

## 29 *Feeding on Hunger*

The great depression did not arrive a moment too soon for the Communist Party. The rank and file had not yet overcome its bewilderment over the latest expulsions. The loss of a few hundred active people was keenly felt. The new command, committed to a Leftist course, was searching for issues to fit the new line. The depression appeared to be made to order.

On a world scale, the depression did not arrive a moment too soon for Stalin either. And, for that matter, for world Communism generally. There was confusion in the ranks of the Russian party and in the parties abroad over the ouster and arrests of the Trotskyites and the removal of the Bukharin Right Wing. Stalin trapped the Bukharin faction internationally on the "revolutionary appraisal" of the capitalist economy. A crisis in the capitalist world seemed to bear him out. The depression was also an effective argument against the Trotskyite denial of "building Socialism in one country." The Kremlin played up the comparison between the shrinking economy of Europe and the tremendous building program in the Soviet Union to confirm Stalin's thesis that the Soviet Union was independent of the capitalist economy.

As it turned out, Trotsky was not entirely wrong. The world's economic interdependence was proven during the depression. Prices on the world market of the raw materials exported by Moscow to pay for the huge orders for tools and machinery required by the first Five-Year Plan sank considerably, while the prices for the tools and machinery declined less. As a result, Moscow had to

export much larger quantities of grain than it had anticipated, bringing the Russian people semi-starvation. The serious results of this discrepancy were concealed.

### THE PREPOSTEROUS PROGRAM FOR THE UNEMPLOYED

The tumultuous Communist activities here during 1930-1934 can be summed up under these titles: The Campaign Among the Unemployed; The Formation of "Revolutionary Unions"; The Concentration on Negroes; The Election Campaign of 1932; The "Social-Fascist" Era; The Stifling Inner-Party Life; The Tightened Cultural Front. Regretfully, they can be treated only sketchily.

Five months had elapsed since the financial crash, and the CP was already forming unemployed councils and calling for demonstrations on March 6, 1930, under the ambiguous slogan, *Work or Wages*. The response to the call exceeded expectations, especially in New York and Detroit. For the latter it was the first outpouring of workers of any sort. City and state officials were alerted on that day to a new problem that had every indication of becoming acute.

*Work or Wages* was soon replaced by "concrete" demands. The Communist program called for a seven-hour day and a five-day week, a social security law providing a minimum of \$15 for a single unemployed and \$20-25 for a family man. This would have compared quite favorably with the average earnings of a worker's family in 1928, \$24 a week or less. However, the heart of the program was in the demand that the millions that Congress would have to appropriate for unemployed relief should be taken out of the funds for the armed forces, and that these vast sums should be turned over to the unemployed councils for distribution.

As no one could believe that Congress would disband the Army and Navy and turn over their funds to the Communist councils, the only deduction was that the CP was only interested in aggravating internal tensions. The revolutionary illusions of the Third Period required that the American party recklessly disregard the feasible for the impossible. These illusions also imposed upon the party a paralyzing incapacity to achieve lasting results from its initiative among the unemployed. This was the reason why the party could not accept credit that rightly belonged to it for the first dent in official indifference to widespread want. It was afraid

to concede—to itself and to the millions out of work—that the “capitalist” state institutions could feed the hungry.

An example was the negative reaction of the party to the first million dollars granted by New York City for unemployed relief, following a march by the Unemployed Council to City Hall, October 16, 1930. The *Daily Worker* dismissed it as “another million dollars for graft.”<sup>\*199</sup> It was inadequate, but not graft, and the idle felt it.

(The same editorial accused Norman Thomas of approving the beating of Sam Nessin, one of the delegates, for insulting Mayor James J. Walker. Thomas, present at the hearing, categorically denied it. But Harry Gannes repeated the accusation.)

The author, in Moscow at that time, called the attention of a few leading men in the Comintern to the absurdity of the last two relief demands, that could only defeat the purpose of the unemployed campaign. They nodded in agreement. But their inaction showed that the American party acted in harmony with the Comintern policy. Only eight months later, in November, did the plenum of the CEC realize that these two demands were “sowing suspicion among the unemployed,” and decided on a saner policy. However, the councils were instructed to “politicize” their struggle, tying their program in with political slogans, including the defense of the Soviet Union. Still, the New York demonstration, February 25, 1931, had among its slogans *All War Funds for the Unemployed*.<sup>\*200</sup>

The party, refusing to acknowledge the relief grants, was quick to recognize the *institution*—the relief agency. Notified by a friendly high-placed social worker that the city was about to establish a Home Relief Bureau, the New York party sent telegrams to about 50 of its bright young men and women to apply for the job of relief investigator. As they were the first, most of them were hired.<sup>\*201</sup> And for a few years the party group there was able, through the usual caucusing and maneuvers, to control the relief outfit. The Communists also controlled the Writers Project and the Federal Theater Project.

