

THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD:

THE STRUGGLE FOR REFORM IN THE COMMUNIST PARTY 1957-58

Jerry Harris

Abstract: A key point in the history of the Communist Party USA occurred in events surrounding the 16th National Convention between 1957 through 1958. During this period there was a struggle over the political and organizational direction of the Party and a loss of a majority of its membership. Most historians give priority to the split between the right lead by Johnny Gates and the left lead by William Foster. This overlooks the importance of the center reform forces who advocated building a mass socialist party based on a Marxist analysis of US conditions. This constituted the majority at the 16th Convention. The following article uncovers this history by exploring an exchange of previously unpublished letters and interviews between the national leaders of the center trend.

In 1957 the Communist Party (CPUSA) held its 16th National Convention in what constituted a pivotal point in its history. The Party's understanding of American society, its view of the world and its own mission and structure were being debated. Thousands of members were pushing for a fundamental reorientation. Emerging from the McCarthy Era, hit by the Khrushchev revelations on Stalin and its own diminished numbers, the party was a shaken organization searching for answers.

This period is often characterized as a battle between Johnny Gates representing the right and William Z. Foster representing the left. Ignored is the large middle ground where most members resided. Inside the National Executive Committee (NEC) Fred Fine and Sid Stein were those most closely identified with what Joseph Starobin called the "re-examinationist majority." (Starobin, p. 227) In Edward Johanningsmeier's biography of Foster he writes with the resignation of Gates "Foster's victory over the fount of reformist 'talk' was complete." (Johanningsmeier, p. 345) Maurice Isserman also fails to distinguish between the right and reform center, he writes that,

Gates did little to organize a faction to consolidate his sympathizers...who included the most articulate, experienced, and talented political organizers in the Communist Party...by early 1957 they lost the initiative to Foster, and by the end of the year were decisively defeated. (Isserman, p. 25)

Isserman ignores the ongoing struggle for reform that went well into 1958 and that most of these “talented organizers” were hardly “sympathizers” with Gates. Howard Fast is another who describes the struggle as a Gates/Foster showdown. (Fast, p. 345)

But those intimately involved have a different viewpoint. Dorothy Healy notes,

Gates’ prominence...gave those outside observers the misleading ideas that He was the undisputed leaders of all the forces favoring change... but outside New York and a few other places the ‘Gates faction’ was a myth.” (Healy, p. 160)

Even the FBI recognized that Fine and Stein were not part of the right. Among the efforts of the counterintelligence program to disrupt the Party they focused attention on Fine noting,

There is an opportunity to further the fractional disruption within the Party. A lack of funds, the reactivation of Party leaders recently released from prison and the Fred Fine- (blank) plan to remove from leadership the strong left-wing and right-wing groups furnish the basis for this. (10/14/57 FBI)

Preparing three letters posing as disgruntle CP members the FBI targeted the NEC meeting of October 23-24 1957. One letter was sent to Bob Thompson and another to both Claude Lightfoot and Ben Davis. ¹

This brief but decisive battle for the soul of American communism can be better understood through the exchange of letters written by the most active leaders of the reform camp. The heat of battle and personal toll extracted are revealed in 170 letters to and from Fred Fine between September 27, 1957 and December 5, 1959. The majority of correspondence includes Sid Stein, Steve Nelson, Carl Ross, Dorothy Healy, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Simon Gerson. ² Fine was corresponding with 20 plus individuals, all veterans and national leaders, acting as an “unofficial switchboard...for those who have left the party and those who remain but refuse to conform.” (9/4/58, Fine) Some of these letters were circulated among groups of supporters; others were in strict confidence with instructions not to let others read them. These letters offer us a unique insight into the thinking, political strategy, frustrations, anger and

¹ In part one reads, “Sure, we all know the extremes of Gates and to some extent Foster have hurt our Party, but more vicious in scope has been the boring from within of Stein and Fine, Fine and Stein. It has been a lesson for all of us how these anti-Soviets are able to control and direct our organization...Claude do not let them use you for their selfish ends.”

² These letters are in possession of the author, many other documents from Fine’s life are kept at the Chicago Historical Museum. Fine had been National Executive Secretary, National Labor Secretary and NEC member; Stein had been National Labor Secretary and NEC member; Nelson was District Organizer (DO) for Western Pennsylvania, member of the National Committee and an officer in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion; Ross was DO for Minnesota and a NC member; Healy was DO for S. California and a NC member; Flynn was a famous veteran of early labor battles and eventually chair of the Party; Gerson was a NC member and Party spokesperson.

disappointments of the inner Party struggle. They are written with all the emotion and heat of the moment, unlike the cooler historic reflections of autobiographies penned years later. In reading them we can understand history as a process, a moving target of developments rather than grand schemes or inevitabilities. Here we have raw history in the making with those words and views often forgotten or softened by reconsiderations after years pass. Most importantly these letters reestablish the history of the reform center outside the shadow of Gates expanding our understanding of the complex history of the CPUSA.

The 16th Convention

To put these letters into context we need to first review the 16th Convention and the debates that were at the heart of the struggle. Essentially the Party faced a multi-level crisis over questions of democracy. This touched on their relationship to the Soviet Union, Leninist concepts of their Party and the possibility of democratic change in US society. Although members thought differently on each issue there was an overdetermination that created a common basis of criticism for those seeking reform.

By 1956 the Party was reorganizing itself as the McCarthy period began to ease. Important leaders who had been in jail or underground were back, although others such as Flynn, Thompson, Gil Green, Gus Hall and Henry Winston remained in jail. Party General Secretary Eugene Dennis put Party membership between 20 to 25,000 in January 1957, down from 80,000 in 1945. (1/3/57, NYT) But these members had stayed loyal during intense government repression representing a veteran and dedicated core. Nonetheless, by 1959 about half the remaining members abandoned the Party over political disagreements.

In February 1957 Fine was sent out on a five-week trip to visit every district west of Pittsburg to appraise the status of the organization and reorganize the Party's labor work. The Party was re-establishing national industrial committees in electrical, steel, auto, packing non-ferrous metal, lumber and west coast maritime with appointments of specific liaisons to the National Committee. Fine's schedule ran between four to six daily meetings with members at every level of the organization as well as non-Party supporters including Harry Bridges and Paul Robeson. Summing up his trip to the NEC Fine detailed estimated state-wide membership as reported by District Organizers. Figures are as follows:

Ohio had 700 members in 1956, re-registrations expected to be 450 to 600; Illinois reported close to 1,000 in 1956 with 600 to 700 possible for 1957; Michigan reported 400 activist with 250 to 350 estimated for 1957; Southern California reported 1,982 members with a 20 percent attrition estimated for 1957; Northern California had between 600 to 700 with a loss of 40 percent in San Francisco; and Washington report 289 dues-paying members, actually up from 1955. (Internal Document 1957, Fine) In

another document dated February 29, 1956 dues paying members in New York were put at 6,114. (Internal Document 1956, Fine)

Given these figures cover the largest member concentrations and number about 11,000 a reasonable estimate of Party membership would be 15,000 when we include Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New England and other outposts not counted in the report. This is significantly lower than the cited 20,000. Additionally, an internal document from the New York State Committee to the NC in January 1958 reports, "Our registration may not exceed one-third of the enrolled membership of 1955-56...Dues payments are at the lowest point in history." (January 1958, NY State Committee) The FBI put membership at 8,500 in February 1957. (Kihss, 2/13/57 p. 20)

These figures indicated the toll the inner Party struggle was taking. These members were not leaving from fear of governmental repression but by disagreements and confusion over the path forward. A thorough examination of policy was first called forth in reaction to McCarthyism when the Party had been forced into self-defeating isolation. Foster put forward an analysis that argued fascism was imminent and war with the Soviet Union inevitable. Although some thought this was an overreaction, the Party's survival strategy was to send their leaders underground that drastically limited their ability for mass organizing. (Harris, S&S) With McCarthyism in decline the great sacrifices made by leaders and activists precipitated a criticism of left errors and a passionate desire to examine the recent past. Since fascism failed to fully develop, many believed the Party underestimated the strength of American democracy. Indeed, the most successful defense of Smith Act victims was asserting the Bill of Rights, i.e. the freedom of speech, press and assembly as the core legal and public strategy. Unfortunately the legal approach used by the first group of indicted national leaders was an attempt to teach the court the true meaning of Marxism-Leninism. (Somerville)

