

30 *White Bias Show Trials*

In appraising the world situation in the early 30's—the Third Period—each Comintern gathering took a higher revolutionary tone. And at each stage the Comintern diagnosis was faithfully accepted here.

The keynote was sounded by the tenth plenum of the ECCI in 1930: "The accentuated external and internal contradictions of capitalism are at present accelerating the shattering of capitalist stabilization and are deepening and widening the revolutionary tide of the international labor movement." *211

The eleventh plenum, March–April 1931, went further. It found that the prerequisites for revolution were already maturing in two countries, Germany and Poland, that the rest seemed unable to avoid the imminence of an economic catastrophe, and that even in the United States the prospect was for "a steady deepening of the crisis." +68

The twelfth plenum, December 1932, proclaimed that capitalism "cannot overcome its deepening and sharpening contradictions, and that it is approaching a new period of wars and revolutions." The Socialists and the fascists were put on an equal footing.

The same plenum instructed the Communist parties to initiate the "struggle for proletarian dictatorship." *212

In the *Thesis and Resolutions of 1930* and in the call to the August 1st Antiwar Day of 1931, the American party emphasized the imperialist war preparations, and reserved for the American imperialism the leading and directing part. *213

A year later, that leading role was handed over to Japan. Browder returned from the twelfth plenum with a new slogan, *Drive Out the Japanese Ambassador from Washington*. This demand implied the threat of war between the two countries. Carried on exclusively in America—Moscow itself not daring to antagonize Japan—the campaign would obviously put the American Communists in the exposed position of asking Americans to be ready to shed their blood to save a region for Russia.

This slogan was discussed at a staff meeting of the *Freiheit*, but only a couple dared to speak against it. However, there seems to have been a hesitation in starting the campaign. The Japanese armies' march from Manchuria into North China allayed Moscow's fear. And Browder, at a conference, claimed that the slogan had been his mistake. Those present knew better.*²¹⁴

THE DISAPPOINTING PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, 1932

The American Communists did not require instructions to vilify the Socialists. Their election literature in 1932 abounded in abuse of the SP, its Presidential candidate, Norman Thomas, and other nominees. The leaders of the garment unions were singled out for special treatment.

The party entered the Presidential elections with high optimism. The creeping paralysis of industry seemed to be operating in favor of Communism. The nominating convention was held early, May 28–29, in Chicago. Nearly a thousand people from all 48 states were brought in. Great pains were taken to make it appear that Negroes played a conspicuous part in the proceedings.

It was a typical Communist mass gathering, the only novelty being that Foster's running mate was James W. Ford, a Negro. The election platform was rather moderate in tone, but the campaign hardly touched the immediate demands. The final goal, a Soviet America, was its heart. Hoover was rarely mentioned. All the attacks were directed at Franklin D. Roosevelt and, still more, at Norman Thomas. An anti-Roosevelt pamphlet, *Who is F. D. Roosevelt?* by Grace Hutchins, was widely distributed. A "public trial" of Norman Thomas, one of many, was staged in New Star Casino. And, to no one's surprise, the "jury" found him guilty of betraying the working class. (In a Communist public trial the defense counsel

admits the guilt of the accused, but stresses extenuating circumstances that actually add weight to his guilt.)

Foster and Ford set out on a long tour. A League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford was organized. The caliber of the men and women who joined the League were a barometer of the new mood among the intelligentsia produced by the depression. The League's manifesto was signed by a number of well-known writers and educators, among them: Elliott C. Cohen, James Rorty, Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Frank, Frederick Schuman, Malcolm Cawley, Lincoln Steffens, Sidney Hook, Sidney Howard, H. W. L. Dana and Theodore Dreiser.*²¹⁵

The election returns were disheartening. A count of 90 per cent of all election districts gave Foster and Ford 69,104 votes. (According to the *World Almanac* of 1933, Foster received over 55,000. In New York City, the vote was close to 24,068; the second best was in Cook County, Illinois, with 11,976 votes.) *²¹⁶ Compared with the 800,000-odd votes received by Thomas, the results were all the more embarrassing. The only consolation was that Foster had doubled his vote over 1928.

