

23 *Running to Moscow*

Nineteen twenty-seven to 1929 were climactic years in the internal struggle of the Workers (Communist) Party. The all-devouring fight for power, thinly concealed beneath a surface of exciting activity, now burst into the open, ending in expulsions.

As the key to the wavering fortunes of the warring factions lay safely in Moscow, one must seek the why's behind the Comintern's seemingly erratic handling of the leadership problem in the American party in the maneuvers of the big Russian leaders for control. American Communism was but a small pawn on the vast Kremlin chessboard.

The factionalism of 1924 to 1929 can be roughly divided into three parts: the first, 1924-1926, the Zinoviev rule; the second, 1927, the Bukharin period; and third, beginning in the fall of 1928, when Stalin took over.

In 1925, Zinoviev was still president of the Comintern and, what spelled more power, a member of the ruling triumvirate with Stalin and Kamenev. Neither he nor Karl Radek, both well grounded in political theory, could accept Foster, a novice to Communism and of pure trade union training, as leader of the American party. Ruthenberg, despite his independence, was more to their liking.

Foster drew the proper lesson from the convention of 1925: that his only chance lay in gaining favor with Moscow. This conviction started a succession of trips to Moscow and a barrage of cables, and caused Foster to "colonize" Moscow with students in the Lenin

School and with functionaries at the Profintern. Meanwhile, his faction dug in for a long internal war.

(The traffic in cables to and from Moscow became a major occupation for each faction. A definite routine was followed, each cabling the mistakes of its adversary, and then circulating only those lines in the usually evasive official reply favorable to its cause. The cable tolls were heavy.)

Foster, a skilful strategist on the domestic scene, had but a sketchy acquaintance with Communist doctrine. He also found it difficult to orientate himself in the maze of the rising rivalry in the Kremlin. Alexander Bittelman, who knew Russian and followed closely the maneuvers of the Kremlin, became Foster's political guide, and later his master.

Foster's colonizing efforts were unwittingly helped by Jay Lovestone, who thought that in acceding to Foster's request for more students of his group to Moscow and more functionaries to the Profintern he was following the example of the Kremlin. But his action boomeranged. It was one thing to send people *out* of Moscow and quite another to send them *to* Moscow. When Krestinsky, a Trotsky follower, was kicked upstairs as ambassador to Berlin, he became worthless to the Trotsky cause in Russia, but sending Foster followers to Moscow created there an oppositional group which steadily argued Foster's case before important people.

During the Zinoviev and Bukharin regimes, the only Foster supporter in Moscow was A. S. Lozovsky, secretary of the Profintern. And he was influential enough to block all attempts of the majority to wrest the TUEL from Foster's grip, creating an anomalous situation: the majority controlled the political apparatus of the party; the rival, its trade union arm.

BUKHARIN FAVORS LOVESTONITES

Ruthenberg's sudden death, March 1927, aggravated the leadership crisis. Zinoviev was no longer the man of power. He and his friend, Kamenev, were fighting for their political lives jointly with Trotsky, whom they had previously ousted in an alliance with Stalin. Bukharin, who replaced Zinoviev in the Comintern and was becoming the spokesman for the moderate, or Right Wing, in world Communism, felt a political kinship with the majority group, the moderate wing in the American party.

The decision of the Comintern plenum of 1927, like the previous ones, was a long-winded resolution that did not show open preference for either American group. Praise and blame were showered on both.*167

But the heart of the decision lay in the practical instructions. They called for a convention late in 1927, to be organized by a committee of equal members from both sides, the Comintern man acting as chairman. In the meantime, the party was to be ruled by a secretariat of three, Lovestone, Gitlow and Foster. Stripped of the official neutrality and of the righteous appeal for unity, the bare fact stood out that the Comintern had turned over the party to the Lovestone group.

To assure the Lovestone control, the Comintern rep at the convention was a Bukharin follower, Ewert, a German, who went by the name of Brown.

Aided by the Comintern, Lovestone had a majority at the convention, in New York, August 31–September 5, 1927. His group took 25 seats to Foster's 15 on the CEC, and a safe majority of the 11 members on the political committee.*168

The majority put on a good show. An outsider would have been highly impressed by the attendance as well as by the reports on the work of the intervening two years. The delegates, about 100 in number, "represented" the most important industries. Listening to their reports—prepared by the party top—one could have imagined that each delegate was backed by thousands of workers. Actually, the steel worker from Youngstown, Ohio, could speak for only a small party body that had but weak links in the huge steel mill there. The auto delegate from Ford had not many more shop workers behind him. The lumberjack from Oregon had even less. Only the few delegates from the garment and allied trades represented positions of strength.

The Foster people were furious, and held Ewert responsible for their defeat; but it was the uncommitted rank and file, who had taken the Comintern decision as an endorsement of the Lovestone leadership and voted accordingly.