Adding fire to the criticism was Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Party on the crimes of Stalin and the new policy of peaceful competition with capitalism. Of course the speech had an explosive and devastating effect on Party members. (Dennis, Healy, Nelson, Starobin) The exposure of Stalin naturally led to a reevaluation of the Party's unquestioning loyalty to the Soviet Union as well as inner Party democracy. At its root freedom of thought is a question of democratic respect for differences between and within political organizations and the right to dissent without punishment. Moreover, peaceful competition strongly implied the possibilities of a peaceful transition to socialism and therefore the question of democracy within US society was engaged from a new perspective. These cascading criticisms resulted in defining left "dogmatism and doctrinarism" as the "twin enemies" the Party needed to overcome. (Weiss, 1956)

With the majority of members understanding their history in light of these problems they began to also question Leninist methods and organization. Gates, Joe Clark, Joseph Starobin and George Charney³ represented the most extreme position on liquidating the Party and questioning the validity of Marxism. The Foster camp were leading advocates for traditional Leninist views. But Fine, Stein and a majority at the 16th Convention sought to build a mass socialist organization with other left forces, rejecting the Party's self-conception as the vanguard. The idea of a vanguard party, distorted under the supposed perfection of Stalin's leadership, had spread internationally as communist party's defined themselves as (perhaps not perfect) but always the most enlighten. Consequently rejection of the vanguard model was linked to democratic relations between parties with implications for a pluralistic multi-party socialist society. One person and one party rule were being rejected by the self-critical examination being made by thousands of American Communists.

Even so it was along the lines of Leninist structure, discipline and work habits that the Foster camp made their stand. This had strong appeal to many rank and file members who as Fine notes, "had know for 10, 20 or 30 years of their life a certain life style of work which they adhered to and which they thought in the most fundamental way was the answer." Loyalty to the Soviets was a second principal of the Foster forces where, "the faintest whisper of questioning the Soviet Union as the fountainhead of socialism was hearsay and treason." (Harris, interview, 1992) Fine comments that Foster and others,

Fought with all the power at their command, not only in language, but for control of committees. They used the fact that the Gates forces were anti-socialist and anti-party to an advantage. (Harris, interview, 1992)

The relationship between the Fine/Stein reformers and the Gates faction needs some clarification because they shared many of the same criticisms of the Party's errors and the subservient relationship to the Soviet party. This allowed them to obtain a majority on the committee's preparing for the 16th Convention and led the party's left to see them as one revisionist grouping. But their differences emerged over how to correct the errors and move forward. The Fine/Stein group still hoped to build a renewed socialist movement and believed the Party was the best vehicle to lead the reorganization of the American left. Gates, Clark and their sympathizers not only were ready to reject the Party but also Marxism and replace socialist ideas with liberalism and social democracy.

Fine's characterization of the center force shows a sharp demarcation with the right. As he observed,

³ Gates was editor of the Daily Worker, NEC member and veteran of the Lincoln Battalion; Clark was foreign editor, Charney was head of the Party in NY and Starobin had also served as editor of the Daily Worker. Gates was in prison from 7/2/51 to 3/1/55.

They were very much Communists. There were very much for keeping some organization that would aggressively proselytize for a socialist America. But they had serious questions about democratic centralism, about the influence the Soviet Party had on American policies and serious reservations about the structure and style of work. (Harris, interview, 1992)

In fact, the center was looking at the emerging trends of Eurocommunism in Italy and France as the general direction they wished to move.

This convention was the most open ever held by the Party and was attended by 298 delegates from 34 states. Jessica Mitford gives a stirring account of the atmosphere leading up to the convention.

The officially launched Discussions were unprecedented in scope, and in latitude not only permitted but positively encouraged by the shaken leadership...For the first time in my Party experience, one could really express without fear of expulsion any and all criticisms of policy. Massive Discussion Bulletins were issued by the National and State committees, supplemented by county, section and club memoranda...I found the Discussion all-absorbing, promising as they did a new dawn for an indigenous, American-style revolutionary movement led by the Party, ending our fairly obvious thralldom to the Soviet Union. There was an exciting mood in the air of untrammelled, critical reexamination of preconceptions. (Mitford, pages 257-58)

Reformers dominated the Convention's most important committees and subcommittees. For example, the Resolution Committee was co-chaired by Stein and Jackson with Healy as secretary; the Constitution Committee was chaired by Fine with its subcommittees headed by his allies Oleta Yates, Louis Todd and Carl Ross. Additionally, the other four major committees were chaired by reformers George Watt, Gerson, Nelson and Gates. (1957, CPUSA) But not everyone welcomed the enthusiasm for change. Battles at the convention lead to compromises that lacked a decisive win for the reformers. As Fine explains,

No one individual or group was in a position to control the convention. Which also reflected itself in the subsequent leadership that emerged from the congress...At the same time the Fine/Stein group in coalition on some of these matters with Dennis and his supporter...I myself, and I recall this vividly, left the convention far from euphoric--- given the nature of the debate with the Foster faction, given the internal debate within the coalitions, which were rickety at best, and the compromises that had to be made which were much more than I and Sid Stein and Steve Nelson and people wanted to give. But we needed these compromises to defeat the Foster position. Knowing that Gates and his forces wee not part of the two-thirds, except on a few occasions, and

were about to leave the Party and didn't even want that survival of the Party, we didn't have much confidence. (Harris, interview, 1992)

Although Fine felt, "the most vitriolic, unforgiving, no middle ground, bitter debates were with the Clark and Gates group," it was Foster and the left who were best organized. As Fine relates,

Foster and others were veterans of many factional struggles leading to the formation of the Party, then struggles against the Trotskyites and later against the Lovestoneites ...then there were smaller struggles during the German Soviet pact and during the Soviet show trials. At that time the Foster line dominated the Party...with great sophistication of internal organization." As for the reformers Fine observes, "We had the majority going into the convention...but there was a huge variety of tendencies – by individuals, not organized groups. And we were constantly shaping and reshaping coalitions inside the Party." (Harris, interview 1992)

Foster's own evaluation of the convention is a contradictory statement, at once claiming victory yet angry over right influence.⁴ He characterizes the meeting as, "Generally a Left-Center convention" in which "The Right received a serious setback." Yet it's clear that Foster was ready to move against the right. In discussing the convention in an internal document he goes on to say,

It is doubtful if any other Party in the history of the world Communist movement has lambasted itself so mercilessly...it raged on in its extremes without any check whatsoever. The general effect upon the Party and the membership was almost catastrophic. The leaders of the Party were made to look like blunderheads without a trace of political sense...Realizing the damage that this gross exaggeration of errors was doing numerous comrades tried to put a brake upon it and to establish a Party criticism more in line with reality. But in these efforts they had very little success...documents of the convention remain tainted with the distorted and unbridled criticism...This situation also represents a serious unfinished task of the Convention. (Foster, 9-/2/57)

The Post Convention Struggle

In the aftermath of the convention the role of Eugene Dennis was perhaps key to the eventual victory of Foster and the left. Dennis was in a position to establish an alliance with the reformers or the left, and many in the center viewed him as their leader. Nelson writes that during the convention the reformers "caucused, searching for someone of stature to replace

⁴ In the elections for the NC three Black candidates, Charlene Alexander (210), Lightfoot (201) and Jackson (186) got the highest vote totals. This was followed by Healy with 176, Davis 174, Dennis 174, and Foster at 172. A bit lower were Winter with 143, Fine 141, Ross 136, Richmond 134 and Stein with 129. Gates received 129 and Charney was at the bottom of those elected with 115. (Kihss, 2/13/57)

Foster.” Both Nelson and Bill Schneiderman declined.⁵ Nelson notes, “The logical choice would have been Dennis, but he had vacillated so much over the past few months that most people felt he was no longer reliable.” (Nelson, p. 393) Healy had similar observations,

Dennis could have done the most to hold the Party together—he had begun the year by playing a bold and innovative role. He occupied a middle ground between the extremes represented by Foster and Gates...It is, in theory, possible to hold the middle ground decisively; one can play an honorable role as a compromiser and conciliator and avoid the onus of being a vacillator. Dennis, unfortunately for us, was unable to pull it off. (Healy p. 158)

Commenting on Dennis’ role Fine says,

Dennis’ cynical compromises with Foster were a long way from the measures necessary to revitalize the Party...In the Central Committee which came out of the 16th Convention there was a coalescence of the Fine/Stein forces, and of course we had Foster and his group because we were still making an attempt to become a united Party. Gene went over so clearly to the Foster forces on most questions that whenever a vote existed on the 16th Convention we were becoming rapidly extinguished. (Harris, interview, 1992)

Under the shock of the Khrushchev revelations Dennis helped to lead the reexamination of Party policy. But perhaps the key issue that ultimately separated Dennis from the reformers was independence from the Soviet Union. Dennis had lived and worked in Moscow as a representative of the Comintern and he and his wife left their young son in the USSR when they returned to the US. Their son grew up as a Party functionary and it was 19 years before they saw him again. Given these circumstances it should be no surprise that Dennis moved towards the Foster camp which held onto traditional views of Soviet loyalty.

