

CIO Drives Point Up Need For Independent Role

This is the first of a two-part article on the history of communist work and policy in the trade union struggle in this country. This first part deals with the contributions and the political and ideological errors of the Communist Party in relation to building the CIO in the 1930's and the war years of the 1940's—Ed.

Thirty-eight years ago last month, Nov. 9, 1935, the leaders of eight large unions in the American Federation of Labor (AF of L) met in Washington, D.C. and founded the Committee of Industrial Organizations. (CIO). This convention triggered the last explosive stage of the most important labor upsurge in American history, the 1930's.

The mighty battles for industrial unions which followed, brought out the best in the working class in this country: courage, sacrifice, discipline, solidarity. In the forefront of the proletariat in these battles was the Communist Party USA, then a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist organization. Although many tremendous gains might have been lost without the Party, there is also much to learn from the hideous errors it made under the growing revisionist influence of Browder, head of the Party.

In 1900, labor organization in the U.S. was controlled by the American Federation of Labor. This was an organization dominated by old-style craft unions, unions of men and women engaged in a particular skilled trade: Boilermakers, Carpenters, Shoemakers, etc.

But the growth of monopoly capitalism had already outmoded this form of organization. The big profits came from giant factories in which only a small percentage of the workers required any skill other than the ability to stand 70 or 80 hours of grueling work under the worst imaginable conditions. The answer to monopoly had to be the creation of industrial unions, containing all the workers, skilled and unskilled, in a particular industry.

From the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to the steelworkers' drive of 1919, attempts were made to create such unions, but always the narrow craft union leadership of the A.F. of L. opposed them outright or sold them out. They feared and despised the masses of workers, and they led even the workers in their own unions to defeat as their collaboration with the bosses extended from the "roaring 20's" into the headline 30's.

The CIO was begun by some AF of L leaders who saw that the future of the entire labor movement depended on industrial unions, and others who decided their own futures depended on industrial unions.

CIO Based on Struggle

To understand the CIO, it's necessary to take a look at the way in which class struggle developed during the Depression. During the early years, 1930-'33, the working class reeled under one blow after another: pay cuts, speedups and finally massive layoffs and plant shutdowns, followed by hunger and evictions. They fought back first through the communist-led Unemployed Councils. These organizations prevented evictions, with street battles if necessary; they demanded jobs in demonstrations at local plants; and they won first local and then national "relief"—unemployment insurance, welfare, social security, etc.

Starting in 1933, when unemployment, though still massive, dropped to about 10 million, strikes began to take place among those still in the shops. This was made easier by the National Recovery Act, which Franklin Roosevelt was forced to pass as a concession to the anger and struggle of the millions of hungry and fed-up workers. Clothing workers, farmworkers, rubber, miners, and auto workers all went out, but Roosevelt showed his true colors by backing the bosses and forcing many union leaders to call off the strikes.

It was not until 1934 that the future broke through to daylight. Teamsters in Minneapolis and Auto-Lite workers in Toledo fought and won tremendous strikes despite attacks by police, vigilantes and the National Guard. 475,000 textile workers, mostly in the South, struck against pay cuts and for union recognition. More than 20 strikers died in the face of machine

gun and pistol fire from National Guardsmen during the three weeks it took to break the strike.

But it was in San Francisco that the biggest development came. In support of longshoremen and seamen, the Central Labor Council declared a city-wide general strike that put S.F. in union hands for a few days. And proving it was no West Coast fluke, 26,000 workers went out on a two day general strike after 600 metal workers were attacked by police—in Terre Haute, Indiana.

CP Not Idle

The Communist Party was by no means idle at this time. In all of these struggles, particularly the textile strike and the San Francisco general strike, the most militant and progressive workers were looking to the Party for leadership. At this time, the Party was engaged in correcting the serious "left" error of dual unionism in its workplace work.

During this "left" period, the CP had led the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), which had been formed in 1927 as a revolutionary workers' movement working inside and outside of the union structure, into a policy of forming "revolutionary" unions and a tendency to scorn the AF of L as hopelessly reactionary.

During 1934-35, the TUUL was dissolved and the tens of thousands of workers in its unions entered the AF of L on a basis of some strength. With them they took one fighting principle of the TUUL—industrial unionism. But the CP left behind an even more important one—the need for advanced political and organizational forms that functioned both in and independent of the trade union structure. In a matter of a few years, this error would develop into full blown political degeneration in the Party's shop work.