Neither Foster, Bittelman, Dunne, nor Jack Johnstone considered the results of the convention as the final verdict. They began a long siege of Moscow against the majority.

The party was hopelessly split in two. John Pepper, who con-

vinced Bukharin that he could bring peace to the American party, arrived here for the second time in 1928 with a unique plan for a triumvirate consisting of Lovestone, Foster and himself. But Foster, distrusting both Pepper and Lovestone, rejected the proposal. At the same time, Foster was restive under Bittelman's steady pressure for a Leftist course for the group, but lacked the moral strength to tear himself away.

His plan a failure, Pepper returned to his original camp, the Lovestone faction. The situation in the party was now untenable. The minority formed a party within a party. And the question of expelling Foster and Bittelman was raised and seriously discussed by the majority caucus.

INNER-PARTY DEMORALIZATION

Far worse than the decaying inner-party life was the demoralization inflicted on the membership. Many of those who had entered the Communist ranks moved by sincere purpose—and they were in the overwhelming majority—were gradually infected by the running sore.

The daily practice of factional cheating and deceiving was corrupting the mind and corroding the spirit. The ordinary Communist, taught that the righteous cause grants a license for a social behavior that would be inadmissible in private life, now learned that this double code of morals could be applied within the party itself. Loyalty to the party was replaced by loyalty to the caucus. For many the damage to the human conscience was irreparable.

A rank-and-file Communist could keep from being entangled in a caucus if it was distasteful to him. But there was no escape for one occupying a post in the party or in an auxiliary body. Positions were distributed according to the strength of the factions, each protecting its man "on the job." And without at least a formal allegiance to a caucus, one could not keep any job of significance, whatever his merits. Many Communists, eager to function in the party, swallowed a great deal of nonsense from their caucus and accepted "theses" which filled them with deep misgivings.

Like a sieve, the party could not hold new members. Each annual drive brought in new recruits. But most of them, disgusted with the factional conniving, dropped out before the next drive. Only the

old core, that had passed through the mill of early splits and persecutions, remained faithful. Also steadfast were those for whom the caucuses opened a convenient ladder for rapid climbing in the party. However, the major addition to the party came from the Young Workers (Communist) League, torn by the same internal feuds. The League graduated hardened caucus combatants.

The party's daily activity revolved around exposing social injustices, here or abroad. A definite pattern was followed: first came an outburst in the party press, then a protest demonstration or a mass meeting, followed by a special committee to raise funds for the respective cause or victims. Often the committee preceded the demonstration. Outsiders who joined the special committee because of their interest in its cause became valuable contacts.

This succession of protest campaigns also had a therapeutic value for the membership. They were kept busy and made to feel a part of a world-wide libertarian cause.

CAMPAIGN OF 1928 REVEALS PARTY WEAKNESS

The majority decided to begin the Presidential campaign of 1928 ahead of the old parties, to gain time and to impress Moscow with a sizable vote. This required a nomination convention with all the trappings.

The convention was held May 26-27, in the New Star Casino, New York City. The credentials committee proudly reported 296 "regular" delegates and 155 "fraternal" delegates, from 39 states, territories and possessions of the United States. The geographical arithmetic used to arrive at these consequential figures could only be explained by Jack Stachel, Lovestone's right-hand man. Nevertheless, all the seats for delegates were filled and all the proper committees elected. To present a united party, Foster was nominated President and Gitlow Vice President.

Care was taken not to be outdone by the Republicans and Democrats in the nominations. The technique was simple. A placard with the name of each state was carried by the "delegate" who came from there; and where there were none from a given state, the placard was carried by a man or woman born there. This was particularly true of most of the South and the territories. Still, the paraders reached a high pitch of enthusiasm, shouting, blowing horns and

snake-dancing. For a moment, the excitement even infected the leaders on the platform.¹⁶⁹

"A Platform of Class Struggle," as it was called, contained the entire party program, but omitted the slogan for a Soviet America and dictatorship of the proletariat.

The party was determined to make the campaign a serious affair, even resorting to paying for signatures on election petitions in many counties. Gitlow made a cross-country speaking tour lasting two months. Every unit had a special election committee. The party press kept up a hard drive to spur the ranks to election work, "linking" every workers' struggle with the necessity to vote Communist. (In a discussion with the author, then editor of the *Freiheit*, on the urgency of the campaign, John Pepper feelingly exclaimed, "But I promised Moscow a quarter of a million votes.")

For all the pains taken by the party, the Foster-Gitlow ticket, on the ballot in 32 states, polled only 48,770 votes. What hurt most was revealing the party's weakness to Moscow. Several reasons for the failure were advanced inside the party, but none suggested that the Platform of Class Struggle, though moderate enough, was too remote from American reality to evoke a wider response.

The poor election showing must have hit the standing of the Lovestonites in the Kremlin. But, as events unfolded in Moscow a year later, no election result would have altered their fate. It was already sealed.