

14 *New Alignments*

The undertakings of the Workers Party in the 20's were largely of a hit-or-miss character. It did chalk up a few gains on the industrial field, in 1924-1928, but was completely thwarted in its unremitting efforts to enter the political arena through the movement for a labor party, 1922-1924. And, during all this time, a cancerous inner strife was devouring the party's vitals.

The major key to the changing Communist tactics in the 20's could be found, as usual, in Moscow, though one must hasten to add that a number of secondary keys could be looked for here.

In 1923, all hopes for a revolutionary crisis in Europe had disappeared. The abortive uprising in Hamburg, October 23, 1923, started expressly on instructions from Zinoviev over the objections of the German party and of the Comintern emissary, Karl Radek, had shown that the Western European workers had not the slightest desire for revolution. Moscow could draw but one lesson from this defeat.

As a consequence, the Comintern charted a new course. Communist parties were told to discard some of their doctrinaire trimmings and renew their efforts to enter the labor movement and the political life of their countries. But, and precisely because the turn toward the "right" had to be covered by left phrases, those men best qualified to contact bona fide labor groups were purged as "remnants of Social Democracy." (In Germany, they were Brandler and Thalheimer, in 1923.) Another reason was Moscow's desire to have a more submissive top in all the parties.

In the United States, the "remnants" numbered one man, Ludwig Lore. (One cause for Zinoviev's hatred for Lore was Lore's well-known admiration for Trotsky and his ill-concealed dislike for Zinoviev. And the struggle against Trotsky was already brewing in the Kremlin.)

THE MANEUVERS AROUND A LABOR PARTY

Communist maneuvers in the labor party movement is a fantastic tale of deals and double dealing, that finally ensnared them in their own shenanigans. Regretfully, only a few general observations can be given here.

The Communists took notice of the growing sentiment for a national labor party only in the fall of 1922. And the second convention of the Workers Party, December 1922, endorsed the creation of such a party.

The man most responsible for the turn toward a labor party was John Pepper. Pepper took an immense liking to this country, and made up his mind to stay here, if permitted by Moscow. He spent much time in the public library studying American history, and was impressed by the numerous attempts to form a third party. Being accustomed to the broad parliamentary activities of the European Socialists, an experience that his fellow Communists here had never had, the efforts for a labor party fascinated him. However, Pepper's knowledge of America was rather bookish, and Communist totalitarianism precluded collaboration with other groups on a basis of equality.

Pepper's stand coincided with the new Comintern maneuver for the United Front. Its major aim was the strengthening of the Soviet position at the conference of the great powers at Genoa, Italy, April 1922, to which Russia was invited; the Soviet foreign policy was then tuned to establishing trade and diplomatic relations with the outside world.

In December 1921, the ECCI asked for a United Front with all Socialist and labor bodies to work out a common labor policy toward the problems to be dealt with at Genoa. After much hesitation and bickering, the Second International and the Vienna Union (the Second-and-a-Half) met with the Comintern in Berlin. But the meetings brought no accord. One reason was the failure of the

Genoa Conference, Russia and Germany concluding the Rappallo Treaty.

Pepper had no difficulty with his comrades here either. The Ruthenberg people were also looking for a broader political field, and Foster, though distrusting Pepper, did not have to be converted to the idea of a labor party. He had helped the Fitzpatrick group to form such a party in Chicago, in 1919-1920. He also hoped that a labor party might lead to a change of policy in the AFL.

Conveniently forgetting their belittling of parliamentary activity, the WP published a booklet on October 15, 1922, *For a Labor Party*, expressing in simple language and moderate tone its program for such a party. But the WP delegation to the second meeting of the Conference for Progressive Political Action, December 1922, in Cleveland, could not even gain a hearing before the credentials committee. And the delegation of the ACWA, with whom the WP was in amicable relations, refused to support them. The SP voted against the WP, too, though for different reasons. Only the Fitzpatrick people and the delegates from Minnesota voted for them.⁺²⁷

The Communists were not discouraged, nor was Pepper's enthusiasm dimmed. To him the movement for a labor party had revolutionary significance. In an article in the party's monthly, *Liberator*, September 1923, Pepper envisaged that "America faces a third revolution. . . . It will be a revolution of well-to-do and exploited farmers; it will contain elements of the great French Revolution and the Russian Kerensky Revolution. It will not be a proletarian revolution."

THE FINAL FIASCO

The Communists began working for new farmer-labor parties: first, at a convention in Chicago, July 1923, with the aid of the Fitzpatrick-Nockles group; and, second, at a convention in St. Paul, June 1924, their allies being the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. The entire Left, in all its auxiliaries, was mobilized for these two conventions, and they were easy prey to Communist control. But the inability to treat allies as equals, inherent in Communism, and their haste in forcing through their plans lost them the good will of the Fitzpatrick progressives and later alienated the Minnesota people. At the same time, the CPPA, on the insistence of Senator

Robert M. La Follette, put off the formation of a third party and closed the door on the Communists.

