled to win to their side large and ever decisive masses of them for policies of class struggle."[13]

The Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), founded by Foster before he joined the Party, was adopted by the new-born Communist Party in 1922 to be its major weapon in the triumphant march through the unions.

"Our main strategy was to revolutionize these [AFL craft] unions by giving them Communist leadership (through organized minorities, and such official posts as we could conquer), by amalgamating them into industrial unions, and aside from par-

* Lovestone's expulsion in 1929 was preceded by the political struggle with a tiny clot of Trotskyites, whose dishonest intrigue scarcely took the form of a major line struggle. In any case, they are incidental to the events we are analyzing here.

In passing it is interesting to note that the Lovestoneites degenerated completely into renegades, stool pigeons, CIA agents and general professional anti-communists. After years of political intrigue within the American trade union movement, Lovestone became the CIA's favorite operative within the labor movement, especially internationally. He was involved in arranging union credentials for CIA agents bound for Latin America, and other unsavory service to imperialism.

tial support of existing independent [non-AFL] unions in unorganized industries, by organizing the unorganized masses into the old ones. The TUEL national center directed this general minority movement and challenged the AF of L bureaucrats for leadership of the masses."[11]

It didn't work that way. By 1923, the very "progressive" trade union officials that the Party planned to unite with in a "left-progressive bloc" were patching up their differences with the main body of the union bureaucracy and helping to launch a massive expulsion campaign against Communists. The union structure did not move to the left, but instead dove headlong into a frenzy of wheeling and dealing, bribe-taking, "labor" banking and infamous new schemes to help speed-up the workers. Where the Party had successfully won some leadership of the economic struggle, in the coal mines and garment industry, the influence did not lead to secure positions within the union structure, but to massive and violent expulsion fights.

Most important of all, from a communist point of view, the policy did not lead to the political radicalization of the working class.

Although Foster bitterly fought the Lovestone faction for control of the Party, and ultimately opposed their rejection of the line of the Communist International, his line on trade union work was based on a similar view of straight, steady work around the day-to-day concerns of the masses. When the line was put into practice it met with failure, and when struggle broke out it did not follow the plan and lead to radicalization of the masses through union positions for the "militant minority." Conditions had changed, the economic struggle died down during the '20s, and with it the willingness of union officials to allow themselves to be dragged into confrontation with the employers evaporated.

Three industries did provide the Communists with a mass base: textiles, coal and the garment industry. All three of these industries missed the "golden glow" of prosperity. For various reasons, vicious price wars, layoffs and wage cutting swept them years before the overall Depression itself broke out. Because of the intensity of the oppression, the rapid impoverishment and the man-killing speedup, and because there was a large percentage of immigrant workers concentrated there, the Communists won massive influence. But instead of seizing control from the well-entrenched hacks, they were expelled, often taking thousands of workers with them.

In 1928, under pressure from the Communist International and from stark reality, the CP broke with "boring from within" and started to organize independent unions. In September, 1928, the National Miners Union (NMU) was formed out of the militants of the crushed 1927 miners' strike to "Save our union." With that defeat the AFL-affiliated United Mine Workers had been broken organizationally throughout the coalfields and its treachery had earned the hatred of the more active and advanced workers. The NMU vowed to replace it with militant "class struggle" industrial unionism. Similarly the National Textile Workers Union was formed at the same time, out of the ashes of the strike of 26,000 cotton mill workers in New Bedford, Mass. In December, 1928, the revolutionary fur workers, their organization intact after years of bitter and bloody struggle in the New York garment district (where the AFL hacks had driven out 12,000 members—the whole New York membership), united other expelled and militant garment workers around themselves and their Communist leaders to form the Needle Trades Industrial Union. These were the first results of the new line of the Communist Party in the trade unions, and the signs that the Communists were breaking with religious awe for the established labor institutions.

Dual Unionism

Conventional wisdom among social democrats, revisionists, bourgeois historians and even some genuine communists is that the Communist Party, driven by frustration, flipped into an infantile, sterile and sectarian ultra-"left" binge in the late twenties, and recovered its senses barely in time to make its historic contribution to the American working class: the building of the industrial unions in basic industry and the passage of unemployment insurance.

By forming *dual* unions (unions apart from and sometimes paralleling the existing AFL craft unions), this story has it, the Communists violated sacred principles and cut themselves off from the "mainstream of American labor." Gloriously pure but inevitably rejected.

Foster, despite the fact that he led the Party's practical union work of this period, and even gave it critical endorsements in his later histories,[12] is undoubtedly a major source of the "dual union" taboo. After all it was Foster himself whose main contribution to the theology of American revisionism was that dual unionism was the U.S. revolutionary movement's original sin: "Dual unionism has poisoned the very springs of progress in the American labor movement, and is largely responsible for its present sorry plight."[13]

In his view even the most hidebound craft unions restricted to skilled (and usually white) workers had, as Foster put it, an inherently "working class character under their veneer of bourgeois ideology and reactionary leadership . . ."[14] The very idea of forming "dual unions" conjures up the image of "splitting the working class" if you succeed, and sterile isolation if you don't.

This ignores the fact that the working class was (and is) already split, into a politically backward labor aristocracy, and the broader masses of ordinary workers, among whom it was (and is) extremely important to build up a revolutionary political pole, in opposition to the reactionary outlook actively promoted by the bourgeoisie's representatives in the unions whose social base comes from this labor aristocracy. This certainly does not mean that the task of communists was (or is) to smash the existing unions, or to set up special economic organizations for the most advanced workers. But the criticism of dual unionism leveled against the TUUL that has been standard gospel about this period really amounts to the viewpoint of the labor aristocracy and those like AFL head Samuel Gompers (the George Meany of his day) who claim that they are the "legitimate" spokesmen of the whole working class.

Any concrete analysis of the objective conditions in the working class at that time shows that by the time the crisis got going, the AFL was so isolated from the profound turmoil among the industrial workers that to try to center political work inside of it would violate the basic principle of uniting with the masses.

Throughout the '20s, the AFL shrank steadily, and was more and more exclusively based on the most skilled workers, and focused on the battle for privileges over the masses. The few industrial unions within the Federation were hardest hit. Some, like the brewery workers and the seaman's union, simply folded. The United Mine Workers, the largest and most influential union in the U.S., disintegrated under the combined assault of the pro-

found overproduction crisis in coal (starting in 1922) and the gruesomely reactionary policies of the John L. Lewis clique. In 1920, the AFL had encompassed 19.4% of the working class, and in major struggles was actually a vehicle for leading the broad masses, including the unskilled. By 1930, the AFL barely spoke for 10% of the workers, even by its own figures.

Great sections of American industry were virtually untouched by union organization, including most of steel, auto, electrical equipment, rubber, cement, textiles, chemicals, food, oil and non-ferrous mining. Where unions did exist they were usually so corrupt and conservative that they were worse than useless, even to the workers who belonged to them, and were propped up as an instrument of the employers. It is typical that the AFL opposed unemployment insurance far into the Depression on the grounds that the "dole" undermined the individual initiative that "made America great"!

Fortune magazine reported the obvious: "The Federation has been suffering from pernicious anaemia, sociological myopia, and hardening of the arteries . . ."[5] Wherever struggle broke out, new unions sprang up, organized by those expelled from the AFL, including "non-political" unionists, socialists and various defeated bureaucrats, all competing for the leadership of the masses. Communists were not the only ones forced to give up neat little plans for "boring from within."

But in fact, there is a very serious error associated with dual unionism, and that is syndicalism, a tendency which has historically been deeply rooted in the U.S. revolutionary movement, including the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) at the beginning of the century. Syndicalism sees the task of transforming ownership of the means of production from the hands of the capitalists to the workers as principally an economic question, neglecting the key role of the state and state power, of political revolution, in this transformation. Usually this means organizing the working class to fight for socialism on an economic basis—shop by shop and industry by industry—and neglecting the political organization of the workers, their organization to carry out revolutionary political struggle and eventually political insurrection—a line that often involves underestimating or even denying the need for the political party of the working class as its highest form of organization. In the old IWW, it even took the form of a stand against such political struggle as the fight against the first world war, and calling on the workers to concentrate instead on building up the battles against their employers.

For the CP in the period we are talking about here, this syndicalism shows itself clearly in the very idea of "revolutionary unionism," as though industrial unions which can only be organized on a shop-by-shop and industry-by-industry basis were the basic revolutionary organization of the working class. This is tied to the CP's economist line of unfolding political work mainly around the struggle over wages and working conditions. What was wrong with the CP's line was not so much the "dual" as the "unionism."

Gastonia

In the spring of 1928, in the small North Carolina mill town of Gastonia, the new CP-led textile union got its baptism of fire. The struggle in Gastonia was a first glimpse of coming changes in the consciousness and activity of even the more backward sections of the working class. And it broke out at the climax of the two-line struggle with the Lovestoneites within the Party including the sharp internal debate over how to conduct political work in the working class upsurges.

The bourgeoisie was proud of the political backwardness of the Southern white workers. They were religious, racist, filled with the ignorant backwardness of rural life, and held up as examples of why revolution was only the un-American scheme of foreigners. When they rebelled under Communist leadership it was a political statement that electrified the whole country, and inevitably brought out the most determined hatred of the oppressors.

Year after year of intensifying exploitation, a workday of eleven and twelve hours, the nerve-wracking work of tending several looms at once, and the constant "stretch-out" increasing the work load on each worker, all the effects of the intensified competition and crisis within the textile industry brought the workers to the limits of human endurance. Every institution in the company towns stood against them. Even the preachers were notorious for teaching that the Bible opposed bathing, in order to excuse the company housing without indoor plumbing. Within days of being contacted by the National Textile Workers Union, the workers felt they had what they had needed for years, a leading center with experience in fighting the oppressors, and the promise of outside relief to keep their families alive when the wages stopped. Contact between the union and a few active workers, two speeches to crowds of workers from the Loray Mills, and the strike was on.

Right from the start, the bourgeoisie tried to redbait the strikers and divide the workers from the Communists. The *Gastonia Gazette* ran a full page ad "paid for by the Citizens of Gaston County," declaring:

"The strike at the Loray is something more than merely a few men striking for better wages. It was not inaugurated for that purpose. It was started simply for the purpose of overthrowing this Government and destroying property and to kill, kill, kill."[6]

A federal mediator at the scene announced that a settlement was inconceivable until "the workers divorce themselves from their communistic leaders." In its present form it was "not a strike, but a revolt."