#### THE TWO HUNGER MARCHES ON WASHINGTON

The peak of the unemployed action was the two hunger marches on Washington, December 6, 1931 and December 6, 1932, climaxing

similar marches on state and city governments. The first possessed the fervor of a genuine outburst of idle men and women demanding that the state assume responsibility for their plight. And the grave silence of the crowds that lined the streets on the route was eloquent testimony of the serious impression made on them by the march. The second, carefully prepared and organized, had a stronger Communist imprint—and for that reason was less impressive.

The Communist Party had a monopoly on this work in the first period. The Socialist Party did not enter into it until much later, with the exception of Chicago. And the AFL, in the spirit of Gospels’ dictum, “Keep the government away from organized labor,” at its conventions in 1930 and 1931, rejected unemployment insurance.<sup>\*202</sup> A year later, however, the AFL took a positive stand.

These enormous opportunities were frittered away by blind adherence to a doctrine imposed by Moscow. Of course, the overriding reason for the failure was the relief and work program inaugurated by the New Deal. But the unemployed councils lost their hold earlier; they were never allowed any semblance of independence. Policies, tactics and personnel were decided for them by the respective party committees, although the party repeatedly warned them that the councils should be permitted to conduct their affairs free of interference, the party only exercising “political guidance.” The councils gradually shrank, and the merger with the Socialist-led Workers Alliance could not keep them alive.

One must not assume that the party top was blind to the harm implicit in openly bossing the auxiliaries. A four-page circular letter to all units, signed by Max Bedacht for the party secretariat, and dated September 9, 1930, spoke sharply on this subject: “. . . So-called auxiliaries . . . must be genuine non-party mass organizations . . . with definite aims . . . distinct from the party. . . . At present, the usual conception of these organizations is that of side shows for the party, which have to improve its income. . . . In some instances they are merely names under which a few functionaries collect money to pay rent and their own wages. . . . The leading non-party people see new faces every day in the offices. . . .”<sup>\*203</sup>

These fine-sounding instructions remained dead letters for the party top itself. In the midst of the second hunger march in Washington, D.C., Herbert Benjamin was summarily removed as national

secretary of the unemployed councils, and replaced by Amter. It was a decision by the CEC of the party, without the formality of bringing it to the councils. This practice was applied to all auxiliaries. It could not be otherwise. The very nature of a Communist Party precluded any degree of internal autonomy for auxiliaries. The only "freedom from interference" the councils had was in putting back furniture of evicted families.

Jewish Communists, in their own narrow field, seized upon the general discontent in 1931 to lead bread and meat strikes in Jewish neighborhoods in several cities. The strikes were organized through the women's councils. It was not difficult to unite irate housewives in a demand for lower prices on such essentials. They picketed the stores, clashed with the police and caused a turmoil in the community. But the Communists in control of the women's councils followed the party line of "spreading the struggle." And they kept spreading it until the housewives were tired. The largest and longest were the bread strike in Chicago, that began February 1931, and the meat strike in St. Louis, in the same year. The women's councils were more successful in stopping rent evictions.

#### THE NEW REVOLUTIONARY UNIONS: DUAL UNIONS

The hunger marches, dramatic and violent, were not intended to be the major task of the party. High priority was given to those employed in the mass industries. A cursory reading of the *Thesis and Resolutions* of the plenum of the CEC, March 31st–April 4th, 1930, will bear this out. The *Thesis* emphasized:

The most fundamental task of our party in mass work is the building of the revolutionary unions of the TUUL into broad mass organs of struggle. The recent communications of the Comintern and Profintern have again laid stress upon this elementary necessity. . . .<sup>204</sup>

This "most fundamental task" was never fulfilled. The party had to shift into high gear on the unemployment sector; to march hungry and disgruntled people was incomparably easier than building revolutionary unions in strategic industries.

The party's new line in trade union work preceded the depression. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the fourth congress of the Profintern, summer of 1929, implemented the resolution of the

Comintern, a year earlier. The top of the old unions were branded reactionaries and incapable of defending the workers' interests. New unions were to be built around a revolutionary center in each country.

The Lovestonites had to bow to this new directive. And the plenum of the CEC, May 1929, decided to form new unions in the unorganized industries.

The Fosterites threw overboard the reservation specifying the unorganized, and hastened to form unions wherever any contact remained from previous Left-Wing strikes. In a short while, eight "national" and "industrial" unions were organized: in coal mining, textiles, marine, the garment trades, in the auto industry, food, shoes and grocery clerks. It proved a thankless task. Only among the miners and the garment workers did the Left have any following. As only two industries, food and auto, could be called practically unorganized, the rest of the new unions were simply dual unions.

Of the eight unions, only the National Textile and the National Miners succeeded in moving to action considerable numbers of dissatisfied people. The first conducted the strike in Gastonia, N.C., 1929; the second, the miners' strike in Illinois, 1930, and in Kentucky, 1931–1932. Gastonia and Kentucky were bloody affairs, attracting national attention, and all three were lost.<sup>+66</sup>

The party had nothing to show for all its strenuous efforts either in Gastonia or Kentucky. Gastonia remained for Communism a burned-out shell, and the one unit that was left in Bell County, Kentucky, soon died out. Still, if one could discount the waste in human life, the strikes were illuminative of the explosive industrial relations in the South and brought into sharp focus the part played by local and state authorities in these relations.<sup>+67</sup>

#### MOSCOW WANTS A STRIKE; DRESS TRADE CHOSEN

If numbers were the only criteria, the convention of the TUEL, in Cleveland, Labor Day 1929, was a spectacular affair; there were 690 delegates. Actually, the delegates came from the party periphery—the eight new unions plus opposition groups in the old unions. With the exception of a few Lovestonites present, no one challenged the sweeping decision to push vigorously the campaign for new

industrial unions. The word "Educational" was dropped from the name of the League and replaced by the word "Unity."