The meeting called by the League in Irving Plaza Hall to hear the election returns was a gloomy affair. The chairman, Joseph Freeman, bravely but vainly tried to strike a cheerful note. No one could hide his disappointment.*²¹⁷

STRAINING TO PENETRATE NEGRO MASSES

Extraordinary energy was spent by the CP during the Third Period to gain a mass following among the Negro People. The emphasis on Negroes originated in Moscow. The Comintern kept insisting that the 13 million Negroes, oppressed and discriminated against, would be the most vulnerable to Communist infiltration. As an extra bait, some brilliant mind in the Kremlin, confusing the American Negro with colonial peoples, hit upon the slogan of *Self-Determination for the Black Belt in the South*. This spurious and dangerous slogan was one of the four political targets given to the American party by the twelfth plenum of the ECCI.*⁶⁹

As in all the mechanical applications of issues handed down by Moscow, the Communists here went all-out to battle for this one too. The South was flooded with literature and speakers explaining

and agitating for the slogan of Self-Determination in those sections where the Negroes formed a majority.

The Negro community, looking upon itself as a part of the American nation, and not as a colonial people, spurned this Black Belt idea. Many Negro Communists would not have accepted it either could they freely voice their opinion.

The number of Negro party organizers and officers was out of all proportion to the small number of Negro members. It became an unwritten rule that every committee must include a certain proportion of Negroes. More Negroes were sent to the party school in Moscow and here. Harlem and the South Side in Chicago were "concentration points," with special headquarters. The South, where the party was practically non-existent, was dotted with Negro organizers. Contrary to the high white and Negro party functionaries, these organizers were poorly paid and often had to depend upon the white middle-class sympathizers for their meals.

Negroes were coddled in the party, which did neither them nor the party any good. It created an unhealthy atmosphere and led to demoralization. Parenthetically, few Negro women joined the party.

HOW THE PARTY FOUGHT WHITE CHAUVINISM

The party spared no effort in combating race prejudice within its ranks. The slightest suspicion of white chauvinism was dealt with severely. But, as in everything else in that rigid period, the race issue was treated piously, noisily, and dogmatically. The favorite medium was the "public trial."

In one such "trial," February 7, 1932, in Harlem Casino, Joe Burns, a member of the Needle Trades Industrial Union, was charged with expressing his doubts regarding the intellectual equality of Negroes and whites. Ben Gold, leader of the union, was prosecutor, and Charles Alexander (an assumed name), a Negro intellectual, was the counsel for the defense. Burns admitted his guilt and was put on probation for six months to work for Negro rights.

Some of the "trials" involved parents who objected to their daughter's marrying a Negro. A "trial" of this kind was held in Brownsville, Brooklyn, timed to the eve of the Presidential elections

of 1932. Israel Amter was himself the prosecutor; Alexander was again counsel for the defense.

The *Freiheit* proudly reported, "Comrade Amter presented a splendid Marxist analysis of the various methods with which the bourgeoisie is striving to maintain its influence over the workers, to restrain them from fighting for a better life . . . and from organizing against an attack on the Soviet Union." Amter was particularly indignant that "The defendant, a Jew, who had suffered in Czarist Russia, should be the bearer of ideas that helped the capitalists of America to enslave a people which constituted a majority of the population of the Black Belt." *218

Alexander, a tall and handsome man, made an eloquent defense. He pleaded with the jury not to expel the defendant from the party. Dramatically, he exclaimed, "I would prefer to have my body riddled with thousands of bullets than to be expelled from the Communist Party." He found an "extenuating circumstance" in the fact that Misky, the defendant, "does not know English well and is not acquainted with Marxist-Leninist literature." Misky, too, pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to be suspended from the party for three months in addition to working with a Negro group.

In Philadelphia, a Communist old-timer, Ida Tabachnick, was tried "for avoiding to carry on party work with a Negro."

