

CPUSA in the 40's

The Browder Line in Practice

The first article in this series on the Communist Party, USA (December 1973) dealt with the Party's role in the development of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the mid and late 30's; the second (February 1974) with the Party's political line immediately before and during World War II, and especially the role of Earl Browder in turning the line into full-blown revisionism. This article goes into some of the practical effects of the development of revisionism in the Party at that time, especially around trade union work—Ed.

At the same time in the late 30's that CP head Earl Browder and his followers were tying the Party's coattails to President Roosevelt and the bourgeoisie, FDR was delicately tampering with the CIO. Roosevelt was concerned about CIO head

John L. Lewis. At the time, Lewis had a considerable following among workers, and unlike other CIO leaders such as Sidney Hillman and Dave Dubinsky, considered himself as much a big shot as the President. And Lewis was becoming increasingly impatient with Roosevelt's openly anti-labor policies, which compromised "leaders" like Lewis. FDR therefore buttered up Hillman and other totally corrupt forces in the CIO top leadership with private "chats" and government appointments. In January 1940, Lewis denounced FDR's third-term campaign, and for a while seemed likely to propose a new farmer-labor party. But instead, two weeks before the election, he announced his support for the Republican, Wilkie, and said that if Roosevelt won, he would resign as CIO head.

Roosevelt won, Lewis quit, and his lieutenant, Philip Murray, became new CIO head. Murray, a devout Catholic and anti-communist, and very afraid of the rank and file workers, immediately started to steer the CIO into "respectable trade unionism."

Two Key Drives

The two great organizing drives of 1941 were Bethlehem Steel and Ford, both with extensive Communist leadership. Both were walkouts with mass picketing rather than sit-downs, because of the discomfort the national CIO felt about the "unorthodox" takeover tactic. These two struggles represented the last major surge of the great CIO organizing drive, which had begun in 1936-37.

The Ford plant at River Rouge was completely surrounded by workers and their cars. All police were driven out of the area and UAW members took care of traffic control and peace-keeping for a large section of Dearborn, Michigan, for the 12 days of the strike.

The Ford contract was the first "union shop" agreement in the auto industry, and the River Rouge local, number 600, was to remain a center of Communist and left strength for 15 years in spite of heavy attacks from the union and the government.

Two strikes which pointed toward the road of the future took place in the spring and early summer of 1941, at Allis Chalmers Manufacturing in Wisconsin, and North American Aviation in Southern California. Both were called by Communist-led UAW locals. The Allis-Chalmers strike was against the company's union-busting attempts to set up an AFL local in the plant.

Proclaiming that the strike hurt "national defense preparedness," the U.S. Government ordered the workers back to work. The local refused to a man and received belated backing from the CIO. The Federal Government denied it had issued the order, but over the next three days, police in armored cars and the state militia tried to break the mass picket line. They failed and the company gave in.

Met by Bayonets

Two months later, early June, when the 12,000 workers at North American decided to go out for a pay raise, Roosevelt had learned his lesson. With Sidney Hillman at his side, he signed an order for the workers to go back. Richard Frankenstein of the national UAW spoke to a strike meeting to urge them to go along with the government back-to-work order. He was booed off the stage.

But when the pickets showed up on June 9, to start the strike, they were met not by the state militia, but by the U.S. 15th Infantry with drawn bayonets, mortars and machine guns. The picketers were driven away with bayonets and gun butts. The next day, attacked by the government and deserted by their international, the local leaders called the strike off.

The Allis-Chalmers and N.A.A. strikes so upset the reactionaries in the UAW leadership that, led by Walter Reuther, they launched a vicious red-baiting campaign at that fall's convention, which would be repeated throughout the labor movement over the next ten years. Allis Chalmers delegates were refused seating, and the North American strike was condemned. On the last day, a resolution against Communist Party members holding UAW office was jammed through. Only the onset of WWII prevented the full unfolding of this conflict within the CIO in the following period.

The War, The Workers and The Party

On December 26, 1941, leaders of the AF of L, the CIO, and the Railroad Brotherhoods met in Washington, D.C. with Roosevelt and signed a pledge to refrain from any strikes for the duration of the war. For the whole next year they were able to maintain this, although contradictions appeared which would break into the open later.