The wide sweep of the La Follette campaign impelled the Communists to support the Senator even from the outside, a realistic move. But the enlarged session of the ECCI, in Moscow April 1924, put its foot down on supporting La Follette without a labor party. Stopped in their tracks, the Communists and their creature, the Federated Farmer-Labor Party, nominated a Presidential ticket: Duncan MacDonald, a former official of the miners' union in Illinois, for President; and William Bouck, a farmer from Washington State, as his running mate.

By the time MacDonald started his campaign tour, the futility and even harmfulness of the entire venture became apparent to its authors. Their FFLP was but a duplication of the WP, and would deceive no one. A drastic shift had to be made. MacDonald's tour was stopped by a telegram, and a WP nomination convention was hastily convened in Chicago, July 10, 1924. William Z. Foster and Benjamin Gitlow were nominated for President and Vice President with the proper fanfare. Placed on the ballot in 14 states, they received 33,361 votes, a tiny fraction of the 4,822,000 cast for La Follette.

A factor in the negligible vote was the lukewarm attitude of the rank and file. Though relieved at not having to work for a bourgeois candidate, they were incapable of an active doorbell-ringing campaign even for their own candidates. Too long had they been taught that elections were of but secondary importance. This slighting attitude toward elections proved a drawback also in 1928 and 1932, when the CP was anxious to register an impressive vote.

The labor party fiasco tore away the thin thread of inner-party harmony during that short period. The old conflicts blazed up anew. Each side blamed the other, and both, taking a cue from the Comintern, assailed the Lore group for Right opportunism. (Lore and his friends, in good old Social Democratic fashion, opposed all the labor party schemes.)⁺²⁸

RUTHENBERG AND FOSTER; BRIEF SKETCHES

The highly fluid inner situation in the WP was "stabilized" in 1923 into two major factions, one headed by Charles E. Ruthenberg; the

other, by William Z. Foster. The latter gained a majority in the party at the convention of the same year through an unprincipled deal with the Olgin-Lore group and their friends in the garment trade unions.

It would be hard to discern any basic differences between the two major factions. However, the Ruthenberg group shared a common approach, later evolving into the moderate wing in the party. The Foster camp was rather a hodge podge of former syndicalists and Leftist Marxists held together by the popularity of their official leader. This faction developed into the Left Wing of the party, though Foster himself could in no way be labeled a Leftist.

A thumb-nail sketch of the leaders of the factions is in place.

CHARLES E. RUTHENBERG was born in 1882 in the Midwest, of a middle-class family, and was himself a white-collar man. He was tall, broad-shouldered and handsome, though bald. Ruthenberg was not an eloquent speaker, and not well versed in theory, but a clever man and an excellent administrator. His calm bearing and poise, bordering on aloofness, and the prestige that followed him from the SP impressed the rank and file. Ruthenberg was well above his rivals in personal integrity, as this writer can testify from his own experience. Wrapped in his own importance, he was not given to group politics or maneuvers, unless compelled to. He recognized the authority of the Russian leaders, but his long training in the SP made him unwilling to go to Moscow to plead for recognition. And only in 1925, under pressure by his associates, did he go. But he did not crawl. On the contrary, he boldly resisted the efforts of the Kremlin to give the Foster group a larger representation than was due them.

Ruthenberg died in the summer of 1926, in his middle 40's. Had he lived three years longer, to see Stalin rise to power, he would undoubtedly have been purged. Ruthenberg would have been too unmanageable for Stalin.

WILLIAM Z. FOSTER, the second chief contender for leadership, was of a different background. He was born in 1881, in Philadelphia, son of a large and poor Irish-American family. Foster had a hard youth and a varied career. He was a supporter of William Jennings Bryan in 1898, a syndicalist, a member of the SP (he was

among the IWW people expelled in 1912) and a founder of the Trade Union Educational League, in 1915, to work for industrial unionism. He later joined the Chicago Federation of Labor, and, on the recommendation of John Fitzpatrick and Edward Nockles, was appointed to lead the union drives among the meat packers in Chicago, and, later, the steel workers in the Pittsburgh area.

During the war, Foster supported Gompers and spoke in behalf of the Liberty Bonds,¹¹⁴ an unforgivable "crime" that he was repeatedly reminded of, and with much relish, by the other faction. The defeat of the steel strike, 1919-1920, reemphasized for Foster the superiority of industrial unionism. He revived the TUEL, but again without success. Foster was chaffing under the enforced inactivity and lack of recognition. Fitzpatrick could do little for him after his blast against the AFL in his book on the steel strike. He was badly in need of allies, and the Communist Party was no less in need of a man with his trade union background.