Another "trial" was held in Detroit against non-party middle-class people, active in the ICOR, who disapproved of their daughter, a public school teacher, going out with a Negro. They, too, recognized their guilt. Olgin reacted to the Detroit affair with a series of thundering sermons in the *Freiheit*.

The party's inroads among the Negroes was far from commensurate with the enormous exertions on that sector. However, it would be erroneous to gauge the Communist Negro periphery merely by the card-carrying members. The candidacy of James Ford and the energetic intervention of the International Labor Defense in many Negro court cases—notably that of the nine Scottsboro boys, that began in 1931 in Alabama—created a favorable climate among Negroes.⁺⁷⁰ Only later did thoughtful Negroes realize that the Scottsboro boys and others were only pawns in Communist maneuvers.

The efforts to Americanize the party during the Third Period led to relegating work among the minority groups other than the

Negroes to secondary place. But one phase was not neglected, that of acquiring a standing among foreign-born. The initiative in this field was taken by one man, Alpi, known here as F. Brown, an Italian from Macedonia. Alpi had been involved in inter-party feuds there, and the Comintern had taken him out and sent him to America as an instructor. The party here, not knowing what to do with him, created for Alpi the job of head of a language department. He took the job seriously.

In the late 20's, the Federal government began deporting "undesirable aliens," mostly Communists active in strikes in the coal mines and in textiles. More were cited for deportation in the beginning of the depression. Foreign-born radicals were alarmed. The party reaction was confined to protest meetings, until Alpi suggested forming a new auxiliary body.

A Committee for the Protection of Foreign-Born was formally launched in February 1931.^{*219} Presented as a non-partisan agency, its first conference attracted many foreign-born groups, unions, liberal clergymen, Catholics and Protestants. The committee appeared before Congressional hearings, and was helpful in preventing several deportations and in carrying other cases to court.

But the Communist control of the committee soon became apparent, and a number of unions and others withdrew. However, some liberals and clergymen remained even after the signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact, thus providing a Communist front with a respectable letterhead.

Again Communist alertness to a social issue gave them a monopoly in that field. And they reaped all the benefits.

A COMMUNIST'S LIFE WAS BUSY AND HARD

The anti-intellectualism, that started in Moscow in 1930 with the defeat of Bukharin, was ruthlessly carried out in Europe under the pretentious label of "proletarianizing" the parties. Intellectuals were demoted from policy-shaping to interpreting policies.

In this country Stalin's campaign to sow distrust of intellectuals found a feeble echo. The secret of this American "exceptionalism" was that, unlike the European parties, the strength of the American party at that time rested largely on white-collar workers and middle-class people. Still, without any surface prejudice, intellectu-

als on the whole were kept down and were expected to be louder in pledging loyalty to changing party lines than the proletarians.

To belong to the party in the depression, endurance and a readiness to be knocked about were indispensable. Ceaseless demands were made on a man's time, energy and purse. The party sought to instil in the minds of its members the idea that they were shock troops of the potential army of the revolution and that they ought to be in a steady state of mobilization.

A party man had to spend a great amount of time on all sorts of mass actions—demonstrations—for and against, as the given issue required. He had to attend all official anniversaries and participate in the various Days—First of May, Antiwar Day, Youth Day, Women's Day—he had to do his full share in the fund-raising campaigns for the party papers and for special purposes, as well as collecting from others. Then there was selling the *Daily Worker* once a week and belonging to at least one mass organization. His life was indeed a hard one. (On going over the Communist press of that period, the author found a week in which Communists were called to five demonstrations.)

Constant droning on a state of readiness and mobilization was more than some could bear. One day the *Freiheit* received a letter saying in effect:

"I am a sympathizer of the Communist Party and follow the line of your paper closely. However, my wife and I are perplexed. You keep advising us to be constantly on guard and in a state of mobilization. What does this spell for us in practice? Shall we stop visiting friends and going to the movies? We are particularly uncertain about the nights. Shall we and our two children go to sleep in our clothes?"