The strike was a sharp challenge to the whole heavy hand of class rule in the South. Nominally the demands of the strikers were simply the means to life itself. They demanded a weekly wage of $20, a forty-hour week, no more piece rate, better living conditions in the company housing, union recognition. The mill superintendent replied, "You realize that if we should comply with them, it would mean that we would virtually give you the plant." All the local pillars of society were mobilized against them: the press, the National Guard, sheriffs, the nightriders called "The Committee of 100," all aimed at stomping out the spark that threatened to ignite the Southern working class and spread throughout the country.

The strikers were almost immediately evicted from their company housing and forced to live in tents pitched in the mud. Facing beatings and gunfire almost constantly, they organized armed self-defense. When the lawmen and thugs fired, they fired back. When the local police chief led a drunken charge on the union hall, he was blown away. These strikers knew the odds they were up against, but they considered their lives intolerable and were determined to change things no matter what. This is what made their struggle a manifesto that threw cold fear into the hearts of the bourgeoisie and brought support for their fight from across the South and throughout the country.

Workers came from every Southern state. By foot, horse and ramshackle car they came to support the struggle.

The funeral of four men killed by Detroit police during a Hunger March of 3000 led by the TUUL and the Unemployed Council, demanding jobs or income from their former employer at the Ford River Rouge plant. There is a sharp contrast between the portrait of Lenin that hangs over the funeral—obviously symbolizing the cause for which these men gave their lives—and the DAILY WORKER's treatment of this struggle, which focuses solely on the immediate demands of the workers and in no way uses it to bring out the need for revolution.

...ity of Employed and Unemployed Main Task--This Is the Lesson o... the Hunger March of Ford Worke...

JOHN SCHMIES
Organizer of the C. P.)
) workers participated in
unger March during the
it lasted. The march-
gather at 1 p. m. and
narch at Midnight. In
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the "new deal"
the Wall ...

DEMANDS OF THE FORD WORKERS

1. Immediate cash relief of $3 per week and $2 for each dependent for all unemployed Ford workers and Trade School students laid off in the last three years.
2. $3 a day minimum wage for Trade School students; admission of Negro boys to the Trade School.
3. No payment of relief when rehired at Ford's, cancellation of debts due the Ford company on the part of the Ford workers.
4. Abolition of the $1 a day wage at the Ford plant.
5. A $5 a day minimum wage and corresponding increases for higher paid workers.
6. Minimum of three days work, eight hours a day, or three days pay each week.
7. Free medical aid and hospital service to unemployed Ford workers and their families.
8. Abolition of the Service Department.
9. Slowing down of the inhuman speed-up, setting up of workers committees to control the speed of conveyors and machi...
10. No discrimination against Negro ... equal opportunities fo...

But from now on the hourly ... the union must be a much a... orientation to the employed ... workers the building of anti-wa... committees, grievance committee... tion committees against grievanc... be acted upon immediately, anti... off committees, committees ag... the speed-up in the departments, ... And on this basis develop the stru... against wage-cuts, against relief c... for increases in wages and for a p... gram of Unemployment Insurance ... the expense of the bosses and th... government.

The prestige of the Auto Worke... Union developed as a result of th... Ford Hunger March to a very hig... degree. Hundreds of workers express... ed openly that this march has dem... onstrated the seriousness and honesty ... of the Auto Workers Union in their ... fight for relief for the auto workers—... and not as the enemies ... the union and ...

In surrounding mill towns, every twist and turn of the strike was watched intensely. Advanced forces eagerly made contact with the union and the Party and repeated attempts were made to turn the strike into a general strike of the mills in the area.

Calls went out to the National Guard to mutiny and join the strikers:

"Workers in the National Guard: we, the striking workers, are your brothers. Our fight is your fight. Help us win the strike... Refuse to shoot or bayonet your fathers or brothers... Fight with your class, the striking workers."[20]

In the few short months the strike lasted, before it was crushed in a bloody wave of lynch-mob terror, a political battle raged among the Communists about how to conduct the strike. It paralleled the strike itself in intensity and bitterness.

The question was whether or not and how the strike should be "politicized," as it was then said, and one of the sharpest ways this came down was over the issue of whether or not the strikers should take up the "race question." All but a few of the workers were white, as a result of Jim Crow practices by the owners. The CP strike leaders opposed taking up the question of Jim Crow at all, fearing that it might divide the white strikers and undermine some of the support the strike was receiving from the community.

Fred Beal, the main CP strike organizer, recounts with scorn in his autobiography, how another comrade

"brought orders from the Comintern and from the Central Committee that I emphasize the Negro Question. I explained that there had been only two Negroes working in the mill and that they had fled when the strike started. But Weisbord argued that this situation involved other things than a mere strike.

"'It's not just a skirmish. We must prepare the workers for the coming revolution. We must look ahead and smash all feelings of inequality,' he insisted.

"I failed to understand how it was possible to bring into the strike the question of Negro rights when there were no Negroes involved."[21]

Beal's viewpoint was ridiculously narrow, since this strike was taking place in the heart of a region kept backward by a sharecropper system that could not survive without the semi-feudal oppression of Black people (even though many sharecroppers were white). In fact, the huge supply of labor available to the mill owners, including the many sharecroppers who had worked in the mill at one time or another in the past, was a tremendous obstacle to the strikers. True, the strike *could* be waged without any reference to Black people at all—but it was a fantasy to say that the situation of the strikers had nothing to do with the oppression of Black people. Certainly there was a basis to "politicize" the strike in this sense.

In nearby Bessemer City, the line of trying to spread the struggle from Gastonia into a general strike in the Southern textile industry—a line also opposed by the open rightists within the Party—began to become a reality. The workers struck one of the few mills that employed both Black and white. At a union meeting, the whites requested that a Jim Crow wire be stretched between the workers. The Communist organizer of the meeting, George Pershing, strung it up. The Black workers left the meeting and never came back; and the strike crumbled until it consisted of just a few blacklisted workers picketing a humming factory.[22]

Even more telling was that when the national CP leadership sent a leading Party member, Otto Hall, to root out this betrayal of the new "Negro program of the Union, the RILU, the Party and the CI,* *he capitulated too!* To the disgust of the Party center, he suggested that the Black workers be organized into a separate organization so that the issue of the wire would not come up. Hall was Black and this was not a case of being infected with the prevalent racism. Rather it was a case of giving in to what seemed most "practical"—after all, if it's only a union that you're after, why go up against segregation, which wasn't even really an issue at stake in this immediate battle?[23]

Even after the strike was crushed, the two lines were carried right into the kangaroo courtroom where 15 strikers and leaders were railroaded on murder charges, in connection with the shooting of the police chief. Some Communists simply protested their innocence, even though the Party's line was to proclaim the fight of self-defense. One comrade, Edith Miller of the Young Communist League, spit in the face of the anti-communist hysteria, openly declaring that revolution was the agenda of the working class, and when challenged on the question, boldly defended atheism from the witness stand.

The problem was that the two lines that were in contention within the CP over how to conduct this strike were both wrong, although one was clearly counter-revolutionary. The open rightists, including most of the on-the-spot leadership of the strike who were associated with the Lovestone faction (and who left the Party shortly after), fought tooth and nail for the line that "the struggle in Gastonia was to win the strike for its immediate benefits and not for forming Soviets," as Fred Beal, the main CP organizer, later wrote.[24]

Instead of seeing the strike as a "school of war," as Lenin had said, "a school in which the workers learn to make war on their enemies for the liberation of the whole people," the other line saw this strike as though it were the war itself, as though this struggle (or a spreading of it) could lead in a straight line to revolution.

CP strike leader Albert Weisbord declared at a strike meeting:

"This strike is the first shot in a battle which will be heard around the world. It will prove as important in transforming the social and political life of this country as the Civil War itself."[25]

Here Weisbord completely identifies the strike with insurrection, as though they were the same thing. But this blurring over of distinctions, which is, in the final analysis, rightist, was presented in a very "left" form. While Beal, the open rightist, was trying to talk the workers out of carrying guns (apparently he thought this strike was looking too much like an insurrection), the "left" line was claiming that because of the guns it already *was* an insurrection.

As a nationally distributed CP pamphlet summing up the Gastonia strike said:

"The struggle in Gastonia has reached a far higher stage—that of armed struggle... [this] furnishes irrefutable proof of the process by which the inner contradictions of capitalism in the imperialist period bring on economic struggles which speedily take on a political character."[26]

True, especially because of conditions in Gastonia, the strike did raise sharp political issues—this is why it stood out so clearly that the openly rightist line was wrong. But the fact that the strikers took up guns against the law did not in and of itself mean

* The RILU was the Red International of Labor Unions, the international organization of revolutionary and communist-led unions, and the CI is the Communist International.

that they were acquiring a revolutionary Marxist outlook, that they were waging a consciously political struggle or a struggle over something more than the terms of the sale of their labor power.

In fact, when the CP did try to bring Marxism to this strike, it was badly infected with the economism and syndicalism that appeared in such a "left" form in the Party's declarations. The Young Communist League was the main open face of the Party during the strike. In a speech that drove the open rightist Fred Beal up the wall, the YCL representative gave the following announcement at a press conference when he arrived in Gastonia:

"I am here for the purpose of organizing the Young Communist Workers' League. The principle view of the Communists is control of the country by the workers. Under Communist control the Loray Mill and every other mill would be operated by a general committee made up of one representative worker from each department, and they would elect a manager who would be responsible to this general committee."[47]

At this point, Beal cut the YCL representative off and told him that from now on only he, Beal, would speak to the press; he considered the speech a provocation. But the real problem is not that it upped the ante as far as the mill owners were concerned. The mill owners, faced with deadly competition, were of the opinion that if they gave in even around wages and working conditions they'd go broke, which was almost as bad as communist revolution. The real problem is that this speech is sucker-baiting—an attempt to "sell" socialism to the workers on the basis that this is how they can satisfy their economic demands. It reeks of syndicalism, and is at bottom a thoroughly reformist attempt to make the goal of revolution seem "concrete" to the workers, as though control of the Loray Mills was what they had been seeking all their lives.