To cover the abrupt change, a clause was inserted in the program that work in the old unions must not be given up. But the epithets "corrupt" and "impotent" applied to them left the door open for opposition unions everywhere. And this was the actual intent.\*205

A revolutionary trade union center needs strikes, and with maximum demands. As the depression spread, the workers were on the defensive and reluctant to strike. But Moscow was apparently anxious for strikes in the United States for its own purposes, and Foster had to shop around for strike openings. He chose the dress-makers in New York.

The Needle Trades Industrial Union strongly resisted the idea of a strike in the dress trade, for two reasons: 1, Its position there was too weak; 2, The industry was already in the grip of a crippling unemployment. Nevertheless, Foster insisted, and the top of the union, Communists and Lefts, had to obey.\*206

The strike in the dress industry was called February 17, 1931. The major demand was a basic change in the system of work, week-work instead of piece rates. The *Daily Worker* devoted almost the entire front page to the start of the strike. A cable of greetings from the Profintern was printed in big fat letters. It said in part, "ALL COUNTRIES ARE SENDING YOU EXPRESSIONS OF OUR CLOSE SOLIDARITY. . . . YOUR SUCCESS LIES IN SPREADING STRUGGLE TO MAXIMUM. . . ." \*207

In a front page editorial the paper added its own blessings:

"The needle industry is especially the field for the loot of Lieutenant Governor Lehman's banking company, and Lehman is closely connected with the fake "Socialist" leaders of the corrupt union, the ILGWU. . . . The ILGWU has long ceased to be a labor union, to become an auxiliary to the employers." \*208

From the space lavished by the *Daily Worker* and the *Freiheit* on that strike, one could have imagined that a stoppage in the New York dress industry posed a threat to the American economy. Moscow knew the insignificance of the dress strike. But it needed a chance to spread stories about workers' unrest in America at a time when consumers' goods and food were fast disappearing from the state stores.

The dress strike was lost before it was fairly begun, and it never

involved more than a few thousand workers in an industry of more than 50,000.

#### PARTY BLAMES STRIKE LEADERS

In true Stalinist style, the party blamed the strike leaders for the failure, accusing them of "lagging behind the militant masses in the strike" and of Right-Wing opportunism. The miners in Illinois were also charged with—of all things—"undemocratic conduct of the strike." The same charge was leveled at the Communist food workers.

It is worth noting that among the enumerated Right-Wing errors and weaknesses—and this applied to all TUUL unions—was the "failure to put forward political slogans in the economic struggles . . . persistence in trade union legalism and craft practices . . . and gross underestimation of the radicalization of the workers." To correct another weakness, the 13th party plenum decided that "building the party must not wait until after the strike is over, but must proceed before and during the strike." \*209

A fair example of what the party demanded of its people in a strike led by an AFL union is Israel Amter's denunciation of the TUUL section of the pocketbook workers' union for their behavior in the strike of 4,000 Jewish workers in New York City, in the same summer of 1931.

Amter, the chief officer of the New York District, deemed it his duty to call the party's attention to "some major lessons from a minor strike," which was "shamelessly betrayed" by the union leadership. Such a betrayal on the part of "reactionary social fascist" officials was no surprise to Amter. It fitted snugly into the party's concept of the AFL. What pained him was the opportunism of the Pocketbook Makers Industrial League.

"A complete misconception of a revolutionary strike strategy and an opportunist collapse before the situation," he wrote, "was recently manifested. . . . It was the first instance during the life of the TUUL that the revolutionary opposition had the opportunity and duty of assuming independent leadership in a sold-out strike. In this task (it) . . . failed, and the lesson of this failure must be drawn and learned for the benefit of the entire American working class." \*210

Amter saw two other opportunist weaknesses of the Communist-Left in that union: 1, "A complete underestimation of the workers' strength, militancy and willingness to struggle against the bosses, reactionary leaders and government (the government was added to round out the party program—M.E.)"; 2, "The failure to see the possibility of *spreading the strike* (italics M.E.)."

The "sold-out" strike was actually a favorable compromise in a great depression. And the Communists had participated in the settlement, as they should. But, his only guide the doctrine of the revolutionary crisis, saintly Amter had to censure his comrades for not breaking up the union during the strike.

The "revolutionary" unions failed, and the first stirrings among the unorganized under the New Deal passed them by almost completely. The TUUL was quietly buried at the end of 1934, and with it most of the unions. Only the national marine union, the fur workers and the longshoremen on the Pacific survived.