

15 *The Expendables*

The persistent Communist efforts in the 20's to penetrate the trade unions met almost the same fate as their intricate maneuvers to break into the general political scene. The underlying reasons were likewise similar: the irreconcilable rift between theory and practice, the internal strife, and dictation by Moscow.

From the very beginning, the Jewish Communists had selected the women's garment workers as likely to be the most receptive audience because of their known militancy. But, as their experience with trade unions was practically nil, their appeals outdid in dogmatism those of their party. A leaflet, *Cloakmakers Awake!*, of October 1920, calling upon them to form a workers council in their industry, condemned the prized gain of the last general strike, week-work instead of piece-work, a goal of all radicals in the apparel industries.

Moreover, the program of the proposed workers council did not recognize "any agreement between capital and labor. We recognize only the uncompromising class struggle with the exploiters, until the overthrow of capitalism." The leaflet finished on a Jewish note: "We, the Jewish workers, . . . cannot and must not remain idle and watch others fighting for us." A. Bittelman and M. Lunin were advertised as speakers at the conference; neither was a member of a trade union.¹¹⁰

These amateurish tactics had to be given up. The CP began seeking a more realistic approach toward the unions. In New York City, Joseph Zack (Goldfedder) became the party's industrial organizer—

his qualifications for that job were not apparent. Zack managed to unite a few straggling groups in the smaller divisions of the food and shoe industries, and in a few other trades neglected by the old craft unions, into a body with the high-sounding name of United Labor Council. Similar attempts, with still less success, were made in other large cities.

In 1921, the Jewish Federation contributed to the merger with the Communists a number of young active trade unionists, men and women who wielded influence among their fellow workers. This was primarily the case in the apparel industries, the painting trades, among the bakery workers, and some smaller trades. Foster, too, aside from his own popularity, brought with him a few experienced trade unionists in the Midwest.

TUEL—A COMMUNIST TOOL

The program of the Trade Union Educational League, after Foster's return from Moscow, formulated three major slogans: the amalgamation of craft unions into industrial unions, militant class struggle instead of class collaboration (the repudiation of various plans for cooperation between labor and management), and labor's independent political action. Of these three, the first, though not new, possessed the strongest appeal for radicals everywhere.

The program stressed that the TUEL was merely "an informal grouping of progressive and revolutionary elements . . . to develop the trade unions from their present antiquated and stagnant condition into modern, powerful labor organizations. . . ." Their goal was "abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' republic."¹²⁰

The last insertion was a political wedge forced in by the party.¹²¹

At the first convention of the TUEL, the end of August 1922, in Chicago, syndicalists, anarchists and even Socialists participated. Foster was known to them as a trade unionist. Feeling keenly the need for a directing center for all oppositional elements in the trade unions, they thought that the TUEL would be such a center. But they soon realized that the TUEL was Communist property.

The signal for the first break with the non-Communists came at the convention itself. All the committees and all the convention reporters were Communists: Jack Johnstone, H. M. Wicks, Alfred

Knudsen, Rose Wortis, Harry Canter, William F. Dunn, O. H. Wangerin. This Communist domination was clinched by the resolution to affiliate with the Profintern.

Those who were ready to overlook the Communist face of the convention had another unpleasant awakening coming. The members of the Workers Party functioned in the TUEL sections—the trade groups were called sections—as party fractions, and voted en bloc at the meetings. This gave them a tremendous advantage over the non-Communists. Most of the latter, unwilling to be pawns in a game of power, left to form their own groups. Only those on the Communist fringe—loosely labeled Left-Wingers—remained in the TUEL. As a consequence, the planned campaigns in most industries did not materialize.

At its second national convention, September 1–2, 1923, in Chicago, the TUEL was already a purely Left-Wing body. All the enormous work to tie in with the local revolts against John L. Lewis in some districts of the United Mine Workers were futile. Only in two sectors, the textile and garment industries, did the TUEL—or, to be precise, the local Communist units—stir up discontent.

THE PHENOMENON OF A MASS OPPOSITION

The trade union movement, during the "golden prosperity" under Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, was rather listless, its numerical strength low. Such a situation could not be called exactly propitious for action involving great numbers of workers, and still less under Communist leadership. Amazingly, such an action actually did take place, and on several industrial fronts. The most significant in scope and the longest in duration was that in the apparel industries, where the Communists were battling the Right Wing for hegemony, a battle that lasted from 1923 well into 1928.