From the point-of-view of Dennis he was trying to fight both left and right errors. Peggy Dennis defends him in the following manner,

From the beginning in 1956 Gene had chosen a difficult role for himself...He worked to isolate the extremes of both the revisionist Right and the doctrinaire Left. He sought to consolidate the best elements influenced by both extremes into a majority unity essential to Party activity. These goals, so clear to him, were not understood in the heat of battle. (Dennis, p. 235)

The approach taken by Dennis won over important centrists unwilling to break with the Party. When Ben Davis tried to expel Healy, Lightfoot, Carl Winter and Mickey Lima, Dennis stopped

⁵ Dennis became General Secretary in 1945 but was jailed from 7/2/51 to 3/1/55. Schneiderman and Fine were brought to NY to run the national office, and Schneiderman had been DO of Northern California.

the purge and nominated Winter and Lightfoot for the NEC.⁶ Such acts helped consolidate a left/center alliance and undercut the fading Fine/Stein camp.

The Letters

Fine's correspondence begins with Louise Lambert, a close friend who had been involved in the underground.⁷ At this point his grave concerns are focused on the right. He writes,

There have been a number of new incidents—violent, disgusting and discouraging which makes it difficult to fight the spreading mood of depression and defeatism...The last meeting of the NAC⁸ broke up with violent exchanges, charges and counter charges. This has become our steady diet...Gene's role has on the whole been constructive (and) I have had occasion to tell Johnny and Lil (Gates) and George (Charney) that they must realize that the convention closed a certain chapter and a new phase has opened. Nothing can now be said in defense of a continuation of factional methods. Factionalism now can only be ruinous of everything we seek. (4/9/57, Fine)

A month later Fine writes Lambert a riveting account of the May 1957 meeting of the newly elected NEC.

The Executive itself is not a bad one and actually reflects the relation of forces fairly accurately. But the shock of Foster's defeat in the secret balloting, and of Sid, too – but in a less dramatic sense. Stachel's quivering underlip as he fought for control while making the motion to include them both on the NEC regardless, and his trembling voice choked with emotion when he - the oldest colleague in terms of service in the same harness – nominated Bill as the Chairman Emeritus; Foster's tears – it's quite an experience to see this tough veteran's voice break as he fights a losing battle to hold back tears; the deep sense of frustration, gloom, nervous and physical exhaustion that pervaded everybody during the forced recess...the interplay of petty personal ambitions with strong political animosities; the injured vanities and the throbbing wounds of the discarded---Louise, it was really a small hell. (5/1/57, Fine)

The meeting struggled to elect their leading officers. IN a four way race Fine lost to Dennis for General Secretary but then was nominated as Labor Secretary. Fine describes a five way split,

⁶ Lightfoot was DO of Illinois, Winter DO of Michigan, Lima DO of N. California replacing Schneiderman. All were NC members. Davis was a NEC member and elected to the NY city council from Harlem.

⁷ Fine and Stein were on the road from NY to Chicago when the FBI arrested the second string national leadership in a night raid. Walking into a Michigan City drug store the following morning Fine saw his photo on the newspaper's front page with the headline, "FBI Seeks Missing Reds." Stein and Fine immediately entered the underground and were put on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

⁸ The National Administrative Committee was separate from the National Executive Committee and responsible for the day to day operation of the Party.

An ultra-left; the left-sectarians; the left-of-center, the right-of-center and the right. They are all pretty well crystallized...The left-of-center and the right-of-center groups are the majority between them. On most issues they are so close they touch, BUT – here is the important difference – it is their behinds that touch for they face in opposite directions.⁹ (ibid)

In late 1957 Fine still felt cautiously optimistic about moving policies forward. Writing to Stein shortly after the NEC¹⁰ meeting in September he states,

I'm please to see that among some of the people on the Daily Worker, and even with Johnny thee is a feeling that progress is being made...There was a large measure of unity in the meeting; however, I felt that some of the real questions before the Party were not being fully and frankly faced up to. Nevertheless, I think that little by little, and on the basis of the issue by issue and in the crucible of new experiences as people get to the tasks in hand, that the Party here will move in a generally fruitful direction.
(9/24/57, Fine)

Stein, also on the NEC, agreed with Fine's assessment. He writes,

Now about the aftermath of the NEC meeting. The reaction has been much better than I expected. Even Johnnie shows some respect for it. Have spoken before the distributive regional committee and told them pretty much in detail what happened and it made a real impression on them. Especially the idea that there is now a majority that is fighting for a definite line of policy and will not be sidetracked by such issues as Clark. (undated, Stein)

During this time a number of meetings had begun with other socialists in accordance with the 16th Convention. In March a symposium was held on "The Relationship Between Socialism and Democracy" at the University of Chicago featuring Max Weiss the Party's National Educational Director, Mulford Sibley of the Socialist Party and Max Schachtman of the Independent Socialist League. (3/27/57, Chicago Tribune) Also in March in Los Angeles at the Embassy Auditorium under the title, "Is There a Future for American Socialism" Healy, Vincent Hallinan, Bert Cochran, Carl Marzani and Reuben Borough appeared together. Later in September, Fine reports on efforts to create the American Forum, a platform for private and public discussions

⁹ Among leaders identified with these groups were: the ultra-left, Harry Haywood and Armando Roman; left-sectarians, Foster, Thompson and Davis; left-of-center, Dennis, Winter, James Jackson and Jack Stachel; right-of-center, Fine, Stein and Nelson; the right, Gates and Clark.

¹⁰ The NEC functioned as the politburo and had 20 appointed members. The NC was the central committee, met quarterly with 66 members, 20 voted on at the 16th Convention, others appointed by state bodies. The National Administrative Committee had 11 members, Dennis, Davis, Gates, Fine Stein, Jackson, Doxy Wilkerson, Earl Durham and Hy Lumer.

that included Norman Thomas, A.J. Mustie, Sid Lens, Cochran, Schachtman, the Workers Socialist Party, Christian socialist and others. (9/27/57/ Fine)The first public meeting in New York brought out 500 people.