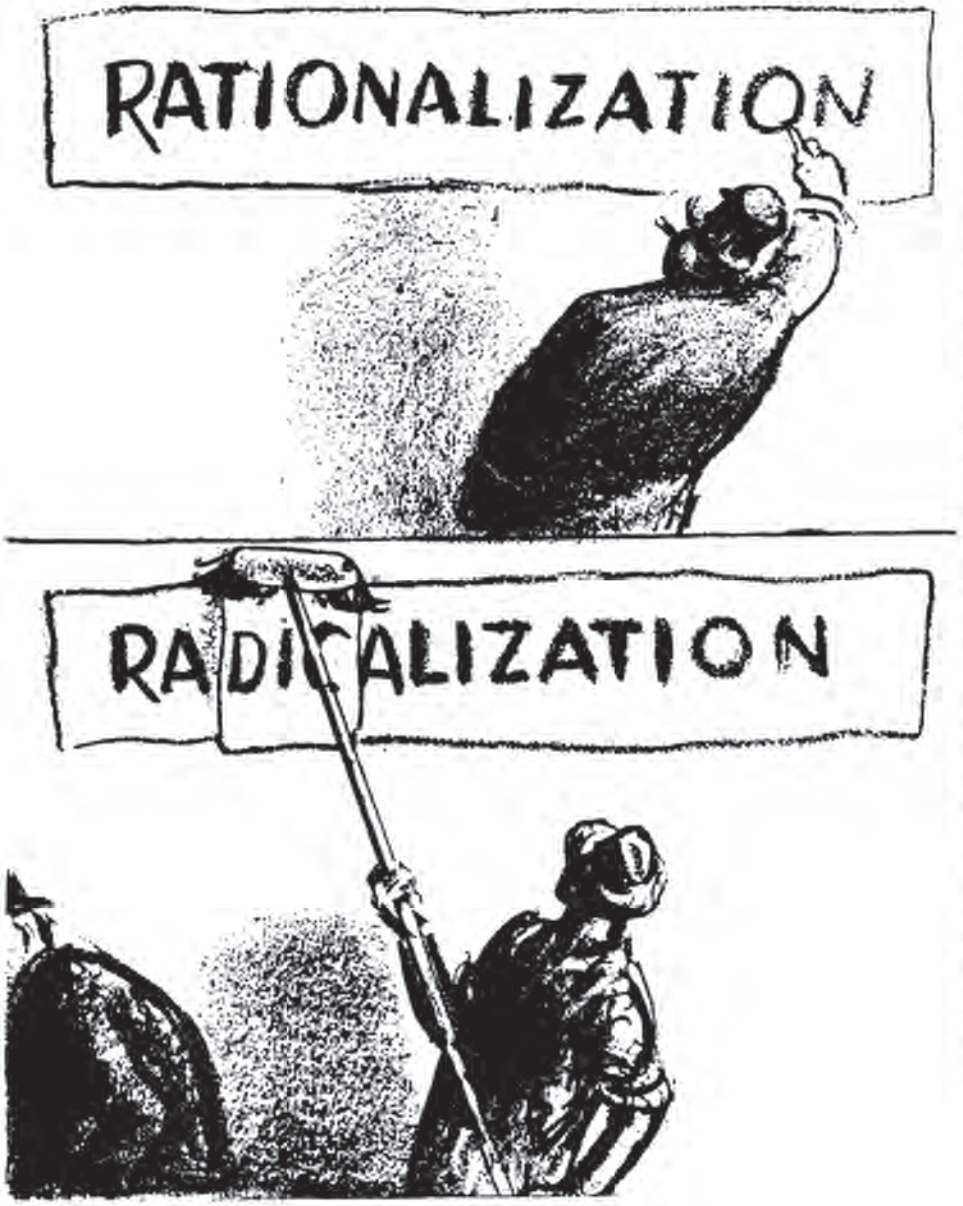
The combination of open rightism by the CPers involved in the strike on a day-to-day level with the empty bombast heaped on from outside formed a unity—both aspects meant that the CP was doing little to actually divert this spontaneous battle into a conscious part of the revolutionary struggle. That's why the same man, George Pershing, who made the brash YCL statement quoted above on his first day in town, was also the man who later strung up the Jim Crow wire at Bessemer City. The general rhetoric about revolution quickly melted in the heat of practical work.

III. "LEFT" ECONOMISM

At the Labor Day, 1929 convention in Cleveland that founded the TUUL, CP spokesman William Dunne declared:

"The main objective of the RILU, the overthrow of capitalism, requires for its attainment organization of the

THE WORKERS' ANSWER! By **Fred Ellis**



As it turned out, "rationalization" (speed-up, layoffs and other capitalist attempts to get out of the crisis) didn't automatically spread to revolutionary politics among the workers. Underestimation of the task of communists to transform the consciousness of the masses is what the CP's line during the early Depression had in common with all economism.

workers in disciplined battalions around a program which meets the daily needs of the masses."[28]

For this purpose they set out to build an organization that would win widespread influence among the workers by focusing on the burning economic needs of the masses, unionize them, and then be the arena for increasing "the class consciousness of the masses on the basis of their experience in these struggles." This they saw as the first and central step to take on the road to revolution:

"The building of the TUUL, the development of the new unions into organizations of struggle for the daily demands of the workers, especially in the basic industries, is a prerequisite for turning our Party into a mass Party, capable of leading the workers in their struggles against capitalism."[29]

So naturally, following this line, the convention of the "revolutionary unions" spent the major part of the meeting broken down into 16 different industrial caucuses developing a program of immediate economic struggle for each branch of industry, and cementing the organizational ties that were hopefully to be the basis of massive unions that would soon sweep America.

Down to the smallest details, the new organization was built along union lines—local bodies were going to be Trade Union Unity Councils, patterned after the central labor bodies of the craft unions.

Here was a rival center of union organization that was going to fashion itself into the perfect vehicle for the coming upsurge of the workers. "The heart of the convention was the struggle against capitalist rationalization and all its evil consequences of speed-up, unemployment, accidents, occupational sickness, low wages, etc."[30] Any worker who accepted the "basic program of class struggle" was welcome. And the entire thrust of the organization made it clear that this "class struggle" was simply the opposite of traditional "class collaboration"; it meant "a militant strike policy"[31] plus a general orientation that the bosses and the workers had nothing in common—a notion that does not at all overstep the bounds of trade unionism.

At the end of the three-day convention, a rousing plenum "enthusiastically" passed a series of resolutions and slogans that were intended to inject revolutionary politics: "Build the Trade Union Unity League! Fight Against Imperialist War! Defend the Soviet Union! Fight Against Capitalist Rationalization! Organize the Unorganized! For the 7-Hour Day, 5-Day Week! For Social Insurance! For Full Racial, Social and Political Equality for Negroes! Organize Youth and Women! Defeat the Misleaders of Labor! For World Trade Union Unity!"[32]

An eclectic mixture of slogans tacked onto the end of a convention overwhelmingly immersed in laying plans for massive unionization drives. This was what the CP saw as the first step in combining the immediate economic demands of the workers with the major political questions that faced the class.

On the one hand, the slogans took a stand against the oppression of Black people and called attention to the urgent political question of a new imperialist war aimed at the Soviet Union; on the other, the whole movement was so consumed with its central focus on alleviating the escalating impoverishment through militant unionization strikes, that even the most baldly utopian and reformist slogans like the "7-Hour Day" slipped in as a major "rallying cry."

What was the plan behind this "revolutionary unionism" and how was it going to enable the Communist Party to lead an uprising to overthrow the system and the government? In short, what was supposed to be "revolutionary" about this unionism?

To understand this, we have to get a picture of what the CP thought was going on in the world, and how they thought workers became revolutionary. In a nutshell, they thought that capitalism was so rotten ripe, that the Depression was going to be so profound and long lasting, that the masses were plunging into such profound impoverishment... that every demand for the very means of life would challenge the system itself. As the CP summed it up a few years later: "Fight For Bread Is A Fight Against Capitalism."[33]

From the struggles against the effects of the crisis, out of the crying needs of workers driven to starvation by unemployment and wage cuts, would come ever greater explosions and the approach of revolutionary consciousness and the revolution itself.

As the CP portrayed its smooth ride to power:

"The revolutionary way out of the crisis begins with the fight for unemployment insurance, against wage cuts, for wage increases, for relief to the farmers—through demonstrations, strikes, general strikes, leading up to the seizure of power, to the destruction of capitalism by a revolutionary workers' government."[34]

There was one little problem with this theory. It was based on idealism, not on the actual laws of development of society. As we shall see in a moment, the result of this was that the CP got stuck, completely bogged down in a long fruitless battle to complete the first stage—winning the majority of the workers to its leadership in the economic struggle.

But first, we have to examine exactly what is wrong with this whole plan for revolution theoretically, their view of crisis, and their view of consciousness.

Crisis and Consciousness

The CP's view of crisis was that capitalism, in the era of imperialism, was so moribund that it was impossible to maintain even the most temporary prosperity without constantly increasing the absolute impoverishment of the masses. The misery and desperation of the masses could only mount until they were driven to deliver the final blows to the system.

"Any recovery, therefore, that may be registered from the present economic crisis can, at most, be only *very* partial and temporary in character. It must soon be followed by another crash still more far-reaching and devastating to the capitalist system."[35]

Overall, the system was seen to be in a permanent tailspin. What they overlooked was exactly the possibility of a world war affecting capitalism the way World War 2 ultimately did. In his book *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin laid the basis for the understanding that imperialist war for redivision of the world plays the role under monopoly capitalism that economic crisis played during its earlier stage—that of purging and reorganizing capital so that it can once again reproduce itself profitably, until the next spiral of crisis and war.

Although hindsight makes it easy to criticize the CP's conception that a revolutionary situation would quickly develop in the U.S., such a development was not inconceivable at the time this analysis was made, and of course revolutionary situations did develop in other countries during this period of capitalist crisis. Nor was the CP's analysis based on the assumption that economic crisis alone would give rise to a revolutionary situation, since the CP specifically pointed out that the world was moving toward war, either among


DAILY WORKER, NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY MAY 2, 1928

JR 20 THOUSAND NEW READERS OF THE DAIL

CENTRAL COMMITTEE STATEMENT ON CIRCULATION DRIVE OF THE DAILY WORKER. BRING THE DAILY WORKER

A GREATER CIRCULATION MEANS A GREATER PUNCH IN YOUR STRUGGLES!

Daily Worker

According to this cartoon and the Party document that accompanies it, the main task of a communist newspaper is to help build the struggles the workers are already waging. But as Lenin and the Russian Revolution had already shown, a newspaper's main task to "train the masses in political consciousness and revolutionary activity" through drawing from these struggles and a thousand other examples to create a single compelling picture of a system that the workers must and will overthrow. This cartoon of a muscle-bound charicature of a worker degrades the task of training the workers in the outlook of Marxism.

the imperialist powers or between the imperialist powers and socialism, or some combination of the two (which is in fact what happened), and that the revolutionary situation would most likely arise in conjunction with this development.