The CIO Is Born

In 1934, at the AF of L convention, a large upswell of support for industrial unionism came from leaders of local Central Labor Councils and from the delegates of unions in manufacturing—industries like textile. They were beaten back viciously by William Green, the head of the AF of L, and union leaders like Dan Tobin of the Teamsters, who called the unorganized workers "rubbish," "riffraff" and "good for nothings," and said, "We do not want the men today if they are going on strike tomorrow."

Defeated, the industrial unionists returned to the 1935 convention still more desperate. The ruling class was using the unorganized to keep pay at the starvation level and make existing unions increasingly powerless. The unorganized themselves were demanding organization, staging walkouts spontaneously over pay and grievances. And at this convention there was a new spokesman—John L. Lewis, the autocratic head of the miners union.

After it was clear that even his passionate "organize the unorganized" speech would not sway the hide-bound reactionaries, Lewis took a bold and carefully planned action. He punched out Big Bill Hutcheson of the carpenters, and in doing so split the AF of L wide open. The CIO, which was set up three weeks later, was not thrown out of the AF of L officially until 1938, but from Lewis' first punch it was an independent organization.

The strength and the weakness of the CIO can be seen easily in comparing the drives to organize auto and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. The strength were the rank and file industrial workers, and nowhere did they play a greater role than in auto, which was not even seen as the main focus of CIO organizing.

They had a union, the United Auto Workers, but no contracts, since the UAW had been given no help when it was affiliated with the AF of L. Nonetheless, the union had thousands of members who wanted union recognition, more money and better conditions.

Sit-Down Strikes

After wildcats and sit-downs in GM plants across the country through November of 1936, and after being told by CIO leadership, "Wait; conditions aren't



TOP: Open-air meeting of Unemployed Councils organized in 1930's under Communist leadership. BOTTOM: Unemployed Councils in action, fighting eviction by moving worker's furniture back into house.

ripe yet," the workers of Fisher Body in Cleveland struck and took over their plant. They said they would stay until GM signed a national contract. Two days later, the workers at two Flint, Michigan Fisher Body plants sat down in their shops.

It was only after this, as more than a dozen other plants from Georgia to Wisconsin moved to sit down or walk out, that the UAW called a formal strike. The focus was of course Flint, where police violence, court injunctions and slick company promises failed to budge the men.

John L. Lewis came in to town and said he stood with the sit-downers 100%. Rank and filers from auto, rubber, steel and mining poured into Flint to protect the strikers. An estimated 10,000 workers from as far away as Buffalo, N.Y., many of them armed, had taken off from work and formed motorcades to go to the aid of their class brothers.

The greatest heroism, however, was that of the strikers, who for 44 days created a miniature democratic workers' council that organized life in the seized plants, and their wives, who not only provided the communication and supply link to the sit-downers, but armed with 2 x 4 clubs fought cops to defend the strike.

Try though GM did, they were unable to persuade the government to use the National Guard to try and crush the strike. For the capitalist state the stakes were

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Thousands march in funeral procession to honor 2 dead workers by cops sparked off a general strike.

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too high. GM settled Feb. 11, 1937, and the workers marched out of the shops chanting "Freedom, Freedom, Freedom."

Steel Drive Top Down

The Steel drive points out the other side of the CIO—it was run top down by class collaborationist trade union bureaucrats who had decided that their careers looked brighter if they could ride herd on the upsurge of industrial workers. The Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) consisted entirely of leaders of the old unions which had bolted the AF of L without a single rank and file steelworker among them. Its strategy was based on winning over honest men and perceptive opportunists from among the heads of already existing company unions.

It signed up thousands of rank and file steelworkers, but Lewis just used the cards as a bargaining chip in two months of secret bargaining with U.S. Steel. On March 1, 1937, the world learned that U.S. Steel and SWOC had an agreement, which came as a real surprise to steelworkers and the heads of other steel companies. There wasn't much role the workers could play, since not until 1942 would the SWOC become a real union with even the pretense of democracy.

The smaller steel companies sensed the essential weakness of the SWOC, the fact that it didn't have a powerful and independent rank and file. The group of companies called Little Steel used harassment and lockouts to force the workers into a strike they were not prepared for. Then they used red baiting, back to work movements and terror to break the strikes.

Ten heroic strikers were cut down by the Chicago police in the notorious Memorial Day Massacre at Republic Steel, and their class conscious brothers and sisters learned anew the bitter lesson that no matter how progressive the leadership may seem, it is only a powerful and aware rank and file that can insure victory, and advance the workers' movement.