Writing to Stein in November, Fine was in the middle of organizing regional trade union meetings, but he also discusses political tactics on how to move forward with the policies of the 16th Convention. Fine writes,

I have given considerable further thought to our problems of the leadership of this Party...we must maintain a steady pressure for the direction of the Convention decisions, with bold initiatives and as few compromises as possible (and) repulse at any cost sharp reversals in the direction. (11/18/57/ Fine)

At this point there is no direct reference to the Foster camp. But a month later in a letter Ross, Fine's concerns have grown. He writes,

Your two letters, including the one to Sid certainly poses the real problems and suggests some of the basic answers in terms of strategy in this Party struggle. You and I are not far apart...Gene told people here that he and others are out 'to create a new majority in the National Committee.' His local lieutenants (including Jim West) put it this way: its' a show-down now between the Leninists and the anti-Leninists. And they mean business. (12/13/57 Fine)

Preparations for the December NEC meeting were quickly getting tense. There were a number of veteran leaders who didn't fully support the 16th Convention but were uncomfortable with the left. Fine observes,

Claude (Lightfoot) from one direction, and Kushner from another are trying to prevent complete crystallization of a new alignment...Sam feels a little uneasy in coalition with Ben Davis and they are all embarrassed by the crude power-play of Bob-Gene-Ben at the last NEC meeting. Claude is urging a 3 point program and wants a peace negotiations meeting. His 3 points: 1. No name calling and no camps. 2. No new majority. 3. No package program...discuss each issue and concept one at a time. I told him he has my sympathy and conditional support.¹¹ (Ibid)

Writing to California Party leader Mickey Lima, Fine assesses the NEC;

Our last NEC meeting had its positive sides – more than usual – and still like so many of the other meetings was not only inconclusive, but failed to shed sufficient light on the

¹¹ Sam Kushner was on the Illinois State Committee and NC. Bob-Gene-Ben refers to Thompson-Dennis-Davis. Thompson had replaced Charney as DO of NY, was a NEC member and veteran of the Lincoln Battalion.

real urgent problems of the moment, nor did it light up enough the path we must take to get out of the corner we're in. (12/31/57 Fine)

The Gates Resignation

Evidently the reform forces were still holding onto a strong position and had prevented a "new majority" from taking over. But a turning point was developing with the resignation of Gates in January. With Gates gone the center would be open to attacks as the remaining right danger and the left quickly moved to label them as such. Over the next six months, particularly at the NC meetings in February and June, the reformers suffered political defeats and lost their influence in the Party.

The danger faced with Gates' resignation was immediately recognized by the reformers. Fine writes to Lima,

Johnny continues to stage his unilateral, ill-conceived, anarchistic scenes, only this seems to be the last posturing this prima donna will do as editor of the Daily Worker. Ben Davis is pressing for Johnny's expulsion. Bob (Thompson) thinks he is a commander in tank warfare. Gene is glowering in futile and impotent rages and making his sterile, Lilliputian maneuvers. Sid is bedeviled and hard-pressed from all sides. (12/31/57 Fine)

Days later in a letter to Ross he states,

In NY I saw Johnny on the eve of his resignation...he was intoxicated with the considerable notoriety he was expecting...the impending suspension of the Daily Workers and his simultaneous resignation from the Party resulted in hordes of TV cameramen, still photographers, reporters and feature writers surrounding him for days. (1/12/58, Fine)

Nelson expressed similar feelings saying, "Johnny's behavior is rotten." (1/14/58, Nelson) He writes to Fine,

Gates' exit left a bad taste in everyone's mouth, including mine. He acts like a punch drunk and tired radical. As the days go on I feel sore at myself and ourselves for not making loose of him sooner and for not presenting our views more clearly and more effectively. (3/14/58 Nelson)

More serious was the position the reformers now found themselves in as the right wing of the Party. Fine notes that, "Johnny's resignation, for the moment, is of course a weapon in the hands of the Left that is having considerable success in forcing the left-of-center forces into closer fusion." (1/12/58 Fine) Nelson also sees danger in the new situation as he writes,

Now it's going to be harder to fight for the things we fought for in the last two years, because Johnny will be dangled in the eyes of the Party membership as the first of those 'straying away from the faith'...The incurable Foster, Davis, Thompson mentality of present day dogmatists have a core of quotation diggers...who will go to work at every turn of events, like the Gates exit, to shout about 'revisionism'. But that should not frighten any of us. (1/14/58 Nelson)

Attempting to set orderly ground rules for the growing fractional struggle Winter and Lightfoot prepared a draft document, its approach worked out at a NEC sub-committee meeting in NY. Fine hoped this would help settle differences through mass work and theoretical debates "without destroying each other in the Party." In addition, a new leadership team was to be elected and the national headquarters moved to Chicago as directed by the 16th Convention. But the effort was given little support by Dennis who according to Fine, "was very unhappy over the way the propositions were shaping up" and was intent on undermining the entire effort. Convinced the left would not permit the program to be adopted Fine and Stein felt any changes would make the "total plan unacceptable." Fine believed this was the last chance for

meaningful joint action within the framework of the Party...Failing in this, then I cannot see how I for one can continue to be part of a leadership which is stalemated, discrediting itself more and more without regard to the distinguishing viewpoints we may hold, and more or less impotent in fulfilling the duties of the posts we hold. (1/12/58 Fine)

Clearly, Fine saw the political direction of the 16th Convention being rapidly undermined. Writing to Ross he comments

It has become my firm opinion in the recent days that there is a definite majority in the middle ranks of the Party for a watering-down of the 16th Convention. On one hand the view that the 16th Convention made many harmful concessions to revisionism has gained adherents and is a strong current in the Party. Together with this, another current which is also gaining strength, contends that since the Convention the Right danger has grown to very serious proportions and has been conciliated with and therefore feels we must modify the decision of the Convention on the question of the main danger. (1/12/58 Fine)

Still, Fine hoped that a number of Party leaders could have some "useful effect" counting among those Stein, Nelson, Light foot, George Watt "and a whole group of others in the NY state committee. (1/12/58)

Ross seemed to agree with Fine's general assessment, writing to Fine, "It appears to me that we have reached the great divide...The Forces of G-B-B (Dennis, Davis Thompson) et al will win any 'inner party' factional battle." (Sunday, Ross)

Nelson was also preparing for the struggle. He writes to Fine,

If we do very little else...let us do the thing which will be of ultimate value – ideas, new ideas, new Marxist ideas, yes revised to suit America today...This may not tell you much dear friend Fred, but at least it tells you how I feel. (1/14/58 Nelson)

Knowing Fine is travelling to California for regional labor meetings Nelson urges, "While you are on the western tour I hope you can involve our best out there for this fight. I need not list them all Bill (Sennett) Louise (Todd) and Olieta (Yeats) are seriously key in this fight. (1/14/58 Nelson)

When the NC convened in early February 1958 things did not go well for the reformers. The Lightfoot/Winter resolution was voted down 32 to 21. Although their resolution conceded some ground to the left it strongly backed the main direction of the 16th Convention and the new Party constitution. Furthermore, the report reaffirmed the "cardinal struggle against left-sectarianism and dogmatism, so sharply signaled by the national convention, is by its very nature bound to be a long, protracted and constant one – a struggle which has in fact only begun." (4/58 Party Affairs) Instead a Dennis resolution was adopted that downgraded the struggle against leftism and put off building a mass socialist party into the distant future. When it came time to elect a new national executive board both Stein and Fine were dropped.

Two international documents were also an issue at the NC meeting. The Soviet CP's theoretical journal *Kommunist* had published an article in which it characterized Bill Schneiderman and A.B. MaGil as key revisionists in the CPUSA. Schneiderman was chairman of the Party in Northern California and Magil had been editor of the *New Masses*. The California Party called on Dennis to defend Schneiderman. Instead Dennis, Davis and Thompson forced a vote to endorse the article but were defeated 36 to 12.¹² (3/19/58 Nelson) The wide swing of votes between the two resolutions indicates the range of struggle among NC members. Apparently many felt uneasy with both the left and the Fine/Stein camps, thereby constituting a new center that could determine Party positions. But for Schneiderman it was a powerful blow and he resigned his position and was replaced by Lima.