What the CP thought was most likely was revolution in Germany, combined with attacks on this revolution and the USSR and an inter-imperialist war between the U.S. and Britain. Again, this isn't how things developed, but it isn't so far off the mark—World War 2 did develop as a combination of inter-imperialist rivalry and a war to defend socialism, and did give rise to revolution in many countries. What is really insane about the CP's line is that they paid no attention to its practical consequences—here they correctly predicted that the world was about to enter a turbulent period of war and revolution, and they *still* made the economic struggle the "center of gravity" of their work, as though the economic crisis and the economic struggle were the most revolutionary elements in the situation.[36]

In the course of the struggle against Lovestone's "American exceptionalism," the CP had flipped from classic right economism to a new, "left" form of the same economism. Whereas before they held that the working class was too backward for communist politics and had to be spoon-fed through a long period of economic struggle where it would learn its precious "lessons" by summing up "the experience of hard knocks," now that severe crisis was coming, the CP simply assumed that the same idealist process was going to be telescoped into a few stormy years. *The same underlying theory of how the masses come to grasp the need for revolution and socialism was preserved.*

It is extremely telling that the same month that the TUUL was founded, the *Daily Worker* reprinted prominently a theoretical article written by CP founder C.E. Ruthenberg in 1923, expounding the economist theory of consciousness:

"[The CP rejected the] 'method of propaganda,' that is, that we should present to the working class our indictment of the capitalist system, facts about the exploitation of the working class, the theory of surplus value, the class struggle and the materialist conception of history, and by publishing books, newspapers, pamphlets on the subject and through agitation at meetings, convert a majority of the working class to a belief in our analysis of the existing capitalist social order

and the way in which the evils of this system can be abolished."

To rely on that method would mean "we could wait for another million years and there would be no proletarian revolution nor a dictatorship of the working class," Ruthenberg wrote. The method the CP adopted was "quite a different method."

"The policy of the Communist Party is to associate itself with the workers in the everyday struggle. Communists fight with the wage workers and farmers in support of the demands which they make of the capitalists because it is in these struggles and through these struggles that the workers learn the character of the capitalist system, and there is developed the will to power of the workers, the determination to triumph over the enemy who exploits and oppresses them.

"The everyday struggles of the workers create the most favorable condition for establishing the influence and leadership of the Communist Party. The workers learn by experience the character of the capitalist system. They learn by their experience in the struggle that the government under the capitalist system is merely an agency of the capitalist for maintaining the system of exploitation. They learn this not through theoretical presentation and proof of the facts, but through the hard knocks of their experience with the capitalists, and with the government which supports the capitalist system."[37]

What Ruthenberg has written here is a direct attack on the teachings of V.I. Lenin. The line Ruthenberg opposes, although in a slightly vulgarized form, is the line put forward by Lenin in *What Is To Be Done*, and the line Ruthenberg puts forward is an almost word-for-word repetition of the line Lenin attacks.

Lenin made it unmistakably clear (to anyone who cared to read him), and the experience of the Russian Bolshevik Party certainly confirmed his line, that the task of communists is to *divert* the workers from the spontaneous struggle against the employers ("class against class," as the TUUL militantly put it), into an all-around struggle against the capitalist system—a struggle the workers cannot wage unless they are trained through agitation (as well as taking up struggles around questions that bring out the need for revolution). Lenin's view was what Ruthenberg was caricaturing—that the principal role of communists is to transform the consciousness of the workers and the masses, to "create public opinion," as Mao later put it, so that when the conditions for revolution are ripe, the working class can seize political power. Without diverting the workers' spontaneous struggle in this way, there can be no question of *ever* actually seizing power.

What Ruthenberg does distort is the central role of revolutionary agitation—especially exposures. This does not mean simply giving "facts about the exploitation of the working class, the theory of surplus value" etc., as though it amounted to passing out economic charts and free copies of *Capital* at factory gates. Speaking of the absolutely central importance of organizing political exposures (especially through a newspaper, not just "agitating at meetings"), Lenin rips up the economist theory of "raising the activity of the workers" through "political agitation on an economic basis" (exactly what Ruthenberg is calling for), and declares:

"The consciousness of the masses of the workers cannot be genuine class consciousness, unless the workers learn to observe from concrete, and above all from topical (current), political facts and events, *every* other social class and *all* the manifestations of the intellectual, ethical and political life of these classes; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social-Democrats; for its self-realization is indissolubly bound up not only with a fully clear theoretical—it would be even more true to say not so much with a theoretical, as with a practical understanding, of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society, acquired through experience of political life. That is why the idea preached by our Economists, that the economic struggle is the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, is so extremely harmful and extremely reactionary in its practical significance."[38]

This basic, underlying economist theory (that "economic struggle is the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into political movement") was never rooted out. Indeed, although it took a different form from before, it was the guiding line of the CP's work during the whole period we are discussing (as well, of course, as after, although again in a different form).

Suddenly here, in 1929, was a crisis that promised an endless succession of hard knocks. What could an economist expect except a rapid, automatic and widespread "radicalization"? The masses were going directly into a revolutionary mood.

"A sure radicalization is being brought about by 30 to 40 cents a day wages for Kentucky miners, $3.50 wages for a 70-hour week for Southern textile workers, and similar conditions in other industries. Starvation wages are *destroying* the capitalistic illusions of American workers and 25 cent wheat is making poor farmers their allies."[39]

Whereas before, revolutionary agitation was *premature* because the workers hadn't yet completed the stage of economic struggle, now it was *unnecessary* because the masses were already revolutionary. The role of the communists was now simply to race to catch up with the masses, win the leadership of the majority of workers in their inevitable resistance to the crisis, cement organizational control, and hold on tight through the storms leading to revolution itself.

Social-Fascism

The very same theoretical error that made the CP think that it did not have to *divert* the economic struggle from its spontaneous course, led to tremendously overestimating the ease with which the Party would win the leadership of the struggle for unions and relief. After all, if capitalism is in such desperate straits that it cannot grant any concessions, and at every turn must answer struggle with "fascization," and if every struggle for reforms quickly reveals the struggle for revolution lurking right below the surface—what will the reformists do in the class struggle? The very fact that they are committed opponents of revolution will force them into the open camp of the bourgeoisie even before actual revolution erupts. *All* non-revolutionary forces would be forced by their very nature to attack *any* struggle the masses waged for unionization, or relief, or bread.

"It is no accident that whenever a big strike movement breaks out, the capitalist press shrieks that it is due to Communist influence, and the A.F. of L. and Socialist Party leaders wail that the masses have got beyond their control."

"It is true that all struggles for daily bread, for milk for children, against evictions, for unemployment relief and insurance, for wage increases, for the right to organize and strike, etc., are directly connected up with the question of revolution. Those who are against the revolution, who want to maintain the capitalist system, are prepared to sacrifice these struggles of the workers in order to help the capitalists preserve their profits.

"Only those can courageously lead and stubbornly organize the fight for the immediate interests of the toiling masses, who know that these things must be won even though it means the destruction of capitalist profits, and who draw the necessary conclusion that the workers and farmers must consciously prepare to overthrow capitalism."[16]

In other words, reformism is dead, the very profundity of the crisis killed it. The committed leaders of social democracy, frightened and repelled by the revolutionary nature of the fight for reforms, would flock to the defense of profits. Social democrats, in the U.S. and internationally, had become *social-fascists*, a wing of bourgeois terror. Only Communists could lead the militant fight for reforms, because only Communists stood for revolution. The working class had become a clear field.

To the extent that the CP in this period branded these reactionaries as agents of capitalism, we have no quarrel. And countless examples, like the bloody suppression of the workers of Berlin in 1929 by the "socialist" police chief Zorgiebel, prove that these right-wing socialists were certainly capable of viciously, even terroristically defending capitalism.

The problem is that the whole situation was far more complex than the CP's simple view of a downhill fall, where the choice is "either fascism or social revolution." Overall, there was still a role for social democrats to play as *reformists*, confusing the masses by spreading countless pipedreams and schemes about how to alter the system here or there and make things better. There was still plenty of room for the social democrats of many kinds to slither around among the oppressed spreading their poison. That was still their principal role.

In fact, the theory of "*social-fascism*" principally led the CP in a *rightist* direction, just like the whole "left" economist line did overall. If reformists were going to expose themselves decisively through their fascist attacks on *reform* struggles, then little more was needed to win leadership from them than being the most militant and consistent defenders of the economic needs of the masses. What should have been a fierce political and ideological struggle over how capitalism works and what it takes to get rid of the system, simply became a competition between which political trend could best lead the everyday struggles. Contrary to economist gospel, reformists are often skilled at leading struggles tactically without "selling them out"—the problem is they leave things at that.

At the same time, communists, who represent the overall and long-range interests of the working class, fight for these interests in the day-to-day battles as well, which sometimes means that the fight for victory in these battles is subordinated to the working class's higher interests. Given this, the only way communists can successfully compete head to head with reformists within the limits of the trade-union struggle is by becoming reformists themselves—and even there, the old, original, proven reformists often have the advantage.