Tens of thousands of workers throughout the country, overwhelmingly Jewish, participated in these battles, both sides mobilizing their resources outside of the unions involved. The issues at stake went beyond organized labor. A Communist victory in the unions in the 20's would have secured for them a foothold in the AFL and would have raised them to a strategic, perhaps even a dominating, position in Jewish society. No wonder the reverberations of this

dramatic and violent struggle echoed loudly in the community at large.

At various stages in this furious contest, the Communists captured the largest affiliates of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, in most of the garment centers. They also won the International Fur Workers' Union, held positions in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, in the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union, in textiles, food, house painting, and in local unions of bakers, structural iron workers and a number of other trades. The Communists and the Left opposition were very near to establishing their control over the women's garment industry, were it not for the web of factional feuds in the party and its subservience to the dictates of Moscow. They did manage to take over and retain the Fur Workers' Union in New York and in other cities.

In analyzing this phenomenon, one must take account of the uniqueness of the human element and the peculiarities of the structure and development in these apparel industries. But first a few basic observations are essential:

1. The Communist-Left was not the first to stimulate discontent in these industries; oppositional groups had sprung up earlier.
2. The CP did not send in any emissaries there to stir up trouble, as they tried to do in other industries. The opposition and the fighting sprang up from inside, led by Communists and their sympathizers in the unions.
3. The masses of workers who supported the Communist-Left opposition in spectacular and turbulent fighting were not in the least affected by the Communist doctrine or propaganda; they were simple men and women unaware or uninterested in the Communism of their leaders, a considerable portion of them members of Orthodox synagogues. They sided with the opposition in the belief that it voiced their grievances and sought to protect their rights within the union and their security in the industry.
4. The grave issues over which the opposition and the administration—the Right Wing—were battling had their roots primarily in the complicated nature of the industries, the deteriorating inner life of the unions, and fear of innovations. The political slogans injected by the Communists were simply ignored.

Technological changes in methods of production, small split-up

units, dependence upon the whim of style and fashion, the extreme seasonal character of work, and the keen rivalry for the buyer, intensified a fluid situation in the apparel industries in the 20's. To this was added the delicately balanced relations between "inside" and "outside" shop, jobber and contractor, week-work and piece-work, and the out-of-town migration. Stability within the industries and sound relations between the employers' associations and the unions were a prime urgency. Only a bold and far-sighted policy could achieve this. There were a few constructive minds on both sides. But those in the associations were hamstrung by the die-hards, and those in the unions by the workers' deep distrust of the employers.

Industrial instability was paralleled by a noticeable decline in union democracy. Built by the immense suffering of many thousands of men and women in protracted strikes and bloody picket lines, these unions could well stand comparison with others for their democratic spirit, broad social horizons and wide range of activities, of which education was an organic part. But age and success often alter men. Youthful fires were beginning to burn low among the second layer of union officialdom. A number of officers were closing their eyes to industrial sore spots, and relying more and more on machine politics to maintain power. In some local unions, officers were accused of ballot-box-stuffing and corruption.

The following plaintive lines in the organ of the Right-Wing Socialist Farband, at the beginning of the Left-Right fight, are illuminating: "Many Jewish unions," wrote the editor, "are really not in the best order. Here and there . . . errors are committed and things happen that shouldn't. Not all leaders who are known as "Rights" are on the same moral level. Among the "Rights" are regretfully quite a bunch of simple careerists, ignoramuses and plain nobodies. It is only natural that among sections of the workers ill feeling has been accumulated against the union, which they confuse with this or another officer. This dissatisfaction . . . is artificially inflated and exploited by the Communists." *122

In the discussion on the report on trade unions by Morris Siskind, labor editor of the Chicago *Forward*, at the fourth convention of the Farband, December-January 1926, some of the speakers complained that a number of union officers had joined the Socialist

Party in order to get its support, and not to carry out Socialist duties."¹²³

STIRRING UP MASS DISCONTENT

The Communists and their friends of the TUEL did not have to dig far for their criticism. Workers' distrust of union officers had been the underlying reason for several "affairs" in some of the unions, notably the stormy Dr. Isaac A. Hourwich affair, in 1914, and the Moishe Rubin revolt, in 1916, among the cloak and suit workers. In the ladies' waist and dressmakers' Local 25, composed mostly of girls, the discontent was channeled through the Current Events Club, the Shop Delegate League and the Workers Council. The latter was already influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution; a paragraph in its constitution was demonstratively lifted from the Soviet constitution.

Benjamin Schlesinger, president of the ILGWU, hoped to curb the spread of this radical restiveness by dividing Local 25 in two. In the face of the active resistance of the union executive board, he separated those who worked on dresses, the hotbed of discontent, forming a new union for them, Local 22. But he could not foresee that the new local would grow rapidly with the expansion of its industry, becoming the strongest base of the Communist-Left opposition.