It was signed "A Reader."

Olgin took the matter seriously. He published the letter and lambasted the writer for his doubts on the oncoming revolutionary crisis.

The celebrations in the big halls were the only festive moments. Organizing rent strikes in the neighborhoods and putting back evicted furniture were exciting too. But the countless protests at Union Square and Madison Square and similar places in other cities soon became tiresome and were attended only by the very devoted Communists and Left-Wingers.

THE DRAB AND BORING UNIT MEETINGS

Most tedious was the weekly unit or branch meeting. The party was now monolithic. There was no room for discussion. At the shop nucleus the people could at least talk about shop problems. But these nuclei were few in number. Only about four per cent of the membership belonged to shop nuclei in 1930, and this number remained almost stationary during the depression. Most of them were in small shops.^{*220} The majority were in neighborhood branches, and their meetings were mere rubber stamps for decisions handed down by the higher committees. Even the agenda for the meeting was sent in ready-made. The EC of the branch could only add a few points of local interest.

The heart of the agenda was the political discussion. A member of the branch, previously assigned, had to lead it off. Actually, all he had to do was to read a mimeographed outline given to him by the educational director of the branch and add a few stereotyped words of his own. He and the others knew well that the less they said the less danger of committing a deviation. The discussion was prefatory. And those who were prodded by the branch organizer—the most important man—to take the floor, quickly said their piece in support of the report and sat down. The entire meeting was a deadening routine, felt most keenly by the white-collar Communists.

The meetings were also bombarded by appeals for financial aid for the numerous causes the movement was engaged in. The collections were a drain on the party members as well as on those belonging to the auxiliary bodies. Only later did the party try to regulate the stream of appeals.

As to the *Daily Worker*, every branch had a weekly quota of copies to sell on street corners in its area, and there were no returns from the "bundle." Many were ingenious enough to escape the watchful eye of the branch *Daily Worker* agent, paying for the papers rather than shouting on the street corners, "Buy a *Daily Worker*!" But those assigned to conspicuous corners could not very well shirk their job. The branch paid for the copies left unsold. They were left in the basements or burned.

The bundle sales to the branches were a sizable part of the paper's revenue from circulation. The entire paid circulation of

the *Daily Worker* in that period was not more than 17,000 copies daily. Broken down, the figures were roughly: 5,000 subscribers, 3,000 copies sold through the Metropolitan News Agency, in New York, 6,000 copies sold throughout the country to party branches and through newsstands, and 3,000 copies taken by party branches in Greater New York.^{*221} Like all small papers, the income from the newsstands was insignificant. The paper distributors charged proportionately more for the returned copies than they paid for the sold ones.

PARTY RECRUITING RESEMBLES A SIEVE

The physical, mental and financial strain drove new members out of the party. Keeping them was a major dilemma. At the end of the factional strife, the party had only about 15,000 members, a loss of approximately 1,600 over 1928. The 6,000 new members, "85 per cent . . . industrial workers and 15 per cent Negroes," brought in by the first vigorous recruiting drive in 1930, looked like an accomplishment. But it was largely on paper. The resolution on keeping new members plaintively admitted that "there is a great disproportion between the reported new members and the number of initiation stamps purchased from the central office during the drive." Similarly, the sale of dues stamps had not increased in the same ratio with the recruiting.^{*222}

The elaborate program for "keeping and developing the new members" overlooked a basic element, their disillusionment after attending a few meetings of the branch. The hollow content of the meetings and the tedious proceedings were tiresome. The old members were not averse to loading the new ones with part of their own duties. The latter had also to attend special classes. The new converts soon realized that the inner life of the CP was by far not as attractive as it had appeared from the outside. Only the new recruits from the campus, drawn into the apparatus of the party in one capacity or another, thus avoiding the drudgery of the party routine, stayed, some of them rising to second layer leadership.

The party really began to grow only in the middle 30's, when it gave up its revolutionary frame of mind, embraced democracy, and relaxed. And even then the problem of retaining the new members remained very much in the forefront.