IV. POLITICAL WORK

Agitation and Propaganda

In practice, because the working-class movement was still in an overall ebb (1929-1933 saw a deep lull in strikes overall), despite very sharp outbreaks within it and a mood of tense anticipation on the part of the broad working class, the Party found itself in a position where the great volume of its work was agitation after all. But this was not strictly Marxist agitation

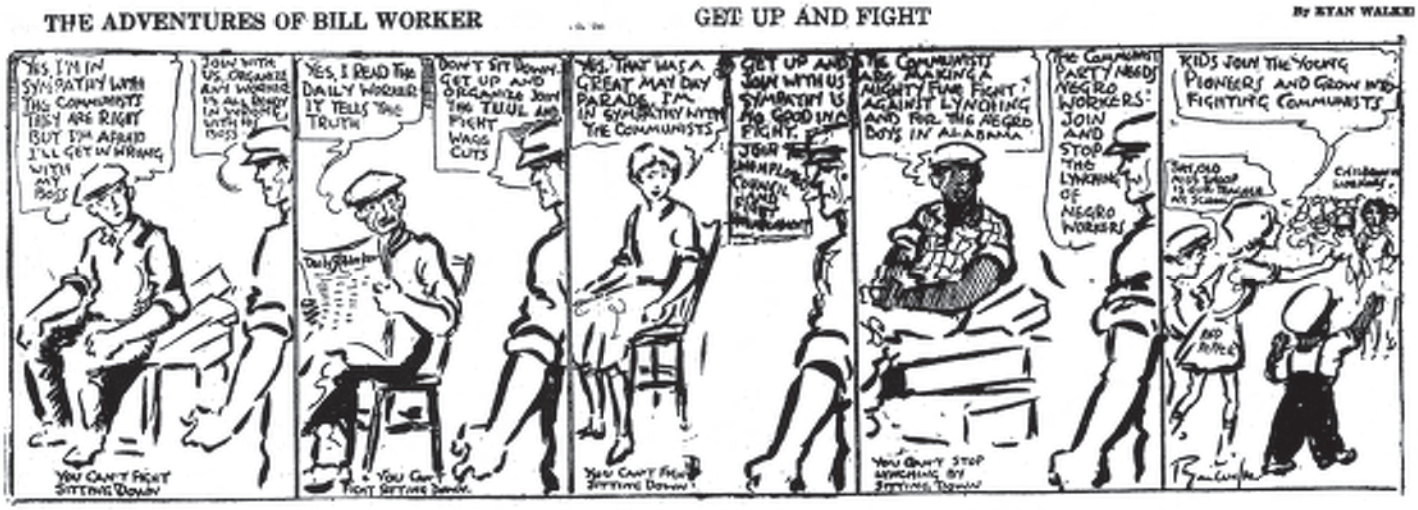
"which not only fans every spark of discontent and arouses indignation at every outrage, but knits together all these outrages into a coherent picture, tracing each to its source, and probes beneath the surface, scientifically analyzing the development of events by means of capitalism's inherent laws and arming the masses with an understanding of historic developments in terms of these laws and with a knowledge of the laws themselves."[17]

Instead, what the CP focused on, in its leaflets, the *Daily Worker* and its spoken agitation, was economic exposures combined with calls to action. Since the line was that people learn only in the course of struggle and especially the day-to-day struggle, this agitation concentrated on sparking some action. The many thousands of CP'ers, locked into trade-union work, beat their heads against the walls trying to find just the right economic exposure and demands to unleash the fury of the masses and create the school of "hard knocks" for consciousness-raising.

This was tied to some of the most hackneyed and wooden "propaganda" imaginable. Actually, there was not all that much genuine communist propaganda—Marxist material (written or spoken) which examines things in an all-sided way and weaves various events and elements together to create an overall picture. Rather, the main thing was "propagation of the ultimate program of the Party," as it was said, which often sunk to the level of simply saying: it's bad here, it's not like that in Russia. Foster's book, *Toward a Soviet America*, written to serve as the main propaganda piece when Foster ran for President in the 1932 election, contains a long section on Soviet Russia which is unbearably boring, far more boring than a few quotes can capture.

This is because what it attempts to do is paint a pie-in-the-sky picture of the USSR, through a step-by-step comparison of conditions in the USSR and the U.S. on an economic basis. Endless statistics on the construction of railroads, tractors, hydroelectric plants and so on. Wages in the U.S. and the USSR. Health care in the U.S. and the USSR. Crisis here, uninterrupted prosperity there. Of course, these statistics did represent the tremendous advances the Soviet working class was making in socialist construction, and did paint a sharp contrast between conditions in the two systems. But really, what they amount to is an effort to say to the U.S. workers: look, the workers really have it good in Russia. There is no attempt to inspire the workers with the prospects of emancipation and the transformation of class society. In fact, according to this view, classes and class struggle did not exist in the USSR and everything was just a matter of higher and higher development. No wonder this seemed so strange and utopian to many who read it (and the many more who skipped the rest after the first few pages). In fact, this whole section is a typical example of an economist (and petty-bourgeois) view of socialism.

With this kind of "propaganda," no wonder it seemed like a distraction and



Is this cartoon training the workers to be, as Lenin said, "a tribune of the people," "able to explain to all and everyone the world-historic significance of the proletariat's struggle for emancipation," and put themselves at the head of the masses in the struggle to overthrow capitalism? Or is it training the workers in the point of view that what the Communist Party is all about is something for everybody, a coalition of self-interests, while the workers' place is in the economic struggle?

even an obstacle to the CP'ers doing the Party's mass work. More and more the summation was that such work was a little "left," but really there was nothing very left about it. It seemed "abstract" and "alien" because it was not connected to reality as only Marxism could connect it, and because it was done in the absence of communist agitation, which, as Lenin said, draws workers into the point of view of Marxism "from living examples and from exposures, following hot upon the heels of what is going on around us. . . . These comprehensive political exposures are an essential and *fundamental* condition for training the masses in revolutionary activity."[12] General, superficial dogma pasted onto economist work which leaves the workers untrained in politics doesn't educate anybody.

"Left" Economism Adjusted Rightward

The coal fields had long represented the great hope of the TUUL for a major breakthrough in basic industry. The miners were one section with a forty-year history of industrial unionism. By the late twenties, the capitalist crisis and the cynical betrayal by the Lewis machine had totally wrecked the once dominant UMWA.

Union membership had dropped from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands. And every step of retreat in the '20s had been a bloody battle, where miners, often led by Communists, fiercely fought for their very lives. John L. Lewis, president of the UMWA, was righteously hated by the veterans of the mine wars. And the chances were excellent for the emergence of a new union led by revolutionaries.

Miners were literally starving. Unemployment in the coal fields was tremendous, the result both of mechanization and of the overall slump. In 1923 there had been 704,800 miners working. A decade later only 406,300 were left. 300,000 families had been driven out.

In 1922, wages had been $0.84 an hour. In the Depression, they dropped to an average of $0.54 and as low as $0.28 in Pennsylvania. The tons of coal were often measured in at 2,800 or even 3,000 pounds, further cutting the wages of the miners.

In 1931, 40,000 miners struck in the Pittsburgh coal fields under the leadership of the TUUL National Miners Union. A magnificent rank-and-file organization was built under brutal conditions. Midway into the strike, the national Party leadership summed up that the Communists directly involved were so engrossed in building the strike in and of itself that they had failed to build the Party organization among the workers, and actually had dissolved the local Party apparatus into the strike organization. They also had failed to build the NMU, which, since it was known as a "red" union, was closely associated with the Party. After this criticism, miners were drawn into the Hunger Marches in Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C., the struggle around the Scottsboro case, and "Red Day" marches warning the imperialists not to invade the Soviet Union. But after the strike was crushed, little lasting organization remained, most particularly little Party organization. This and similar disappointments throughout the Party's work brought the whole line into question.

In many ways the struggle over how to sum up the 1931 miners' strike paralleled the inner-Party struggle over Gastonia. But this time it was resolved in a more openly rightward direction. The official sum-up (actually written by the Executive Committee of the Communist International, but adopted by the U.S. Party) criticized the line of liquidating the Party, but, in contradiction to the line of building Party campaigns and the Party in its own right during the strike, put forward the following view of *how* to bring out and build the Party:

"It was not made clear that a separation and counterposing of these two tasks [i.e. winning the strike on the one hand, and building the Party on the other—RCP] or the emphasis of the one *at the expense* of the other, conceals within itself the danger of a political

one-sidedness or deviation. A lack of clarity remained as to what was to be characterized as the *main object* that the Communists were to pursue in the strike struggle: that if one wants to state the main object in *one* word, and in doing so avoid the danger of one-sidedness, then neither the simple winning of the material results which are contained in the strike demands nor the mere utilization of the strike for the strengthening of the Party organization, should be designated as the main object, but that, on the contrary, the *revolutionization of the striking workers* should be the main object. The most important thing is that the Communists strive, through their agitation as well as through their entire participation in the strike, to give the broad masses of the strikers the experience and the firm conviction that *the Communists have advocated or carried through correct strike tactics and strike leadership.* It is, however, impossible to instill this conviction into the masses of striking workers if the Communists do not exert all their energy in the struggle against the employers so as to win the strike."[14]

Officially, "revolutionization" remains the object. *But what does it mean in practice?* It means subordinating everything, including the agitation of the Communists, to giving the tactical leadership that carries the immediate struggle through to victory. The economist understanding of the relationship between consciousness and struggle, step by step led to the subordination of politics to economics, while in name "combining" the two.

In practice, the Party conceded the obvious fact that revolution was not about to spring full blown from the unionization demands of the workers. But the resolution of the problem was not a determined struggle to find the ways to develop that revolutionary motion. Instead the Party went down that well known path of trailing whatever *was* springing from those struggles. If the upsurge was not coming as quickly as expected, more attention was needed to the "little questions."

Party shop papers, a major Communist activity in the working class, started to be replaced more and more by union shop papers. Even these dropped more and more of the political program of the TUUL and focused on the most particular questions possible. And those shop papers that remained nominally "Party" were bogged down with questions like oil on the shop floor."[15]

In fact, the working class was not a clear field for the Communists, and every struggle swarmed with forces eager to lead. It is not surprising that the very label of "red" became an obstacle in this competition to see who would lead the broadest masses. With economism in command, what the Communists summed up from their own school of hard knocks was wrong. The words "revolutionary" and "class struggle" became devalued and meant little more than "militant." And more importantly, the struggle over whether to hide the face of the Party was resolved by *changing* it—the CP more and more put itself forward as the home of the best fighters, the party of militant resistance.

Here you have the greatest crisis in world history grinding on, a time of intense political turmoil, class forces throughout the world colliding in events that are affecting the course of history: massive collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union, upheavals in Cuba and Nicaragua, red base areas fighting for their lives in China, whole strata of the American population ruined and thrown into turmoil as never before, as well as rising counter-revolution in Italy, Germany and so on—and in the middle of this, the mechanical view, the straight-line assumption about how people learn, leads the CP to bury itself ever deeper in the narrowest concerns of the workers.

In an article entitled "The Fight Against Sectarianism in the NMU," the CP wrote:

"Our local [TUUL] unions lead a life of their own entirely separate and apart from the life of the masses. They are so engrossed in their own internal problems and the general campaigns and problems of the revolutionary movement that they have no time to deal with the problems facing the miners with whom they are in contact. Mine local meetings, instead of discussing the burning needs and demands of the miners in *that particular mine* and the actual organization and leadership of a local struggle around such demands, are taken up with interminable discussions on the Communist Party election campaign, the campaign against the Dies Bill, the state of the local International Labor Defense organizations, etc., etc."