One must appreciate the isolation and frustration of this hard-boiled trade unionist to understand his going to Moscow as a delegate to the first congress of the Profintern, 1921. Quiet and cautious by nature, but deeply ambitious, he had sought recognition all his life. But he was too radical for the AFL and not radical enough for anything that existed in the labor movement at that time. And after his failure in the AFL there was nowhere for him to turn. In the Communist movement he saw a chance to realize his ambition to capture the AFL or, in case of failure, to form a second labor center.

The Russians and Foster were quick to realize their mutual advantage from a close association. Anxious to penetrate the AFL, the Russians accepted his TUEL as a basis of operations, and, for that matter, also his strategy. Foster, accustomed to top level trade union politics, had a mechanistic theory for gaining control of the AFL: winning key positions—high offices—in one union after the other through well-knit, determined groups and individual deals. Believing that his policies would benefit the workers, there was no need to reckon with their opinion.

The original device to disguise Foster's Communism soon broke down, due to the Communists' inexperience in handling valuable people and the factional entanglement in the WP. Similar to all front groups, his TUEL was not permitted any semblance of inde-

pendence, and its monthly organ, *Labor Herald*, staffed by known Communists—Earl Browder, Foster's lieutenant, being in charge—defended the party line. Moreover, the affiliation of the TUEL with the Profintern in 1922 and Foster's presence at the Bridgman convention exposed his Communism. The reckless Communist performance in the labor party affair caused his final break with Fitzpatrick. This break was a severe blow to him.

Thwarted in his designs on the AFL, Foster turned his attention to the inner politics in the WP. His heart was now set on wresting the leadership from Ruthenberg.

It must be added that in Foster the Communist American labor lost a competent man. Were it not for the bait held out by Moscow, Foster, in all probability, would have found his way back to the AFL or, later, to the CIO, where his organizing ability would have been useful.

THE "ERADICATION OF LOREISM," 1925

Early in 1923, the Lore followers thought it advisable to bring their case before the Comintern. But Lore, for one reason or another, refused to go, and Olgin was sent instead. The men in the Kremlin knew Olgin from the time of their exile abroad, and Zinoviev and the other leaders took him in hand. Highly flattered by the special attention of the mighty, Olgin returned a faithful toer of the line. With his usual gusto, he began preaching the dictum that "the Comintern knows best."

Olgin's about-face was a sad disappointment to those who had sent him. The Jewish Loreites went over to Olgin. The remaining Loreites were hit still harder by Zinoviev's lashing attack on Lore at the Comintern session the summer of 1924, Foster sitting silent during the entire session.¹¹⁵ Sensing that Lore was marked for expulsion, J. Louis Engdahl, Juliet Stuart Poyntz and the others, for their own survival in the party, deserted him. They joined the Ruthenberg faction, isolating Lore. And they were not wrong. Lore was expelled by the Comintern in April the following year.¹¹⁶ This made the action of the American party a foregone conclusion. Lore was expelled at the fourth convention of the WP, August 21-29, 1925, in Chicago. Only his friends in the German Federation followed Lore.

Lore's expulsion, or, as it was officially called, the eradication of Loreism, was carried out with flowing oratory. The Foster people disavowed him without batting an eyelash. Condemning Loreism was the only harmonious act of the convention. Ruthenberg applied to Lore's expulsion the decorative stamp placed by the Comintern on the purging of independent-minded people, "Bolshevization of the party." *117

Another step toward "Bolshevization" was the decision to do away with the federations. They were officially named sections of the party, and their branches were dissolved. With the branches went the collection of dues. Membership in the sections was to be based only on the party fraction in ethnical mass organizations. This drastically reduced the sphere of activity and authority of the language groups. The convention also decided to reorganize the party on the basis of the shop nucleus.

Otherwise, the convention was shot with venomous factionalism. The factions were two armed camps—each side bringing its own strong-arm men. Only the presence of the cool-headed and composed Comintern rep, P. Gussev (Green), an old Bolshevik, saved the convention from physical clashes. The party emerged from this convention as the Workers (Communist) Party.

Ruthenberg had a valid reason for hailing that convention. His group had gained control, though by a bare majority and only through Gussev's skilful maneuvers. (He succeeded in prying away Cannon from the Foster caucus.) However, instead of the convention leading "toward the building of a mass Communist party," as Ruthenberg had optimistically predicted, it became a point of departure for a more intense, bitter, and ruinous inner warfare.+29

The party, rocked by internal conflict, remained ineffectual politically, its influence confined primarily to a small strata of foreign-born. It did not grow beyond its original 16,000-odd members.

The official figures for dues-paying members in 1925 showed that out of 16,325 members only 2,282 were in the English-speaking branches. The rest belonged to 18 language groups. (The Jewish group numbered 1,447 members, and the Russian shrank to 870.) *118