The other international document of greater importance was the Twelve Party Declaration signed in Moscow on November 16, 1957. The signers were all state socialist parties declaring proletarian internationalism required "support of the Soviet Union." The Declaration was used by the left, Thompson in particular, to re-establish a Soviet centric view of the world and marking out revisionism as the "main danger in the international working class movement." (12/22/57 Thompson) Debate over the statement ran from early December until it was endorsed by the NC in February. It not only involved leaders at the national level, but state

¹² In *Party Affairs* this vote was reported as 37 to 4 with 11 abstentions.

bodies also. Ross reported that the Minnesota State Committee voted 8 to 4 to table "a motion to 'endorse and instruct the NC to apply' the 12 Party statement." (2/3/58 Ross) Thirteen members of the New York State Committee wrote a seven page appeal to the NC protesting the endorsement of the Declaration and defending the direction of the 16th Convention. (1/58, NY State Committee) Harry Haywood wrote,

The whole incident brought a factional realignment in the leadership at the February 1958 National Committee meeting, with the Dennis right-center and the Thompson-Davis left-center sharing the leadership, although Dennis was definitely the top man. (Haywood, p. 620)

Dropped from the National Executive Board Fine decided to resign at National Labor Secretary and return to Chicago, Stein also turned in his resignation. Both retained membership on the NC. Except for several years in the Army during W.W II Fine had been a full-time Party functionary beginning in 1931 at the age of 17. Ne job possibilities were bleak and difficult financial time, which also affected Stein, Nelson and Ross, became a constant topic in their letters. Additionally Fine's Smith Act conviction and four year prison sentence was still under appeal and he returned to Chicago with a bleeding ulcer. Writing to Stein, Fine describes his ordeal,

Sharp and rather constant abdominal pains, as well as general exhaustion of a kind I never experienced sent me to the doctor, and after a week of 25 x-rays, probing, jabbing and poking into my aching insides, etcetera, he found an ulcer and some other things. I'm not on a strict diet – but one hour with Kushner and I'm doubled up with pain. (3/1/58 Fine)

The struggle had left its physical effects on others too. Writing to Nelson, Fine notes

Jim Jackson tells me he also is under doctor's care for some stomach trouble and that Gene is in the hospital, taken there when he started spitting blood. It may be a bleeding ulcer. It seems our main accomplishment to date has been to make each other sick – that's a helluva note --- eh? (3/5/58 Fine)

Fine, Nelson and the others still had not given up on the Party, and throughout 1958 continued to be active and sought ways to keep their camp together. Before leaving NY after the NC meeting Lima and Al Richmond met with Stein "till 3 A.M." Writing to Fine, Stein reports that "Mickey agreed to act as the clearing house but wants all mail sent to his home address not to the office. (2/28/58 Stein) But Fine notes the problems facing them and these difficulties become even more apparent over the next several weeks.

What is the real alternative? How do we follow up the post NC discussions in NY? This remains a complicated and difficult question...The divergences between a Mickey, for one and a Carl Ross or Louise Todd is very big and troubling." (3/1/58 Fine)

The California Resignations

On March 4th Fine received a letter from Sennett informing him that a group of over 26 key Party members in California were drafting a statement to resign. He writes,

The 12 Party statement cinched the issue...I gather from your statement and the position taken by Sid, Steve N., Dorothy and others you will individually fight for the 16th Convention policies while collectively being confined to the policy decisions which have moved away from the convention decisions! An impossible situation to say the least." Differences among former allies were clearly emerging, as Sennett goes on; "Actually the case for conformity is winning over most of the present membership and a majority of both leaderships. (*Northern and Southern California*) Mickey himself is the leading exponent of that, though in words he denies it. California cannot hold out as an exponent of the 16th Convention in view of the crumbling situation in the ranks and among the leadership. (3/4/58 Sennett)

The next day Fine writes to Nelson, "I hear rumors of a dramatic walkout pending in California...This will of course weaken our ability to develop the policy for California we outlined. You know – stay firm, act homogeneously, more autonomously, and as a sort of orbit and clearing house for us all. If they walk out, it may very well push Mickey and others closer to the center." (3/5/58 Fine)

A letter to Fine from Al Richmond, editor of the People's World in San Francisco, indicates why important supporters of the 16th Convention still felt the Party was worthwhile. Richmond writes

There was truly a phenomenal anniversary meeting for the paper in Los Angeles. True, our ability to announce that Paul Robeson would make a guest appearance certainly was decisive in filling the Embassy Auditorium with more than 1,800 folks. But we also had a group of Negro ministers sitting on the platform for what was advertised as a People's World rally...we also got a large number of greetings...in the balance it was the broadest recognition of the paper since 1948. (3/19/58 Richmond)

But for a group of 26 veterans, many on the state committee and some on the NC, the Party had gone beyond redemption. In late March they issued a three page resignation letter, among

the signers were Bill Sennett, Louis Todd, Oleta O'Connor Yates, Frank and Lil Carlson, Celeste Strack and Don Wheeldon.¹³ In part the statement read,

The National Convention...concluded that the Party's key task was to overcome the deeply rooted dogmatism which has afflicted it for many years, and thereby to find the means of effectively merging Marxism with an indigenous American socialist movement. This central task remains. But with great reluctance we have concluded that it will not be carried out by the present Communist Party. (3/26/58, Group of 26)

Their resignation forced Lima and Healy towards the Dennis camp and was a serious blow, perhaps the final blow, for those like Fine, Stein, Nelson and Ross who had hoped California could continue as a base of support. Healy must have felt personally betrayed, in February she wrote Fine saying, "I saw Louise and Oleta last Saturday in S.F. They are unchanged, and it made my heart ache to hear the continuing bitterness which absorbs them so." (2/58, Healy)

As the confrontations grew, Fine received an emotional letter from Lil Carlson. Neither Healy nor Lima had been told of the impending action and when a meeting finally took place it was anything but pleasant. Carlson wrote,

This incident became the cause for a tirade the likes of which you haven't heard from those who are supposed to be your friends, about 'morality, the bunch of us lacking in integrity, being dishonest, flip-floping' and what have you...it was downright vicious, and left everybody cold. (3/25/58, Carlson)

Answering his old friend Fine writes,

Yes – these are hard and in some ways bitter days...I read your draft statement with interest. I think it's the most cogent so far made by any who have left the organization. There is no use pretending that there is much with which I don't find myself in agreement...But I would hope against a totally negative attitude towards the Party...including the future search for common ground. (3/30/58, Fine)

Fine then reveals that Dorothy,

Called me at about 1:30 AM – woke me out of a deep sleep. I appreciated her dilemma...Don't take too hard the personal sense of rupture – every one of us has many

¹³ Sennett was a NC member and veteran of the Lincoln Battalion, Todd had been state organizational secretary, Yeats was chair of the San Francisco district and her Supreme Court case was the most important legal victory over the Smith Act, F. Carlson and Strack had been state and national leaders of the Young Communist League and Wheeldon was a NC member.

bitter episodes in our recent past – and perhaps the regroupment and time will give things a healthier and more objective complexion. (3/30/58, Fine)

Clearly Fine was torn by the bitterness between old friends and political allies. He closes his observations stating,

I must say also, imperfect candor, that if I had my druthers, California, where the Party was in relatively the best shape internally and externally, should have had people who generally favored the 16 convention direction acting in unison. But there is no choice but to accept the reality...I've been in the vortex of things for more than two hectic years...Being pounded from pillar to post and being in the ring have their positive sides and their drawbacks. I'm getting out of the ring for 3 months and to wash the blood out of my eyes and to take a look around. I'm neither wedded to sterility nor in search of some will-o-wisp futility – somewhere between lies the sound course. Any effort to help cultivate and sprout the new green shoots of an American socialist movement has my support – even now. (3/30/58, Fine)

A few days later Healy, with ironic wit, writes a letter to “Dear T_P_D-o Comrades (temporarily politically dis-oriented).” While condemning the walkout as “intrigue” she reaffirms a key aspect of the convention which is to, “participate in developing new Marxist organization and recognize we are not the sole repository of Socialist thinking or conviction.” Nevertheless, Healy is thinking of resigning her leadership position in June as Lima begins to shift towards the conformity camp. In a personal handwritten note to Fine at the bottom of the letter she says, “Just got a letter from Mickey in which he says he criticized me for my ‘liberalism’ towards the group that left. I told him that while I was very subjective over their methods, I would neither ‘blast’ them nor forget what caused it in the first place. Ah me – I’ve got no allies anywhere.” (4/2/58, Healy)

California wasn't the only area where reformers were in retreat. Arriving back in Minnesota from the February NC meeting Ross comments to Fine,

The NC meeting marked a new turn for the worse, for an acceleration of what was in process from the day the Convention adjourned. But most significant...is the pressure for conformity and the break-down of any semblance of ‘modus vivendi’. My fears are more than borne out by the first Board meeting we held last night...a poisonous atmosphere in which no constructive work is possible.” Continuing Ross pushes for action stating, “What is going on? I think the most urgent matter is the development of an alternative policy, a direction and a center. The people who have broken out or are breaking out need a perspective (not an organization or splinter or sect) but a fighting will to plow up together with others the new ground of a mass Socialist and Marxist

movement. I am ready to support and join in any such move at any time. (Thursday, 1958, Ross)

Soon afterwards, on March 28th, Ross who had been Minnesota state secretary since 1947, resigned his post.