While claiming that the political campaigns *are* important, the author gets down to his basic point:

"The trouble is that they are wrongly introduced, they are not considered in relation to the problems of the masses of miners in the midst of which the local works. Each campaign is treated as something separate and apart from other campaigns and is not used to further the central task of the local union—the organization of the miners in its mine for struggle against the coal operators' offensive. Miners join our union primarily to defeat wage cuts and win better conditions. When they find out that the local organization relegates such matters to second place they leave the union."[15]

There was partial truth to this—the workers recruited on an economic basis expected simple trade unionism. After all, that is what they signed up for.

Political campaigns and the workers were separated more and more, so as not to disrupt the trade union work with "abstract" questions from outside the direct experience of the masses. In the CPUSA internal journal *Party Organizer* there are instructions on how to intimately connect the political issues of the day to whatever is drifting around on the plant floor. Want to discuss the fascist seizure of power in Germany? Start with the way the boss pushes guys around in your department. Want to discuss the oppression of Black people under capitalism? Then talk about how workers in the same shop must stick together or else. What to explain how socialism represents a qualitatively higher form of human society? Then bone up on the comparison between how your shopmates live and the conditions within the same branch of industry in the USSR."[16]

Since economism, basically, assumes that workers don't care about anything that doesn't touch them personally, and don't aspire to anything more than a full belly and a secure, peaceful life, even the line of the CP in *this* period where it was expecting revolution any minute, led to political work that viewed the world through the grimy windows of the factory. And in the final analysis, these politics are politics that tail and reinforce the bourgeois view of "what's in it for me"—they are not filled with the revolutionary sweep of a class struggling for the emancipation of all.

Millions were awakening to struggle, lumbering into action based on a glimmer of the class antagonism in society, eagerly looking to understand more. And the revolutionary work of the Party among workers got more and more vulgarized to fighting the bosses, building the unions, following the Party, and someday we'll have it made like the Russian workers (i.e., lots of

goulash).

Economism and Reformism

The sharp contradiction between "revolutionary" in the Party's line of finding a "revolutionary way out of the crisis" and the reformist content of this line shows itself in the 1932 Presidential campaign.

On the one hand you have the book *Toward a Soviet America*, which is a monument to the fiery tone the Party was capable of at that time. Certainly it is nothing like its later geritol-reformism. In this book Foster exposes and denounces capitalism. The church and religion are lambasted as the opiate of the people. The Boy Scouts are shown to be a training ground for militarism and fascism. There is even a section calling for "racial amalgamation"! This work targets "the idiocy of the capitalist system, its planlessness, its antiquated moral codes, its warp and woof of exploitation," and loudly proclaims the goal of a "United Soviet States of America."[17]

On the other hand there is the line the campaign actually took out across the country, as exemplified in Foster's Chicago speech, the high point of the campaign. Here the reformism that lies side by side with general phrases about revolution in Foster's book now stands naked. After listing the effects of the crisis, the oppression of the masses, and the prospects for more of the same, Foster gets down to his point: "Can the A.F. of L. leaders and the Socialist Party be relied on to obtain relief?" The answer, of course, is "No!" Only a "united struggle against starvation" can provide relief. "If the poor wish to have their voices heard . . . then they must elect their own direct representatives and go to Washington themselves." "Solidifying their ranks, building their committees everywhere, [the masses—RCP] can face Congress, the Senate, and the President with an irresistible force that will achieve results."

And what are these "results"? Foster runs down an extensive program that lists every concern of the oppressed people in the U.S. . . . an end to the attacks on wages . . . immediate relief . . . "All relief and insurance to be financed by taxes on wealth and capitalist income . . ." "Unconditional equality for Negroes" . . . "Against the new robber war. Stop the manufacture and shipment of munitions. All war funds for the unemployed."

And how far reaching will these results be?

"It is clear to us that the workers will find ways and means of putting such a program into effect if [all the workers—RCP] will join together in common struggle irrespective to which political party they adhere, *they can win these demands.*" [!!]

And what is the difference between the Communist Party and all the others? Communists believe in mass pressure from below to win reforms, these others want you to rely on the courts, elections and good will.

Revolution? Well, the speech has an awkward aside that quickly mentions that somehow these struggles will give the workers "organization, consciousness, power, to achieve the decisive way out of the misery of capitalism."[18] But after they win all these reforms through mass pressure, we can only ask Foster why they would want to.

On the one hand, fire and brimstone in the textbook, a broken capitalism compared inch by inch to a young vibrant Soviet Union, and the open call to destroy the old society. But on the other hand, on the campaign trail, the strict focus is on what is "winnable" under capitalism, through coalitions for mass pressure, coupled with the most grotesque reformist exaggeration of what capitalism in crisis can be forced to concede.

This is a stark example of why the RCP has characterized "left" economism as revolutionary propaganda loosely tacked onto the reformist politics arising out of the economic struggle.

(It is only one example among many. The struggle against unemployment centered not on exposing the nature of the capitalist system and unemployment as a built-in feature, but instead mobilizing millions to march for the Workers Unemployment and Social Insurance Bill [H.R. 7598] is also rich in examples, but is outside the scope of this article.)

In practice, because of its line on winnable struggles for palpable demands, the CP undermined all its own attempts to raise revolutionary consciousness by conducting political campaigns simply as the militant fight for reforms. Crisis was portrayed as simply a "policy" of the rich; unemployment as a trick for cutting wages which the capitalists could eliminate by "allocation of all war funds, a capital levy, increased taxes upon the rich, etc."[19] Throughout this period, the very hunger and misery that the Depression brought were "Hoover's wage-cut, starve-the-unemployed murderous policy."[20] The CP put a face on the enemy and in the process obscured his true features. No wonder millions of workers (including many advanced, in fact, including many Communists) were not prepared to resist FDR's demagogy!

Training the Advanced

For hundreds of thousands the outrages of the Depression were the last straw. They stepped forward from the start into intense activity. The ranks of the radical workers inspired by and rallied around the flag of the Russian Revolution were joined by new forces awakened to political life by the desperate position of the class. Many thousands came forward who wanted to learn, eager to transform themselves, to become instruments of the struggle. And they rallied around the CPUSA, because it was the most revolutionary organization in the working class.

Most of the struggles the CPUSA led in the early thirties were actions of this advanced section of the class, preparing the conditions for massive upsurge. The movement they created called to the millions to awaken and struggle, and that movement was a *training ground*, an intense schooling for the advanced section of the workers. In a very real sense, the training given in that school would have a profound effect on the direction that the working class as a whole would travel.

What role did economism give the advanced to play?

The Party is going to couple up to the broadest masses by leading the economic struggle, like a locomotive backing into a train of cars. Once the ties are firm and tight, and once the movement is big enough and bad enough, the Party will lead its train on the road to its final goal of revolution and meat-and-potatoes communism. The consciousness of the masses is not the crucial thing, their motion is. The advanced? They are the couplings of the political train. Their role? Win the respect of the masses by leading them faithfully as the best fighters in the day-to-day struggle; and be unquestioningly loyal to the command structure of the Party.

The model for a communist worker was actually not even a trade union secretary. The Communist Party upheld the "Jimmy Higginses," the working class workhorses, basing their "effective" work on proletarian instinct, basic class hatred, and boundless loyalty for the cause and the Party. Untrained themselves, they were unable to struggle with the broad masses to spread genuine class con-

sciousness.

Since consciousness was to come from the hard knocks of the immediate struggle, and since Communist leadership would be won by leading that struggle to victory, political controversy that might alienate even the more backward was an *obstacle* to the political development of the working class. This passage from the semi-autobiographical novel *Home is the Sailor*, shows how the workers were trained to reduce their politics to whatever was palatable, even to the most backward:

"Hart had a lot of screwy ideas about Communists. As a Catholic, he thought they were against religion and he meant to fight for his faith.

" 'Go to it, bud,' Billy told him. 'No one's trying to take the communion out of our mouth. I've been a member of the Communist Party for over a year now and no one has even asked me what church I belong to, if any. The only thing the Communists are against are preachers who use religion to cover up attacks on the people's rights. Like this guy Coughlin who shoots off his mouth up in Detroit. He's nothing but a would-be Hitler. It isn't against religion to fight him, it's just anti-fascist.' "[51]

There was never quite a view that it required a leap in understanding to become a genuine communist, a leap in grasping the laws of society, of dedicating one's life to the realization of classless society, of applying the science of revolution to the conditions of the present.

This is the image portrayed in *Home is the Sailor*, describing the end of the "left" economist period:

"Having joined the Party, Billy divided his time between the waterfront union hall and the Communist headquarters. Actually there was small difference then in the work of a party member and an active member of the MWIU [the TUUL seamen's union], except that as a Communist he found that he was expected to plunge into whatever work was at hand to do. A union member could take things a little easier occasionally avoiding assignments for street meetings, leaflet distribution and the like."[52]

It is natural that this line would produce a recruitment policy that was basically the old social-democratic method of "self-enrollment." A Party member was anyone who signed a card; and there had to be periodic campaigns to figure out who all was actually in the Party, to get them to pay dues, to come to meetings, even campaigns to get Party members to subscribe to the *Daily Worker*!

Lenin, roasting the economists of his day in *What Is To Be Done?*, points out that the historic tasks that the working class faces demand that the advanced worker be trained, not as a trade union secretary, but as

"*a tribune of the people*, able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it takes place, no matter what stratum or class of people it affects; he must be able to generalize all these manifestations to produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; he must be able to take advantage of every event, *however small*, in order to explain his Socialistic convictions and his democratic demands to *all*, in order to explain to *all* and everyone the world historic significance of the proletariat's struggle for emancipation."[53]

The CP in this period didn't train anyone to be such a tribune. It trained people to be hacks and reformists, it "trained" the life out of the revolutionary-minded workers who were attracted to it.

This produced a problem the CP itself often pointed to: despite huge numbers of workers flowing through it, the Party had trouble keeping these people. At the same time, because of the line in which it was training the advanced, including its own members, it was creating a social base for further moves rightward. Large sections of the Party had only the vaguest idea of *any* final goal. This created favorable conditions for those Party leaders who wanted to drop revolution.

V. DROPPING THE "LEFT" IN "LEFT" ECONOMISM

In 1932-33, the lowest point of the Depression was reached. All the tensions in society strained at their limits. Something was giving way . . . the powerful forces that had kept the main body of employed workers relatively quiet, the fear, the hope that "prosperity is right around the corner," the lack of organization, were dissolving in a new determination to fight their way out. Every political force in the country sensed the workers were going to rise. And they prepared.