There was only limited struggle against the no-strike proposition in the CP's National Committee. William Z. Foster, Sam Darcy, and a few others

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out a couple of times in the last few weeks"—a typical comment from a construction worker. Others at the unemployment offices say things like, "It's all a part of their system. I don't believe the energy shortage." A worker takes a section from an RU leaflet about how the oil companies are using the "energy crisis" to boost their profits, and writes this on the wall in the men's john at his plant.

The workers see the handwriting on the wall, know the system isn't providing, and feel pretty sure, as many of our unemployed friends point out, that their future has to be fought for.

There is no blueprint for organizing around unemployment, but we have come up with some beginning ideas. We in UWOC are generally united around the need to build it as a fighting workers' organization that takes on the system in building the struggle of the unemployed.

Our UWOC membership card states: "The Unemployed Workers Organizing Committee is an organization of unemployed workers, dedicated to fighting together for the needs of the unemployed. We believe that the employed and unemployed have the same crisis and the same fight. We won't scab and we won't starve. We demand jobs or enough unemployment insurance to cover the cost of living until there are jobs! UNITY AND ACTION IS STRENGTH AND POWER."

Exposing Capitalism

The key thing for communists working in UWOC is to build the struggle around the needs of the unemployed and to unfold around this the exposure of the capitalist system. It is to show the relation between the struggle for jobs or income with other struggles against the system, and help set people on the road to understanding that the system must be overthrown and replaced with socialism to solve the problems we have. The need for socialist revolution is not the basis of unity of UWOC, but represents the independent line of communists within UWOC and the struggle of the unemployed.

In UWOC we have had much discussion of how we are doing. While we haven't here in the Bay Area, or elsewhere, grown into huge, mass organizations, we keep agitating and organizing, and are increasingly accepted as an organized force. We have some 35,000 signers of our petition for jobs or income in just the Bay Area.

In the Bay Area and in several other areas, UWOC has linked up with employed workers' fights. We have fought back against scabbing in the Shell strike last year. We have gone to and leafleted union hiring halls, where companies were trying to recruit scabs for the Shell strike, and have united with the workers there in opposing that. We have raised support for the farm-workers.

More recently, Bay Area UWOC helped in the struggle of young postal workers, mainly Black and Chicano, against lay-offs. Many workers, of all nationalities, young and old, employed and unemployed, joined in this fight and helped win temporary reinstatement of the jobs (see December 1973 *Revolution*). One of the chants by these young workers hit at the heart of it—"Overtime inside, Unemployment outside." Employed, unemployed, same crisis, same fight—this sums up the experience of more and more workers.

UWOC also takes up grievances of workers collecting unemployment insurance, and the office administrators have been forced to respect our collective, organized strength. But we are not social welfare workers; we

fight the burden of this system on our backs, on the backs of the unemployed.

Sometimes we are asked if we are an organization around welfare. Our answer again: we do not believe that welfare meets the needs of unemployed people. People without jobs who can't get other insurance are certainly entitled to welfare, but we are an organization of workers. Our goal is to build a mass organization of the unemployed, to unite workers employed and unemployed, to raise consciousness and unity around our needs and to expose our enemy, the capitalist system.

Wide Participation

Representatives of UWOC have spoken at May Day rallies for several years in the Bay Area. We have also participated in events like International Women's Day, demonstrations in support of the Farah strike, and others—bringing our program to these events, showing our solidarity with other workers and supporting their demands.

UWOC has also taken part in the fight around the "energy crisis." Recently, members of Bay Area UWOC spoke at a public hearing on utility cutbacks. We exposed how companies like Pacific Gas & Electric were cutting off unemployed people's heat and light, and besides demanding an end to this, we supported the demand that the rates of the utilities companies should be cut back. We see this as an important part of building the struggle of the unemployed, along with taking up the fight around evictions, repossessions and other ways that the crisis hits the unemployed—and the employed—workers.

UWOC in the Bay Area and other parts of the country is still a small organization, but we know that through persistent work, building struggle, raising demands that concretize the needs of the unemployed workers, exposing our enemy and building the fight back, we will grow as the crisis produces more and more unemployment and more and more workers are looking for the ways to fight back. Already there are many unemployed workers who carry our membership card—Black, white and Chicano. And UWOC has the support of many more workers at the unemployed offices, the hiring halls, etc.