Nelson, in his usual fighting form is upset with the growing resignations. He writes Fine,

I feel very badly that everybody is acting on his own. There seems to be no clear and unified outlook offered by anyone. The Philadelphia people, Joe (*Roberts*) and Joe, (*Dave*) Davis, Ben share my view. We don't agree with the idea of resigning posts, at the same time we don't want to drift...I see that Don Wheeldon resigned from the NC and the paper, Martha (*Stone*) is giving up her post, the N.Y. guys gave them already up, and where does all this lead to?¹⁴ We should be able to talk these things out and decide on the correct course. (3/31/58, Nelson)

But in an earlier letter to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Nelson notes the difficulty of developing something new.

It's true that those of us who think that many changes would have to take place did not have all the answers either. Thus, Old Bill's same old answers, for years were presented as a sort of 'faith' for our movement, and those of us who are looking for Marxist answers for USA and not for other countries, even if we don't have them formulated too clearly as yet are condemned as revisionists. (3/13/58, Nelson)

Meanwhile, Fine was seeing factionalism grow in Chicago. Writing Nelson he reports,

Here in Chicago the picture is very mixed. Very sharp between me and Kushner for example, with Claude trying to mediate on some days. But in the Board, at the Labor conference and especially at a Negro conference hell broke loose between the so-called ultra-left and the Kushners and Jacksons. Almost fistfights. Nightmarish scenes of sectarian, fanatic outbreaks. It worried the Dennis crowd and they don't know quite where to turn.¹⁵ (3/5/58, Fine)

Throughout this period Nelson, Stein, Ross and Fine were trying to find an organizational strategy to continue the fight. Fine, who was now working a 55-hour week, urged Ross to act as a "switchboard for the progressive Communists" by visiting, talking, writing and moving their camp towards a "common point of assembly." (3/3/58, Fine) Ross sent out a detailed proposal

¹⁴ Martha Stone was DO of New Jersey and a member of the NC, Roberts and Davis were NC members.

¹⁵ For Haywood and the "ultra-left" the Party's rejection of self-determination for the Negro Nation was a key point in breaking with the C.P. They resigned with about 80 members. See Haywood's *Black Bolshevik*.

to establish a center to further theoretical discussions and debates that would involve 25 to 50 people and publish three to four papers a year acting as a "voice and identity" for their ideas. (4/4/58, Ross) In N.Y., Stein was working with a group of Party members to write papers on a number of important issues and to work towards a national conference of Party members and ex-members to be held in Chicago. George Charney, Si Gerson and Stein were elected as a committee to "get the ball rolling" ((4/6/58, Stein) Nelson suggested the group write a document restating their basic ideas and a practical approach to move forward, proposing they soon get together either in N.Y., Chicago or Philadelphia. (4/10/58, Nelson)

But by May 7th Stein is forced to drop the idea of a national conference when Schneiderman informs him that no one from Northern California would participate, Fine too has expressed some doubts. It's a hard blow to Stein who writes to Fine,

Frankly I can see no other way of actually getting Carl's proposition across. I can see no other way of beginning to pull together people like ourselves and organizing some useful collective theoretical discussion and exchanges of view. I can see no other way of stopping the dispersal, demoralization and even growing bitterness between those who have left and those of us who are still in. I am afraid that the news will have a very negative effect on the N.Y. group which seized upon this idea as a perspective and will now feel let down. But my friend these things can't be helped...apparently the time is not ripe. (5/7/58, Stein)

After a small meeting of reform-minded NC members on the eastern seaboard took place Nelson writes to Schneiderman urging him to attend the June NC meeting in N.Y. and to have California present a document articulating the reform position. He pleads with Schneiderman,

It is very important that you play a major role in it. Our major trouble in the last few years stems from the fact that we lacked an authoritative leadership. I mean someone who could have articulated the views we are fighting for. Because we did not...we were drifting at times as supposed followers of Gates. (6/10/58, Nelson)

But the reformers were losing ground with former friends like Lima and Lightfoot. Fines writes to Ross that, "Claude came back from the (*April*) NEC meeting with a considerable change of attitude...He's sharply in disagreement with the California group who took a walk." Writing to stone, Fine articulates the predicament many were facing.

If one leaves the Party, he's branded as a deserter and excommunicated as a devil; if he stays and fights, he's a factionalist and worse; if he moves out of the direct line of fire, he's on a political sit down strike. Bob and company, as of you're, insist on a dishonest surrender. My principles can't accept this as the only alternative. (5/4/58, Fine)

Under such pressure Fine found it difficult to pursue his strategy for constructing a broad organizational regroupment.

I've had individual letters from various people in California and they are all quite unhappy and in struggle with each other. This in itself is inevitable I suppose, but I for one regret it. That was one place where I had hoped the 'pro-16th convention elements would pull together...I'm doing all I can to mitigate the sharp clashes, trying to keep fraternal and constructive relationships alive between all, and trying to keep attention riveted on the ultimate regroupment and new advance. But this in itself may be enough to get me expelled. (4/26/58, Fine)

In the same letter to Ross, Fine relates an interesting story about Gates, who had come to Chicago to speak. Fine writes,

He called me and I had him stay at my house. We argued until 4 a.m. and were both quite unhappy with our inability to mesh. I felt I had to tell Claude Johnny stayed at my home. Had he learned that Johnny had been my guest and I hadn't told Claude it would have ruptured all relations and destroyed his confidence in my truthfulness. Claude was very upset, took sharp issue. I had no right to have an enemy stay at my home. He pleaded with me not to tell anyone lest I get him in trouble too. Isn't this pathetic? (4/26/58, Fine)

The complex web of old friendships, shared sacrifices and new divisions put Fine and others into untenable emotional and political positions. Particularly for those still seeking some common ground, the pain and frustrations were great. For those taking a more sectarian stance there were far fewer emotional burdens. When Healy mentioned to Foster that many veteran Communists were close to leaving the Party he replied, "Let them go, who cares?" (Healy, p. 164)

By the middle of June Fine enters the hospital for stomach problems. Moreover, all the main reform advocates were no longer full-time Party functionaries and were restricted in their ability to travel by jobs and low wages. Fine was selling bumpers, Ross was house painting and Stein working in a butcher shop. Most were still facing appeals of Smith Act convictions. On leaving the hospital Fine decides to devote more time to working on amnesty for Gil Green and Henry Winston who were still in prison and he becomes the local chairman for the Families of Smith Act Victims Committee. Amnesty work was one issue that people inside and outside the Party rallied around.

The Last Battle

Another fight was brewing for the June NC meeting, one in which international questions would again play an important role. Simon Gerson writes to Fine on the June 16th execution of Imre Nagy, former head of state and the Communist Party in Hungary, "I felt like you did – sick. It was a stunning blow and I cannot see anything resembling an endorsement of it from here. You can be sure that if the matter comes up at the NC there will be a fight." (6/20/58, Gerson) On June 30th Gerson writes another letter to Fine describing the NC meeting.

The upmost bitterness and vilification was evoked by a resolution on the Hungarian question introduced by Al Richmond and myself. It was quite carefully drawn to make it clear that we were expressing a difference of opinion in a fraternal way within the camp of socialism and directing our main fire at Dulles & Co. Nevertheless, we were called everything under the sun...Our resolution received ten votes – Al (*Richmond*), Si, Dorothy, Mickey, Benn Dobbs, Dave Davis, Joe Roberts, Steve Nelson, Martha Stone Anna Correa and one abstention, Alan Shaw. There were 24 votes against...Worse, however, was the gag rule passed when Dave Davis motion to publish our resolution in *The Worker* was defeated 26 to 8 with 1 abstention. Labor policy was endorsed unanimously, the Thompson (28-8-2) and Dennis reports (30-7-5) won by split votes. (6/30/58, Gerson)

Clearly the Dennis-Foster camp had consolidated their leadership. Few had opposed them and about 20 others felt so dejected they didn't even show for the meeting.