The great advantage of the Communist-Left lay in crystallizing these scattered and lingering oppositional moods, shaping them into a unified and effective mass opposition. Obviously, they had to sharpen and inflate the discontent. But party dictates eventually turned this advantage into a grievous disability.

To the Communists in the unions, the basic industrial difficulties stemmed from the class collaboration policy of the leaders. They agitated for a more militant course and "a return of the union to the workers, through shop committees."

THE PROGRAM AND THE LEADERS

The program for the garment trades adopted at the third conference of the Needle Trades Section of the TUEL, September 1925, in New York City, were an admixture of industrial measures and purely political and Communist slogans:

1. Amalgamation of all craft unions into industrial unions, a step in the fusing of all garment unions into one union.
2. Reorganization of the unions on the basis of shop committees (shop delegates).
3. Political action in the form of a labor party.
4. Recognition of Soviet Russia.

The Communist doctrine had to be wedged in too: "Even if all these reforms would be introduced, we would still be far from the dictatorship of the proletariat or the Communist system."¹²⁴ However, the political slogans were totally disregarded when the struggle assumed a mass scale.

The TUEL sections were headed by a group of able, energetic people: Charles S. Zimmerman, Rose Wortis, dressmakers; Joseph Boruchowitz, Isidor Stenzor, cloak and suit workers; Ben Gold and Aaron Gross, of the Furriers' Joint Board; and Louis Nelson, in the ACWA. Their contact with the party was through the needle trades committee of the TUEL, in reality a subcommittee of the CEC of the party. Zimmerman acted as the district organizer for the TUEL and the party whip in the fractions.

The Communists had the valuable support of Louis Hyman, a Left-Winger but never a Communist, who held an important position in the Tailors' and Finishers' Local 9, ILGWU. Hyman's immense popularity with the workers made him a highly useful man. When the Communists fought their ouster and the "reorganization" of their locals, in 1925, he was the chairman of the Joint Action Committee that waged the struggle for reinstatement. In 1926, he was the general manager of the Left joint board and the chairman of the general strike committee. Hyman often resisted party encroachment, but not vigorously enough.

The party erected a sort of a pyramid in the unions, called fractions, the higher superimposed on the lower. The Communists in the highest union body formed the top fraction. Those in the lower union bodies were the leading fraction, and the rank and file members were the general fraction. Party decisions were worked out in conjunction with, and sometimes against, the opinion of the top fraction; and from there it was relayed to the leading fraction, and then to the general fraction. The fractions were not denied the right to discuss decisions of the party. But the discussions over, they had automatically to submit and carry them out. Left-Wingers

disagreeing with a party decision had the choice of resigning from the TUEL. But the majority, anxious for some sort of participation in the oppositional movement, preferred Communist domination to being left outside.

THE ISSUES, REAL AND FANCIED; THE OUSTER

In common with all oppositions, the Communist-Left in the garment trades mixed fact with fancy. Visionaries in their industrial approach, justified grievances were topped with demands far advanced for that period. And, in the ILGWU, where the Communist-Left had a wider base than in the other unions, they succeeded in 1924 in winning three important local unions in New York, 1 (later 117), 9 and 22. They also won a number of locals outside New York.

The Communist-Left was no longer a mere opposition; it controlled highly strategic positions in the union, and the contest for control over the entire ILGWU was looming. An open break was inescapable, and had the Right Wing been more patient and prudent, waiting for the Left to show its Communist hand, the immediate outcome might have been quite different.

Morris Sigman, now IGLWU president, had previously been close to the Left on industrial problems. A former IWW, he was strongly for merging the craft unions into industrial bodies, and did merge a couple of them. Non-political, a man of action and integrity, he nurtured a bias against the officialdom, and would always listen attentively to complaints of ordinary members. In the beginning of his term, he hoped that his aggressive program would bring him the support of the Left. Actually, there was a moment when Sigman and the Communist-Left were ready to enter into a working arrangement. But the party's insistence on including political demands in the negotiations destroyed that chance.