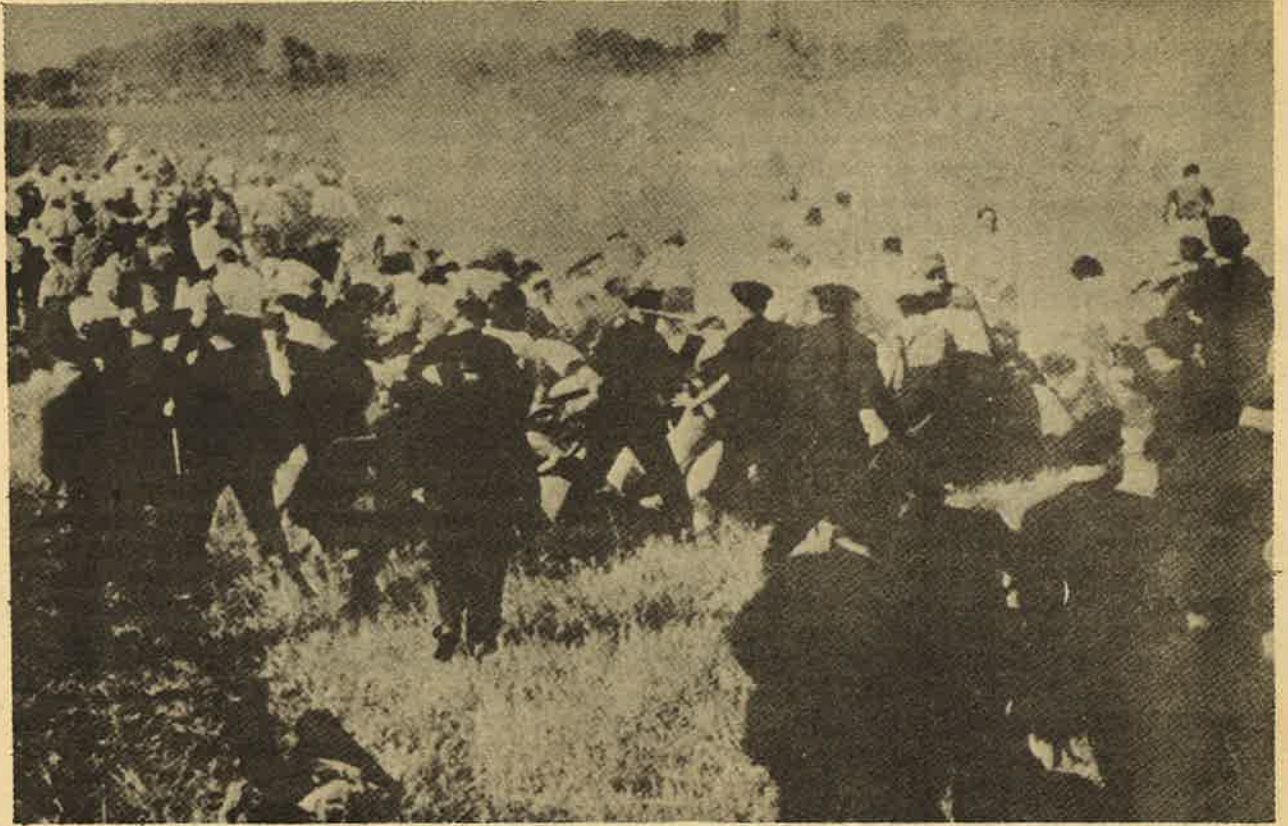
CP's Dual Role

The role of the Communists in the CIO was also a dual one. On the one hand, they led the working masses in courageous struggle, and on the other they failed to understand the nature of the CIO leadership and the trade unions themselves.

Throughout, they played a vital part in the creation of the CIO that the bourgeoisie and the present-day bureaucrats have tried to hide. Members of the Communist Party were the shock troops who spearheaded almost all the organizing drives among the workers. Lewis, who had in earlier years used every trick and every weapon in struggles against Communists and other progressives in the miners union, knew just how able they were.

In many places, it was sufficient to show a Party membership card to be given an organizing assignment by the local CIO office. Many took up the challenge, and for their efforts won blacklisting, jail, beatings, torture or death from the ruling class, and the greatest respect and often a decision to join the Party from their fellow workers.

In the UAW, for example, the Cleveland and



Memorial Day Massacre in 1937 in which 10 workers involved in Republic Steel strike were murdered by police. This strike was part of the upsurge of industrial unionism in the 1930's.