Those of us in the RU who helped to organize UWOC in the beginning have learned more about the mass line, and have understood more deeply that this system is bankrupt, that it cannot meet the needs of its basic producers, cannot provide employment and a decent living, and is therefore doomed. We know that through their many struggles, and our work as communists, the mass of workers, employed and unemployed, will grasp these truths and will carry the struggle forward to knock over the capitalists and build our own society, socialism. ■



Symbol of the Unemployed Workers Organizing Committee

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pointed out that while it was necessary to ally with the bourgeoisie to a certain degree in the fight against Hitler and Hirohito, it was stupid to assume that the capitalists would forget *their* self interest. If the workers couldn't withhold their labor through strikes, they would be powerless to fight the bosses' increasing exploitation.

This, however, was just fine with the Browderite majority. They didn't "play the piano"—that is, make the war effort the main emphasis, but harmonize the class struggle with this, rather than try to *suppress it altogether*. Instead, they chanted monotonously, "Everything to win the war." While corporate profits soared with juicy war contracts and expanded production, inflation ate into the workers' paychecks.

But the line of the Party hardly defended the workers' interests. Harry Bridges, the longshore leader who followed the Party's line at the time, said in March, 1942: "To put it bluntly, I mean your unions today must become instruments of speed-up of the working people of America."

Putting this line into practice meant the reintroduction of "incentive pay"—piecework—into Red-led unions like the United Electrical Workers, where it exists to this day! And the CP also pushed a proposition which AF of L and CIO leaders accepted—that overtime pay be eliminated for the duration of the war.

UMW Withdraws from CIO

Another factor was coming into play as 1942 began. John L. Lewis disagreed with the total allegiance of the CIO leadership to Roosevelt. He proposed merger of the AF of L and CIO, and was sharply attacked by CIO President Murray, who had consulted with Roosevelt.

Lewis then intensified his policy of strengthening District 50, the UMW catch-all section for non-miners. In response, Mike Quill of the CIO Transport Workers Union, and at that time a member of the Communist Party, led an attack on N.Y. District 50 headquarters and smashed it up, arguing that Lewis was trying to sabotage the war effort.

Finally, in mid-1942, Lewis formally threw Murray out of the UMW and pulled the UMW out of the CIO. Although this gave the miners independence to carry out their 1943 strikes, it also cut them off from support and from the CIO rank and file. Nevertheless, the miners' strikes inspired strikes by other workers.

In April, 1943, the War Labor Board sided with the coal bosses against UMW demands for less overtime, better working conditions, and a pay increase (food prices in mining towns had more than doubled since 1939). Thus, when their contract expired on April 30, the mine workers, in Lewis' words, ceased to "trespass on the properties of the coal operators." After four days they went back in as a good will gesture while negotiations proceeded.

The miners repeated the strike and "show of good will" cycle twice more before winning victory. They walked out June 1-7, June 19-22, and from late October to final victory on November 3. The 530,000 miners in these months faced down slanders that they were agents of Hitler, government threats to seize the mines, and the threat of sending in the Army. The miners' answer was simple: "You can't mine coal with bayonets," and they enjoyed tremendous support from rank & file unionists despite the attacks from the labor hacks.

Party Attacks Miners

It is to the disgrace of the CP that it took full part in these vicious attacks on the miners. On May 25, 1943, the *Daily Worker* said, "Lewis' plan is to destroy the labor movement to make it a front for the most sinister fascist anti-labor forces in the United States." In mid-June Browder went the *Worker* one better; the strike, he said, was "treason against the miners, against the labor movement, against our own country." In fact, the Party sent its best organizers, including William Z. Foster, into the coal fields to agitate among the miners against Lewis and the strike.

Lewis, it is true, was no real representative of the

interests of the working class. He wanted to use the workers' militancy and the CIO organizing for his own purposes, which were reformist at best, outright reactionary at worst. Not guided by considerations of the international struggle of the working class, he carried his competing battle with Roosevelt to the extreme of not giving a damn about whether he sabotaged the war effort against the fascists.

But the rank and file miners were not all a bunch of dupes of the fascists. They responded to Lewis' leadership because they had real grievances, because they, like the rest of the working class, were the victims of the drive of the capitalists to use the war to maximize profits. The line of the CP should have been to unite with this sentiment and give it correct leadership.