The NC meeting had a powerful effect on the reformers. Healy writes Fine saying, "we're beaten, not only nationally, but internationally, and we were beaten before we started." Healy was attacked by Ben Davis for "revisionist" views and he demanded her removal as District Organizer for Southern California. She relates her personal inner reaction to Fine,

'god damn it' says I, 'this s.o.b is gonna have a fight on his hands to dump me in my own district.' But then, minutes later, sober second thoughts took over. "Fight for what? To prove what? ...so I shall proceed with my plans...To resign as DO but stay on the NC until the Convention, and to stay in the Party after that. (7/4/58, Healy)

Three days later Fine receives a correspondence from Nelson who writes,

The recent meeting of the NC was a rough one. When I got through I felt like writing to you to the hospital to move over and give me a bed too...It was a heartbreaker and there is much to be discussed...I felt badly not seeing Sid and Carl R., Bill S. and yourself and others at the meeting. (7/20/58, Nelson)

Nelson also mentions how international events, the 12 Party Statement, the execution of Nagy and political attacks on Yugoslavia all “serve as sustenance for the leadership” and their attacks on the right as the main danger in the Party. (7/7/58, Nelson) A bit later on July 20th Stein sends a letter saying, “Politically things couldn’t be worse.” (7/20/58, Stein)

Ross had declined to even go to the NC meeting. The question of democratic traditions in the US, in the Party and in socialist countries continued to be a central debate and so the Nagy execution brought these questions out once more. Ross is ready to move beyond the battle for Party leadership which he sees as isolated from the “whole complex of class issues” For Ross

The political key is the relation between Marxist activity and theory and the current of liberalism and reformism as expressed by its most advanced advocates especially in the labor movement. I think Marxists must be in the posture of the best, most consistent, advanced, conscious, battlers for reform, making alliance with these movements for democratic advance. What else means being in the main stream when the main stream flows strong on the ‘flood tide’ of liberal-led pro-democratic bourgeois reform and only occasionally see that the undercurrent is impelled by class struggle issues...but to make this the end-call and be-all of a conscious Socialist, especially of a Marxist, would be rather short-sighted...I’m afraid this is what Johnny tends to do, to mistake surface current of the mainstream for what is going on below the surface in the sharp conflict and undertow and undercurrent of eddies and boulders that shape the transient flow of surface waters. (Wednesday, July, Ross)

All this news comes to Fine as he re-enters the hospital for removal of gall stones. But then at last some good news. On August 6 Fine learns that he, Stein and four others have won their appeals against their Smith Act convictions. Writing to his old friend Elizabeth Gurley Flynn he says,

I’m a free man. But strange as it may seem, its full significance hasn’t registered with me as yet. Too long have I been under indictment, under sentence, restricted, hemmed in; for over eight years every important decision I had to make or postpone was always bound up in part with my legal restrictions and the shadow of prison...so long tht I’ve almost lost the sense of freedom. (8/6/58, Fine)

Although by 1958 the McCarthy era had one foot in the grave, the Party appeared to be in a similar position. On August 18, Fine receives word from Ross that he has left the Party and the next week a letter arrives from Detroit Party leader Saul Wellman that he has resigned. Stein also indicates he is preparing to leave and others like George Watt and Martha Stone were also on their way out. In a letter to Nelson it’s clear that Fine is also close to resigning. He writes, \

Bob Thompson is in town...He said he may reach me Saturday for a chat!!!??? Frankly, there is little I care to talk about with him. He is about the most hopeless of the whole lot in my opinion. He, Ben D. and Bill Foster with Gene's craven and transparently sly accommodation are pressing hard to force subjection or force us out. Claude is in a bad way. He is moving more and more into accommodation. And is usually in a foul mood. Perhaps this conscience hurts...Saullie (*Wellman*) wrote me, Nat Ganley, Dorothy H, Louise (*Todd*), Phil Shatz, etcetera ---all asking for advice, all lamenting the situation, but all counseling different things or just throwing up their hands. It's a terrible and untenable situation. (9/4/58, Fine)

This wave of resignations is greeted by Thompson as a positive sign the Party is on the right track. In a report to the NEC he says,

These developments do not represent the opening up of a new Party crisis. They are essentially the hangovers of a past crisis. They are not a product of a disintegration of the Party but a by-product of a process of consolidation and rebuilding of our Party. The present improved status...has registered both among revisionist and dogmatist...both are abandoning their hopes that the Party is on the verge of collapse and disintegration. The revisionist forces have degenerated into a Party-wrecking and sabotaging clique and attitude towards them in increasingly becoming a question of being either for or against the Party. (September 1958, Thompson)

The left wanted all doors shut and Thompson's report was a warning to those still maintaining warm relations with old friends.

For some, leaving the Party spurred on new efforts. Ross set a good example as he continued to play an important role in the progressive and radical movements in Minnesota, particularly with trade unionists. Sennett writes Fine urging more work towards regroupment;

I feel that people like you, Sid Stein, Carl Ross and others could be most helpful at present if you were to orient toward discussions with people outside the C.P...what is there to prevent close political collaboration by and between the publications and people around the National Guardian, Monthly Review, The American Socialist and former Progressive Party people like Vincent Hallinan, Du Bois, Corliss Lamont, certain left trade unionists, hundreds of ex-CPers and people still in the C.P. (8/28/58, Sennett)

Stein proposes a meeting in New York for October 11-12th and Fine sends on the idea to Ross saying that "for it to be worthwhile it is crucial that L.A., San Francisco, Philadelphia, Pittsburg be represented as well as you and I." (9/12/58) Ross writes back enthusiastically articulating a number of points to accomplish including discussing concrete mass campaigns, a general political line and a way to formally continue their efforts. (9/15/58 Ross) Stein hoped that

Strack and Yates would attend from California; from NY former *Daily Worker* staff and State Committee members including Alan Max, Max Gordon, Abner Berry and Hal Simon were expected, others from the East Coast would include Stone, Mike Russo and Sid Taylor, Wellman from Detroit and a scattering of other veterans from New Jersey, New England and Buffalo.

But at this moment Healy writes a letter sent out to Fine, Stein, Stone and Abe in which she sticks to working within the Party.

Until the District Council meeting this past Sunday, there was no doubt that one D. Healy was the person with the most political b.o.; the hatred, suspicion etc. was intense, and the desire for my quick political demise was widespread. And then we have a Council meeting...and it becomes the most sober, politically responsible and 'united' meeting we've had in two years. (9/24-25/58, Healy)

At the same time her meeting with those who resigned leaves a poor impression, as Healy writes,

I spent the day yesterday with Celeste and Kappy (and later) with Frank and Lil Carlson. They have very different approaches...One thing is true: they have not succeeded in drawing together any number of the "ex's" most of whom look upon them with complete indifference." Given this assessment and Healy's desire to stay with the Party it's no surprise that she decides not to attend the N.Y. meeting. (9/24-25/58, Healy)

Fine writes Healy a letter that contains the most detailed organizational strategy and political articulation of reform policies of any of the letters going back and forth between the reformers. It is an outpouring of ideas that must have been gathering in Fine's thinking for sometime though at the end of the letter he notes, "This has been written with many interruptions and without regard for careful, hedged formulations...You have asked what I think – and this is it— at least, part – and strictly off the cuff." (9/27/58, Fine) Nevertheless, the letter also goes out to Ross, Nelson and Stein.

Given the importance of the letter it's worth quoting in some length. Fine first notes the difficulty of maintaining a minority position.