His personal courage and strength of character notwithstanding, Sigman was a pathetic figure. Though having many individual followers, he belonged to no major group and was a stranger in the *Forward*. Appearing before the EC of the large Local 1, machine operators, February 27, 1923, he pleaded with the Left, "Those who rightfully insist on freedom of opinion within the union should not deny the president the same freedom. You can criticize as much as you want, but why the insults and abuse!" *125

However, in the following two years, he realized that the Com-

munist Party was masterminding the Left opposition and would step into the union with both feet if the latter won out. He then decided on a sledge-hammer blow, without giving a thought to whether it was constitutional or not, nor its impact on the membership.*126

Sigman suddenly brought charges of anti-union activities against the three Left unions, Locals 1, 9 and 22. The charges were based on a speech delivered by M. Olgin at their joint May 1st celebration, 1925, in Carnegie Hall, which ended with "Long live a Soviet America." A special committee of the GEB found the three unions guilty, removed their officers and executive boards and reorganized them without the Left. This ill-chosen and badly timed move only rallied the majority of the workers around the ousted. They considered Sigman's official reason flimsy and the removal a violation of basic democratic rights.

Labor circles in New York were impressed by the two large affairs which the Joint Action Committee, formed by the removed administration of the three locals, was able to stage after the ouster: the Yankee Stadium meeting, May 9th, and the work stoppage, August 20th. About 30,000 workers participated in the latter. Fearful for the very existence of the ILGWU, prominent Socialists and labor men, Morris Hillquit and Ab. Cahan among them, prevailed upon Sigman to come to terms with the Left. This required the settling of a major demand of the opposition, proportional representation of the local unions to the national conventions and to the city joint boards.

The large unions had always felt that they were being discriminated against. The delegations to the conventions were not in true proportion to the size of each union, and in the joint boards there was no difference at all in representation. It was charged that the GEB favored the small locals because of their dependence on the national office for assistance. After long negotiations, a compromise was reached with the Left on this and other controversies. They had to be ratified by a special convention, in Philadelphia, November 30, 1925.

COMMUNISTS TAKE OVER; THE DISASTROUS STRIKE

This compromise, agreed to by Sigman, was not approved by the Right Wing at the convention. The Left there claimed a majority,

and accused the administration of making free use of small locals and even creating paper locals to maintain their control of the convention. At one point, the Right refusing to yield on proportional representation, the Left delegates, led by Hyman, walked out of the convention.

The Right Wing, not knowing whether the walk-out was on party instructions, felt uneasy, and might have met the Left half way. But the Left was denied any bargaining advantage they might have derived from such a bold step. Comintern policy in the 20's being opposed to dual unions, the party rep in Philadelphia, picturesque William F. Dunne, told Hyman to return, "even if you have to crawl on your belly." The Left went back, and the Right Wing breathed easier.⁺³⁰

After much further bickering, an uneasy peace was patched up between the two camps.

Reinstated in the three locals, the Communist-Left took over the New York Cloak and Dress Joint Board, a delegated body in these trades and the largest affiliate of the ILGWU. Six months later, all the similar bodies of the ILGWU, here and in Canada, were under Communist control. The only exception was Philadelphia. The Communists were approaching their goal, the ILGWU. But the strike called by the Left joint board in the New York cloak and suit industry, July 1926, proved their undoing.

The national officers recommended acceptance of the terms of the Governor's Commission as a basis for the negotiations with the associations for a new agreement. But to accept mediation by a governor's commission would have been tantamount to the despised class collaboration; besides, not all the terms were favorable to the union. The strike, called on July 1, 1926, involving about 50,000 people, emptied the shops, the Right Wing cooperating in the beginning. Had it been settled in a reasonable time and on reasonable terms, the prestige of the Communist leadership would have been greatly enhanced and their grip on the union strengthened.

Zimmerman, Boruchowitz, Hyman and other leading Lefts were aware of the dire necessity for a timely settlement on the eve of the working season. But they were not the sole masters of the situation. In the driver's seat was the Workers (Communist) Party, and the party was gravely disabled by factionalism. On the eighth week of the strike, the leaders were ready with a tentative and quite a

favorable agreement with the largest employers' association. But before making any further step they had to secure the party's approval. When they appeared at the New York party headquarters, 114 Second Avenue, the party committee, composed of the two warring factions, could not make up its mind, each afraid to be accused of Right-Wing opportunism. First consenting then hesitating, the party committee finally sent the strike leaders back with instructions to continue the strike until more demands would be met.

Zimmerman, Boruchowitz, Rose Wortis, Isidor Stenzor, active Communists, bowed to the party's will with a heavy heart. Their timetable for a settlement had been knocked out. The employers, seeing that the season was being lost, stiffened their resistance.