Rather than denouncing and organizing against the miners' strike, which actually aided Lewis, the CP should have supported it, but "adjusted" it, (as Mao puts it) to protect the interests of the miners, while raising their consciousness about the real issues of the war—the struggle against fascism as part of the long-range struggle against imperialism.

In this way, the miners—and the working class as a whole—would have grasped even more firmly and felt even more deeply the need to make *necessary* sacrifices for the war effort, while at the same time not allowing the ruling capitalists an orgy of profit at their expense. And they would have grasped more firmly the need to *force* the U.S. ruling class to vigorously pursue the war, and to break its ties, arrangements and agreements with the fascist enemy.

Heroic Role in Battle

The Party's work at this time did not consist entirely of opposing strikes. From the entry of the U.S. into the war, Party members fought in the unions and the community with petitions, rallies and demonstrations for the U.S. and Britain to open a second front in western Europe. Roosevelt and Churchill were stalling on it, to ensure that the Soviet Union took a great deal of punishment from the Nazis to weaken its ability to play a strong world role after the war. And on the battlefields, young Communists played a brilliant and heroic role, finishing the war as the most decorated group to be found in the whole army.

But as Browder fawned at the heels of the imperialists, the Party line got worse as 1943 ended. After the miners' strike ended in victory, and touched off further strikes among the workers, Roosevelt proposed a "national service act" which would draft all workers until the war was over, legally preventing them from refusing any job, changing jobs, turning down overtime, getting pay raises or striking. This, mind you, came at a time when corporate profits were at the highest levels in U.S. history!

Virtually every labor bureaucrat in the country found it too much to swallow, and denounced it. The only backing Roosevelt got was from those union leaders close to the Party, like Emspak of the UE, Bridges and Curran from Maritime, and even they were forced to back off when they got the reaction of the rank and file. And since 1944 was an

election year, FDR started to get discreet about it anyway.

By mid-1944, the "Teheran line" of Browder's (see previous article, in Feb. issue) was in full effect. Browder had publicly said of the Anglo-Soviet-American Pact, "If J.P. Morgan supports this coalition and goes down the line for it, I as a Communist am prepared to clasp his hand and join with him to realize it."

Browder's "Teheran Line"

What Browder's line meant for the working class was laid out even more clearly in his book, *Teheran*. The section on trade unions, for instance, praises Eric Johnston, President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and includes a number of suggestions on how labor and capital can "cooperate peacefully" to improve the U.S. standard of living after the war. One way would be to open up more foreign markets!

And as the end of the war came into clear view, many Party members in the trade unions began to apply the Browder line concretely. By the fall of 1944, there were major strikes in many industrial shops around the country, and rank and file struggles to dump the no-strike agreement in both the UAW, where it won, and United Steelworkers, where demagoguery & political trickery defeated it. But Bridges, Curran and others proposed in their unions an "indefinite no strike policy after the war."

The effect of this line on workers and Party members alike can easily be imagined. After the repudiation of Browder in the spring of 1945, a Party worker from Buffalo, Freda Werb, described what it had been like in early 1945: "Being faced with layoffs as we were, the discussion in the plant naturally was around what was going to happen to us after we were laid off and what kind of a post-war world we were going to live in. For months I stood there and told everyone who would listen that in the postwar period our purchasing power would be greatly increased, that the capitalists would voluntarily pay us more money because they wanted to have a prosperous postwar world. I might say in passing that many wouldn't listen, or having listened, laughed."

This passage is the most damning condemnation that could be made of the Earl Browder line—Communists forced to take positions so backward as to be laughed at by their fellow workers. The damage this did to the Party's relationship to the working class would become grimly evident over the next few years, when the Party came under attack by the government and the agents of the ruling class in the leadership of the unions.

It is important, however, to touch again on the lesson drawn at the beginning of this article. Browder did not begin by dissolving the Party and kissing the boots of the ruling class. He began by caging the revolutionary workers' movement within the bourgeois limits of trade unionism, ideologically and politically. Then he completely liquidated the independent Communist role within the trade unions. From there on, it was a relatively easy matter to dissolve the Party altogether, as he did in 1944, and consolidate a full-blown revisionist line.

How hard the road back up was to be will be the subject of the next article in this series. ■

WARTIME MAY DAY



This cartoon appeared in *The DAILY WORKER*, organ of the Communist Party, USA, on May 1, 1945, and demonstrates how the Party's policy during WWII was to completely liquidate the class struggle.