For four years, the TUUL had boldly and doggedly fanned any resistance among the workers. On paper, they still expected the upsurge to challenge the system itself. In 1934, they still described themselves as working in "a time when the revolutionary crisis is ripening."[54]

At the very same time, in practice, the CP had already come far down the road of dropping their political work, to focus more on what *actually* arises spontaneously—simple trade unionism and reformism. In the economic struggle, the line of building "revolutionary unions" had given way to building "*independent* unions," i.e. industrial unions neither AFL nor TUUL, with no overt political content beyond militancy. In a sense, this itself evolved *spontaneously*, since it was definitely not the way the plan of the Party was supposed to unfold. Throughout the country, in auto, in steel, strong union locals formed under Party leadership; the very locals that communists built repeatedly voted not to affiliate with the openly pro-communist, openly revolutionary TUUL.

Given the mood of the majority of workers, and given, secondarily, that the CP had done so little to divert the workers' movement from its spontaneous course, there is nothing surprising about this. But for the CP, this is not how they had planned it; their idealist schemes simply did not correspond with the actual processes of society. Faced with this development, they themselves were diverted from the course they had set. Since they worshipped spontaneity, of course they bowed to it.

Together with the locals formed by social democrats and "non-political" unionists the new CP locals became a major "independent" trend that grew up parallel to the TUUL unions. Despite the intentions of the Party, despite the plan they laid out for the economic movement to give rise to revolutionary politics, the actual laws of development asserted themselves.

In 1933, the main body of the working class began to move. The number of strikers tripled over the previous year. Although the Party had not built any stable national unions, it had cores of organizers in every industry, trained through repeated struggles, ready and waiting for the ice to break.

But again the world refused to conform to the idealist "left" economist script. The working class was not a clear field where the masses moved smoothly from one level to the next. In fact, by 1933, the class was crawling with every imaginable stripe of reformist hustler. Several mass movements had already grown under anti-

communist leadership—the Bonus Army encampment of veterans in Washington whose naive flag-waving had been answered with sabres and gunfire, Coxey's Army of the unemployed, social-democratic leagues and unions, and so on. Above all, the bourgeoisie was far more flexible and resourceful than the CP had ever imagined. The capitalists were certainly more aware than the CP that the fight for bread was not, in and of itself, a fight for power, and they bent every effort to limit the struggle of the working class to every imaginable variation of the struggle for immediate relief. Franklin D. Roosevelt brought in a profound change in capitalist tactics. Systematic moves were afoot to co-opt the discontent of the masses, to trade concessions for control of the movement. Major anti-communist forces, especially the section of the AFL bureaucracy headed by Lewis, were marshalled to march at the head of the masses and to steer them into the waiting arms of the bourgeoisie. The crime of the reformists was not fundamentally, as imagined by the CP, that they always and everywhere were forced to "sell out" the masses, and crush their economic struggles, but to contain them *politically* within the confines of wage-slavery.

The CP found itself in a frantic competition over who could most quickly dominate the movement organizationally.

The Disappearance of the National Miners Union and the Rebirth of John L. Lewis

In the spring of 1933 the dam finally broke in the coal fields. And this time the miners were able to consolidate their organization. They came forward in their thousands. A decade of retreat gave way to a charge. In mass meetings, in conventions, in strikes, the miners organized. Within months, 90% of the miners were unionized! Armies of armed workers swept up countless river valleys in the coalfields carrying the struggle to new camps and regions. 128,000 joined in Pennsylvania. 160,000 in West Virginia. The South organized quickly. Rallies were held as far away as Raton, New Mexico. UMW official John Brophy wrote: the miners "organized themselves."

But the union that emerged with a national contract covering 340,000 bituminous miners was the United Mine Workers, notorious as one of the most politically reactionary and corrupt unions of all.

The CP had been outflanked by a top-level decision of the bourgeoisie. Realizing that nothing could stop the movement, they had resolved to control it. UMWA organizers fanned throughout the coalfields. Companies rushed to deal with the very union that they had mercilessly crushed only five years before. Article 7a of the National Recovery Act gave the bourgeoisie's qualified blessing to the organization of the workers in company unions and proven reactionary unions.

Even NMU organizers jumped on the UMW bandwagon. Finally, the CP recognized the obvious, and the NMU was officially dissolved.

The CPUSA, which had planned to win unchallenged leadership of the mass struggle by its proven militancy, found itself in stiff competition with non-revolutionary forces for the leadership of these struggles. And the logic of its economist line led it even further down the road toward shedding its revolutionary program.

The objective fact was that, with the working class as a whole not yet in a revolutionary mood and a revolutionary situation not on the horizon despite the Depression, there was no way that communists could expect to have decisive political leadership over the bulk of the trade unions, since these organizations, by definition, include advanced, intermediate and backward workers. But the CP didn't see it that way. Because they believed that leadership of the unions was a prerequisite for revolution, they judged the success or failure of their work by how well they had seized the leadership of the unions. This was also linked to their line that economic crisis would automatically revolutionize the workers. The question that posed itself especially starkly to them when the working class as a whole began to go into motion was—why weren't they leading it? And this question of leadership was vulgarized, so that instead of being a question of the Party's leadership of the advanced and their political training to put themselves at the head of millions when a revolutionary situation did emerge, and the broad influence of the Party in political life even though it might be controversial and not immediately followed by millions, it was reduced to—why wasn't the Party at the heads of the organization of the masses in their millions? This is why the line of "fighting sectarianism" came more and more to the center stage. The Party began to consider it a liability that they were directly leading only a section of the masses—those that tended to be relatively advanced and most open to radical change—and began to speak of "breaking out" of this mass base by tailoring itself to the attitudes and prejudices of the working class in its majority.

In the summer of 1933 the Party called for an emergency meeting. Three hundred leading Party cadre gathered in New York for "an extraordinary Party Conference." There was an acute crisis in the Party's whole work. The upsurge was starting and from the beginning it was obvious that the Party was not leading it. They surveyed the TUUL and summed up its obvious weaknesses.

This is how the CP appraised their influence in the 1933 miners' strike:

"[The Communist Party and the NMU] play an insignificant role in these mass strikes. We are almost completely isolated from the masses of miners and cannot even speak at their meetings, picket lines, and other gatherings." [The NMU, flagship of the TUUL fleet, did not] "have one single well-functioning mass local of the employed. Since the 1931 strike the Party never appeared before the miners as a political organization ... the *Daily Worker* and current literature were not known even to Party membership."[35]

In the railroads, years of resolutions calling for an organizational breakthrough had yielded nothing, the industry "remains largely—well, we might call it 'unexplored territory.' " The National Textile Workers Union had the same membership (1,000) that it had claimed in 1929, and was in 1933 "after a long period of passivity, beginning to participate again, to some extent, in strikes." The Marine Workers Industrial Union was leading occasional struggles, here and there, did some considerable work among the unemployed on the waterfronts, but was basically still an organizing committee. Steel, supposedly a major concentration, was dead. And the TUUL Auto Workers Industrial Union had a *declining* membership in Detroit although there were some breakthroughs being made outside Motor City.

For the Party overall, the concentration on economic struggle had led to a drop in the circulation of the *Daily Worker*. The rapidity of the turnover among new recruits was shown by pointing out that several thousand members had been recruited in the first half of 1933, and in the *same* period the overall membership of the Party had declined.[36]

TUUL

Given the whole logic of the CP's politics at this point, their motion, and the level of the political struggle within the Party, it is not surprising what the outcome of the "Extraordinary Conference" was. In an "Open Letter" to the membership they laid out the obvious situation and called for a renewed and intense struggle to seize the front of the economic struggle. War was declared on "political formalism" and "sectarianism"—meaning political work that might get in the way of being the best fighters and organizers of the day-to-day struggle and, related to that, there was to be a struggle against "right errors," meaning, in this case, mainly defeatism over whether the CP could really win leadership of the spontaneous struggle.

The Upsurge and the CP's Capitulation— Or, Who Diverted Whom?

During World War 1, the centrists of the Second International justified their political capitulation to their own bourgeoisie with the words, "Hopes for a revolution have proven illusory, and it is not the business of a Marxist to fight for illusions." This same spirit now filled the CPUSA. For four years they had awaited the spontaneous revolutionary turn of the working class. They had fought to catch up and lead every spontaneous outbreak. And now as the storm broke, and struggle swept through American industry in 1934, '35, and '36, the CPUSA watched the struggle slip into the hands of their sworn enemies, those hidebound trade unions that "left" economism had sworn would never lead anything ever again. The CPUSA was by now far more solidly committed to tailing spontaneity and leading economic strikes than they were to their own political independance. From 1934 on, it was a greased slide to the right.

This is not the article to describe in detail the struggles of the upsurge itself. It is difficult to sketch them in a few quick lines. By 1934 about a million and a half workers were swept into the battle. Major strikes broke out in the trucking industry, in auto parts, in the mines and in textiles. The struggle of the longshoremen of San Francisco in 1934 mushroomed into a major General Strike as the entire working class of the west coast entered into a test of strength with the bourgeoisie. In the years that followed there were the giant battles of rubber, steel—the stronghold of the open shop—auto (with the famous Flint sitdown strike), and countless other branches of industry. The pent up anger, the oppression, the repeated assaults that the Depression had created called into being the most extensive movement of the American working class.

From 1934 on the CPUSA was clearly engaged in a process of negotiating a merger of its TUUL forces with the other currents that were rising for industrial unionization. The major question was how much organizational influence the Party would have within that movement.

In 1934, the TUUL issued a call for creating a federation of independent unions which would be formed along industrial lines, and which the TUUL would merge into. It was an offer to completely drop any idea at all of combining economics and politics in exchange for basic leadership of the industrial union movement. There were no takers.

After years of equating the unionization of industry with the road to a new society, they were staring at a situation where they might be isolated or even kept out of the unions that were actually forming. Outflanked, politically unarmed, the CPUSA capitulated. In 1935, the TUUL was dissolved, and its active core rejoined the AFL as individuals.

Shortly after, the AFL bureaucracy split in two, and John L. Lewis led the formation of the Committee for Industrial Organization to serve as the center for the unionization of basic industry. Lewis had fifteen years of experience that proved there was nothing inherently anti-capitalist about industrial unionism. He set out to reproduce on a national scale his feat of leading and containing the miners struggle. With the obvious blessing of the top levels of the bourgeoisie, the CIO captured unquestionable control of the movement. Organizationally they needed to absorb the base that the CP had built, they needed the skilled and dedicated organizers, and they wanted to avoid a noisy fight with the Left that might disrupt the single-minded concentration of the workers on unionization. The CIO temporarily reversed the long-standing policy of simply expelling and isolating Communists. But politically they set the stiffest possible terms for the CP's participation, complete subordination.