Flint strikes against GM were led by Wyndham Mortimer and Bob Travis, and the great Ford strike of 1941 by Bill McKee, all of them members or sympathizers of the Party. The honor roll includes men and women of every nationality in every industry in the country. Their courage and dedication to their class stands as a beacon for all of the class conscious workers and the young Marxist-Leninist forces in this country.

"Dizzy With Success"

Unfortunately, the Party tended to rely increasingly on the leadership of the CIO and not enough on the mighty rank and file movement that looked to Communists for leadership. This problem shows up, for example, in the "Dizzy with Success" attitude to the labor movement in the main report made at the Party convention for New York City's 12th Assembly District in July, 1937: "In N.Y.C. particularly the new and most important trade unions such as transport, marine, are organized very definitely with our direct help, and their leadership is very much under our influence. . . If a new CIO council should be established in New York parallel to the Central Trades Labor Council, composed of the CIO and expelled unions in the federation, we will undoubtedly have a considerable influence in this council."

Along with this reliance on the leadership went a shift away from the importance of shop work, to emphasis on electoral politics. The national CIO had set up Labor's Non-Partisan League, an organization which was supposed to carry out political battles for labor's needs. The CP supported this idea and the League's progressive positions, and hoped it would develop into a true Labor Party.

But the CP failed to realize that the League's purpose was actually to weld workers in places like New York and Minnesota, who traditionally supported Socialist, Communist or Farmer-Labor candidates, to FDR and the Democratic Party. By 1938 Party publications urged that the good situation in the trade unions made it important for comrades in the shops to spend more time on community and electoral work, work that Earl Browder was increasingly leading into the Democratic Party.

CP's Errors

The errors of failing to rely on the workers themselves, and the down-playing of shop work, came from the general errors of the Party at this time: failing to struggle for proletarian revolution and looking at trade unionism as such as something other than the form of "the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie." (Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*)

Contrast Lenin's instructions to Marxists: "to divert the working class movement from the spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy." with the following lines from an article in the CPUSA journal "The Communist" of Sept. 1939, entitled "Twenty Years of Communist Trade Union Policy," by William Z. Foster:

"The organizational forms of Communist trade union work have changed radically in the present period. Some methods, formerly correct, no longer

correspond to the situation in the labor movement. Thus the Party members do not now participate in groupings or other organized activities within the unions.

"The Party also discountenances the formation of progressive groups, blocs and caucuses in unions; it has liquidated its own Communist fractions, discontinued its shop papers, and is now modifying its system of industrial branches. Communists function in the trade unions solely through the regular committees and institutions of the movement. The Communists are the best fighters for democracy and discipline in the trade union movement and are resolutely opposed to all forms of group or clique control."

(It is an unfortunate irony that this policy should be formulated here by Foster, who was a fighter against revisionism in the CP. It was Earl Browder, not Foster, who cut the revolutionary heart out of the CP's line and policies.)

One of the ways the class traitors like Browder got away with this criminal liquidation of the independent role of Communists was by holding up the unions and their leaders as the correct leadership of the workers' movement.

When these officials were forced into a show of militance or into taking progressive stances on, say, recognition of the Soviet Union, it was recognized as proof of this leadership. At the 12th Assembly CP convention in N.Y., referred to earlier, a Party trade union organizer talked about Sidney Hillman, one of the most right-wing and anti-communist of the bureaucrats who founded the CIO: "Hillman as a leader of the CIO, as a supporter of labor's independent political action, was not the Hillman with whom they [Party members] had had such bitter experiences in the past."

Disarming Opportunism

Thus, not only did the workers not get the leadership they needed, but even Party members were disarmed by this opportunism. The chickens came home to roost in 1944, when Browder succeeded in dissolving the Party for over a year, and in the 1948-52 period when the Party was driven out of the trade union movement because of its errors.

The lesson that must be learned from this is simple: trade unions are organizations by means of which workers, including the most backward, protect themselves from the bosses, but their concern is negotiating the terms under which workers sell their labor power to the capitalists. To change the capitalist system, Communists must lead a revolutionary workers' movement which includes strengthening the unions in the fight to protect the workers. But at the same time, this movement must liberate workers from the bourgeois ideology that trade unionism represents, and lead the whole working class and its allies in conscious political struggle against imperialism.

The CIO was the highest development in the history of the U.S. trade union movement. But when Communists mistook it for a revolutionary development or saw it as a substitute for such a class conscious workers' movement, it signalled a drastic turn away from the revolutionary path.

(The next article will deal with the period following WWII, and the lessons of the CP's errors and eventual betrayal for communist work in the trade unions today.) ■



Workers killed in waterfront strike, S.F. 1934. Their murder