FOSTER DOES NOT FORGIVE NOR FORGET

The six-months-long turbulent strike of 12,000 furriers, that began February 16, 1926, had just ended. The Communist top of that strike had won out against the active hostility of the AFL and the intransigence of the association. (The furriers' union was taken over by the Communists in 1925.) However, the party was still embroiled in a protracted and violent strike in the textile city of Passaic, New Jersey, which sapped its strength and finances. Common sense dictated that the party should welcome the opportunity to terminate the strike of 50,000 garment workers on fair terms, and thus consolidate a strategic position in the ILGWU and, ultimately, in the AFL. But the party's lack of common sense was matched by its utter disregard for the bread and butter of the mass of strikers. The Ruthenberg-Lovestone-Gitlow-Bedacht faction was willing to back their people in the conduct of the strike. But Foster, casting aside his accumulated experience with mass strikes, kept insisting on "broadening the scope" of the strike. The garment workers were expendable to him.

Foster was motivated by animosity. The Communists in the garment unions had previously looked up to him as a man who had led great strikes. But, after he maneuvered himself into the role of titular head of a Leftist caucus, they deserted him and turned to the more moderate Ruthenberg group. Foster, desiring to punish his enemies, kept criticizing them for lack of militancy, even when they were in control of the union.^{*127}

The other faction was not saintly either. In a relaxed moment, Jay Lovestone admitted to his inner circle that the garment trade unions were "tossed about like a football" between the factions. When the strike was clearly on the downgrade, the strike committee straining every resource to steer it to an orderly conclusion, the party, under pressure by Foster and over the signature of Ruthenberg, handed them an explosive missile, an order by the political committee to raise immediately the issue of amalgamation of all garment trade unions into one industrial union.*¹²⁸

This highly controversial and no less complicated inter-union issue, totally irrelevant to the desperate economic struggle of so many thousands of men and women, could only have further damaged the strike in the eyes of the public, weaken and confuse the strikers and encourage the Right Wing, who were already preparing to defeat the Communist leadership. Gambling with the livelihood of the strikers could only be explained by the fear of the Ruthenberg camp of appearing before Moscow as Right-Wing deviators.

This time the strike leaders refused to carry out party instructions. But Ben Gold, representing a small union and having nothing to lose, obligingly staged a march of a couple of hundred furriers to the meeting of the general strike committee, demanding amalgamation. The ILGWU top could not miss seeing the Communist Party behind this clumsy issue. They resolved to take over the strike situation.+³¹

LEFT IS FIGHTING IN A VACUUM; THE NEW LINE

The strike dragged on for six months, at a cost of more than three million dollars. The ILGWU officers, headed by Sigman and David Dubinsky, manager of the Cutters' Union Local 10, who emerged as the brain of the administration, stepped in December 13, 1926, took over the conduct of the strike, settled it as best they could, and dissolved the joint board and the Left locals. Every worker was required to register anew in the reorganized union. The same pattern was carried out in the other cities.+³²

The Communist-Left offered resistance; they were still able to rally a considerable following. But their hands were tied. They could not propose a new union to their angry and desperate adher-

ents, nor could they reinstate them collectively in the old ones. This spelled frustration. And, though they called several big meetings, they were operating in a vacuum. Meanwhile, demoralization in the shops was growing and the garment market was turned into a veritable battleground, both sides bringing in all the "strong arguments" they could master. There were many victims. But the results were predestined. The hard core of the Communist-Left in the ILGWU were thrown out.*

The void was ended for the expelled only at the end of 1929. In Moscow, the pendulum swung toward a Left course. The prognosis by the Comintern, in the summer of 1928, of the coming of the revolutionary crisis was implemented at the Fourth Congress of the Profintern, October 1929, by instructions to Communists of all lands to begin forming new unions around revolutionary trade union centers. In this country, the TUEL was to be that center.

Accordingly, the remnants of the Communist-Left in the ILGWU—and they were reduced to remnants—banded together with the furriers to form the Needle Trades Industrial Union, on New Year's Eve 1930. But this union, actually a dual union to the ILGWU, was too little and too late. It folded up in 1934. In the same period, the Communists organized a number of other independent or opposition unions: the National Maritime Union, the National Textile Union and the National Miners Union. The International Workers Order, based on the expelled Left in the Workmen's Circle, was also formed in 1930.

In summing up, one peculiar aspect of the long, costly and passionate strife in the ILGWU must be underlined. The bread and butter of the workers was not a genuine nor an immediate issue, because they were not at stake—the strike in 1926 excepted. It was primarily the lingering undercurrent of discontent with the internal affairs in the union that served the Communist-Left as a lever. That they could sway masses of people with this issue testifies to the excitability of Jewish workers, their innate skepticism of people in authority and their jealous concern for their rights.

* For a detailed study of the Left-Right contest for power in the ILGWU and the struggle in the other garment trades, men's tailoring, fur and cap and millinery, see Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A. 1914-1952*, Ch. "Civil War," and the following chapters.