In these swirling waters of this movement, the CPUSA got pulled down by the undertow. They were the foot soldiers of the war, its finest front line organizers. They were driven to white-hot activity, and Communists were among the 88 workers murdered by the bourgeoisie in its frantic efforts to beat the movement down. But the bourgeoisie was using *dual* tactics—repress all you can and co-opt what you can't repress. The CP provided the organizers, but they did not lead. Lewis summed up the relationship coldly: "Who gets the bird, the hunter or the dog?" Politically, Lewis and the pro-capitalist forces he led were undoubtedly the hunter and history shows how completely they bagged the game.

In a sense, the CP summed itself up with its epitaph to the murdered Communist, Morris Langer. Langer, a worker since the age of 12, had become a Communist. He joined the revolutionary party of his class to dedicate his life to the destruction of class society. In 1932 he led several bloody battles to organize the cloth-dying sweatshops in New Jersey and was brutally assassinated by gangsters there who planted a bomb in his car. His funeral, attended by ten thousand workers, became a powerful demonstration of class hatred against this system. But his epitaph written at that time by his comrades showed the way the vision of the workers was narrowed by economism. Under Langer's picture in their hall they wrote, "We will remember Morris Langer by building a greater union."[57]

VI. SUMMATION

The myth of the thirties as a "high point" turns reality completely upside down. The decade opens with tremendous possibilities, a section of the class eager to dive into revolutionary work and tear the system down. And it closes with the working class overwhelmingly, almost unanimously, cemented into the reactionary, imperialist "New Deal" coalition. Waves of revolutionary-minded workers were molded into little more than militant union organizers. A whole generation of workers saw the class struggle as little more than a fight to better the sale of their labor power.

Thousands who had yearned for revolution were left high and dry by events, disillusioned, frustrated and confused. A few, who clung to their union positions, became some of the most cynically dishonest demagogues of the "labor movement."

The 1930's left behind a working class that had been given a political lobotomy. Considering that, the concessions around unionization and social insurance were a cheap deal for

the capitalists. In fact, the unions, especially with the new and more favorable redivision of the world which U.S. imperialism achieved after World War 2, were less of a concession than they were the consolidation of a new and powerful political machine controlled by big hacks tied to the bourgeoisie's apron strings, with an apparatus extending through a key section of the working class. The unionization of basic industry in the U.S. certainly did take place on a political basis just as the CP once predicted—but instead of automatically revolutionary politics, it was on the basis of the surrendering and sinking of the revolutionary aspirations that at the beginning of the decade had burned so brightly among many workers.

The point of this is not to dismiss the importance of the economic struggle. Without a doubt it was a crucial *arena* of class struggle during this period, the early Depression. The outbursts were not just ho-hum affairs where the workers respectfully presented their demands, but violent upheavals where the workers protested the very conditions of their lives, risked almost certain defeat, for a chance to take a swing at the hated class enemy. It would have been criminal for communists to stand back, expecting the purity that never comes. But it was just as criminal, and far more seductive, to allow the political task of preparing for revolution to disappear in the flush of struggle. Here was something real, they said, as they *allowed* revolution to become unreal, distant and misty. The very reason to unite with the workers in their economic struggle is not to get lost in the struggles that the workers are quite capable of initiating and conducting (and in fact have been for a century and a half), but to lead them off the treadmill, to revolution.

In a recent report, the Central Committee of the RCP, USA wrote,

"in such work, as in all work, communists must not limit themselves to the confines of the trade unions or reduce their political line to the level of spontaneous trade-unionist struggle (nor still less to the explicitly bourgeois politics of the trade union hacks). Instead they must carry out strictly Marxist agitation and propaganda and all-around revolutionary work to raise the workers' sights to the broad and decisive questions in society and the fundamental political struggle for socialism, reaching its highest form in the armed struggle for the seizure of power."[23]

For various reasons it is fairly unlikely that an actual revolutionary situation would have emerged in the 1930s even if there had been a thoroughly revolutionary Party. Events refuted the theories about a permanent economic decline, and the U.S. was able to emerge from World War 2 sufficiently strengthened to enjoy another period of stablilization, a period of "prosperity" and reaction. It did not develop that the bourgeoisie could no longer rule in the old way (the Depression never actually produced a sharp political crisis). And the illusions held by the workers never went from being shaken to being shattered, with millions ready to die rather than live in the old way any longer. However, it is not *inconceivable* that things could have gone otherwise, especially if they had gone differently in some other countries as well. The point is that the course events followed was very much influenced by the subjective factor—the line the CP followed and propagated among the masses.

A revolutionary section of the working class would have had a tremendous effect on the last several decades, especially the 1960s. Even if all that remained of the CP today were a revolutionary legacy—and not a revisionist one—the strength of the revolutionary movement would be quite different going into the 1980s.

It is exactly because the CP was not simply a thoroughly corrupted and revisionist organization from the beginning that gives the whole experience its urgent significance. A revolutionary Party, rooted among the workers, had a tremendous opportunity to transform the political landscape of the U.S., and they threw it away. The source of the problem, ultimately, did not lie in objective conditions outside the Party, including the overall trends in the international communist movement, but most fundamentally the inability of the Communist Party to thoroughly defeat the reformist and economist lines that it was born with and which were continuously recreated and enforced by the pressures of bourgeois society itself.

The CP began the decade as a revolutionary party which mainly carried out a wrong line, a line not based on the actual laws of society. It ended up being transformed, dropping its goal of revolution and eventually becoming thoroughly counterrevolutionary.

In the CP of the early Depression there is little to emulate, but much to learn from. These are mistakes which we, the revolutionaries of the 1980s, cannot afford to repeat.

Footnotes

1. Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years* (Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1960), p. 247; Jack Allen & John L. Betts, *History: USA* (American Book, 1969), p. 527.
2. William Z. Foster, *Toward Soviet America* (International Publishers, New York, 1932), p. 55.
3. Bernstein.
4. *Toward Soviet America*, p. v.
5. *The Way Out* (pamphlet), manifesto and principal resolutions adopted by the Eighth Convention of the Communist Party of the USA in Cleveland, Ohio, April 2-8, 1934 (Workers Library Publishers, N.Y., 1934), p. 12.
6. See Bill Klingel and Joanne Psihountas, *Important Struggles in Building the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* (RCP Publications, 1978).
7. See "There Will Be Revolution, But Wishing Won't Make It So," *Revolution*, January 1980.
8. *Party Organizer*, Jan.-Feb. 1928, p. 18. (Article by Max Bedacht)
9. *6th World Congress of Communist International*, 1928.
10. *The Communist*, Dec. 1928. Article on "The 1928 Elections," quoted by Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (Viking Press, N.Y., 1960), p. 382.
11. *The Daily Worker*, Dec. 26, 1928. *Ibid.*
12. William Z. Foster, *Bankruptcy of the American Labor Movement*, 1922, quoted by Draper, p. 70.
13. William Z. Foster, *From Bryan to Stalin* (International Publishers, 1937), p. 55.
14. *The Communist*, October 1930, p. 885, Article by William Z. Foster.
15. *From Bryan to Stalin*, pp. 277-281.
16. William Z. Foster, *American Trade Unionism* (International Publishers, N.Y., 1947), p. 66.
17. *The Communist*, Nov. 1935, Article by Foster.
18. Bernstein, p. 506.
19. Fred Beal, *Word From Nowhere*, p. 117.
20. Irving Howe & Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party* (Da Capo Press, N.Y., 1974), p. 259.
21. Beal, p. 115.
22. *Southern Exposure*, Winter 1974, pp. 188, 194.
23. *The Communist*, June 1929. Article by Cyric Briggs, "The Negro Question in the Southern Textile Strikes."
24. Beal, p. 113.
25. Howe, p. 258.

26. William Dunne, *Gastonia, Citadel of the Class Struggle in the New South* (N.Y., 1929), quoted by Howe, p. 261.
27. Beal, p. 112.
28. William Dunne, *The Daily Worker*, Sept. 1929.
29. *Party Organizer*, May 1930, p. 10.
30. *Labor Unity* (organ of the TUUL), Sept. 14, 1929.
31. *From Bryan to Stalin*, p. 219.
32. *The Daily Worker*, Sept. 3, 1929, p. 2.
33. *The Way Out*, p. 29.
34. *Ibid.*,
35. *Toward Soviet America*, p. 69. (Emphasis added.)
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.
37. *The Daily Worker*, Sept. 20, 1929, p. 4. Article by Charles E. Ruthenberg, "Road to Proletarian Revolution."
38. V. I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* (Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1975), p. 86.
39. *Toward Soviet America*, p. 261. (Emphasis added.)
40. *The Way Out*, p. 23.
41. *Revolution*, Jan. 1980, p. 37.
42. Lenin, p. 87.
43. Three articles in *The Communist* express the different lines: "Next Steps in the Coal Strike" by William Z. Foster, 1931, p. 703; "Some Lessons of the Last Miners' Strike" by S. Willner, 1932, p. 27; and "Lessons of the Strike Struggles in the USA," *Resolution of the E.C.C.I.*, 1931, p. 402.
44. *Party Organizer*, Feb. 1934, p. 31.
45. *The Communist*, 1932, p. 697. Article by Tom Johnson, "The Fight Against Sectarianism in the National Miners Union." (Emphasis in original.)
46. *Party Organizer*, March 1934, pp. 30-32. This is only one of many examples of this line.
47. *Toward Soviet America*, p. 341.
48. *The Daily Worker*, Sept. 13, 1932.
49. *Toward Soviet America*, p. 248.
50. *American Trade Unionism*, p. 200.
51. Beth McHenry & Frederick N. Myers, *Home is the Sailor* (International Publishers, N.Y., 1948), p. 108.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
53. Lenin, p. 99.
54. *Party Organizer*, March 1934, p. 1.
55. *The Communist*, 1933, pp. 975, 978.
56. *The Communist International*, 1933. "The Extraordinary Conference of the CPUSA," pp. 652-657.
57. Philip S. Foner, *The Fur & Leather Workers Union* (Nordan Press, Newark, 1950), pp. 392, 394.
58. *Revolution*, Oct./Nov. 1979, "The Prospects for Revolution and the Urgent Tasks in the Decade Ahead: Documents from the Third Plenary Session of the Second Central Committee of the RCP, USA," p. 13.