As to attendance (*the NY meeting*) those comrades who are still determined at all cost to remain in the Party best not attend...the consequences will probably be very sharp. Our Party is funny that way (and we all helped make it that way). If one has basic dissatisfactions with the Party, it is preferred that you remain inside and be passive, leave quietly and sink into a coma, leave quietly and be a free lancer...in that order. But to leave and group together to avoid dispersal...to leave and group together to seek in common alternatives means to advance the socialist cause...That's the cardinal sin. That

must be fought in every way...Sad but true. Even sadder when one reflects on the preamble to the constitution adopted at the 16th Convention when the Party abandoned the 'monoploy' concept (the Party is 'it' and everything else is enemy territory) and when we included in our perspective a united socialist organization. (ibid)

I consider the dispersal of socialist forces the worst thing that can happen. I would like to link arms with those who left...and those still remaining in the Party. I believe this is in truth the official line of the Party as adopted by the 16th Convention...I prefer to maintain Party membership (but)I am determined to help every effort in and outside the Party to help plow up ground for a new social advance. And I'm prepared for the consequences. (Ibid)

In no sense do I contemplate a Party, a discipline organization, or anything along those lines. But there must be an organized relationship, a common effort, and some useful project...Ideological and heretical ideas must be boldly investigated and the power of attraction and stimulation that comes from good, sound, fresh ideas should be exploited...We must not be provoked into sterile, internecine warfare with the party...but our fight is not with Communists but with capitalists...what must come is a new center or movement for socialism—based primarily on the trade unions and youth. And in this movement, the principles of scientific socialism indigenous to America, but also in fraternity with Communists and socialists everywhere, will strive to win ideological leadership. The moment for this is not here yet...Nevertheless the time is here to start breaking new ground for this development, and each of us can do something to help...This requires from us work on program, theory, tactics and FORMS OF ORGANIZATION, (this should) include something like a socialist information center...The objective throughout, besides fulfilling the worthwhile role of making available every kind of socialist information, is to stimulate interest, contact, study and joint action, all aiming to help crystallize a left trend. (Ibid)

On reading the letter Stein replies that we are "pretty much in agreement" supporting four key ideas; "a medium for keeping contact, some form of publication, coordinated theoretical work and beginnings of some perspective formulated in a statement." (10/1/58, Stein) Ross writes on the same day saying, "I read your opus with interest. On many things we are not too far apart." Ross wants to stress practical work a bit more pointing out that

Two questions are involved: a) stimulating the left-radical trends that must eventually give rise to the socialist current on new lines; b) while helping do this, to close the gap between us and the labor people's movement...and developing a socialist perspective including for a mass socialist movement in which the Marxist current contends for

leadership...I would want to balance your approach more with some of ours so that any journals, Info Exchanges, etc. do not get too esoteric.¹⁶

A day after the N.Y. meeting Ross writes to Stein and Fine obviously excited.

My head is buzzing with all kinds of thoughts about the weekend meeting...I believe we have to face the fact that we have entered a new stage in the struggle for a Marxist scientific approach to the problems of America in a new world. Whatever the reasons, that tendency which fought for this approach has been defeated within the CP...The struggle has now ended in the C.P. It must publically now come outside. (10/13/58, Ross)

For Ross the meeting makes his organizational break complete. He goes on to write,

The problem is how to crystallize it outside...Sunday's meeting was a mixed-up group. I would urge Dorothy, Steve, Joe (*Roberts*), Si, etc. to join in such a move before they are expelled or frozen into conformity. (Ibid)

This list of veteran leaders who were part of the reform effort but did not attend the meeting reveals a fundamental problem for regroupment. Many members deeply sympathetic to the 16th Convention were not ready to leave the Party. Everybody was moving to their own pace, embedded in their local experience and personal ties as well as national problems. Fine had felt strongly that participation from California, Philadelphia and Pittsburg was essential for the success of the meeting, but this failed to materialize. Additionally, no full-time national organizer was appointed for the effort, and without dedicated staff and budget there was no real hope for a new center for socialist thought and action.

Stein also expressed some frustration with the meeting. Writing to Fine he observes,

Well Fred, what now?!! I have been very downhearted since the conference – for it dramatized the growing ideological dispersal and our own inability to articulate our views collectively. Since the conference I have talked with quite a few people most of whom expressed disappointment that nothing concrete came out of the gathering. (10/58, Stein)

Stein goes on to comment on a number of books revealing his political state of mind.

I had a chance to do a little reading – *Zhivago*, *Gates* and *Nagay*. On *Zhivago* – he and I are complete strangers. *Gates* has nothing to say and says it better than I expected.

¹⁶ Ironically Ross calls for a “national network of small committees of correspondence.” Years later, “Committees of Correspondence” becomes the name for a large section of C.P. members that left the Party in the wake of the Soviet break-up.

Nagay was really worth reading. But for the fact that Thompson does not have state power we would have been as dead as Imre Nagay. (Ibid)

For Fine the meeting also signaled his final break with the Party and he offers his official resignation on October 15. He soon faced reprisals in Chicago, as he writes,

The Secretariat here wanted me to resign immediately as Chairman of the Smith Act families Committee...Claude insisted with me. However not only Lil and Ben (*Green*), but also Dick Criley (who has been part of the 'left' in this District) opposed this vigorously and the Secretariat bowed to their judgment. (11/10/58, Fine)

Others in the Party corresponded with Fine Expressing regret over his resignation. Alex Bittelman wrote, "Of course, my dear fellow, I understand. I'd be a damn fool if I didn't, but that doesn't make it much easier for me to take. (11/16/58, Bittelman) Gerson said,

While I disagree with what you did and hoped you would share my patience, I realized that your statement was an eloquent and agonized expression from your heart...Regardless of any changes in political status, you should know that I regard you as an old and dear friend. My friendship – and forgive me if I sound corny – is not lightly given and no decree from any source will disrupt it. (11/8/58, Gerson)

Healy writes an interesting letter that reflects on her own standing. After a brief comment calling Fine's resignation a "sober document (and a sad one)" she goes to her own situation.

I spent 2 hours with Mike Harrington discussing California politics. The guy who brought us together (one of the Schactmanites) needled him into inviting me to write an article for *Dissent* on California. What do you think? Would I get expelled for writing for what is really an anti-Soviet magazine? (11/5/58, Healy)

After criticizing those that left the Party in California, Healy turns her attention to Lima's "odious crawling" to Dennis saying,

My answer to him, including a comment on his assertion that Benn (Dobbs) and I are misleading the Party in LA, will not go down in history as a model in tolerance. (Ibid)

She clearly feels frustrated and trapped, both angry and scared, with no good alternatives.

Nelson was also feeling stranded and depressed, he writes

Within the Party the struggle continues around the same ideas, of course, with a lot less voices supporting our view since you and Sid and others left...it is going to take a long time and much effort to develop a perspective for the American left, a perspective based on Marxism, but without its dogmatic application, as we have done in the past.

This struggle can be carried on within the Party and outside. Frankly, I do not see great green pastures outside amongst any of the left...what I have seen of their thinking and writing up to now there is very little that impressed me and which I would be ready to support. (12/26/58, Nelson)

In 1959 the amount of correspondences drops sharply. Fine continues his efforts to free Green and Winston and becomes managing editor of a satirical left magazine called *Maverick*. He also acts as Program Chair for the American Forum, which continued to have some life and sponsor programs but never led to an organizational realignment. An exchange between Fine and Ross expresses the conditions they found themselves in. Fine writes,

We are turning out to be piss poor correspondents. It can't be because we're lazy...It must be because we're busy and must also feel that we don't have much to say of great consequence. Nevertheless, I'm deeply interested in what you're doing – personally and politically, and what you're thinking.¹⁷

Ross replies in the same vein,

I too have pondered no little over the reason for the almost total lapse of correspondence on the part of most of us concerned. It is, it seems to me, due to preoccupation with many other things including reorienting with respect to earning a livelihood, a lack of any significant new developments or interesting experiences; but also, it would seem due perhaps to some mutual perturbation or sense of unease about the question of agreement over direction or starting point...or perhaps I should say, of expression being given to theoretical questions. (6/5/59, Ross)

Conclusion

The center never had a completely articulated thesis of change. There were in the midst of dialectic with a fluid and tentative political synthesis developing in response to the other camps. Ultimately they lacked the time and cohesion to fully develop their alternative. But the failure to develop a mass socialist party over the past 50 years cannot simply be laid on the doorstep of the reformist wing of the CPUSA. Others, such as the social democrats, have tried and failed. And when a new generation of revolutionary minded youth developed in the 1960s the main thrust was towards Maoism and revolutionary nationalism. (2002, Elbaum) The CP experienced mild growth, only to split again with the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ In 1984 Fine, who never renounced socialism or Marxism, was appointed the first Commissioner of Culture by Chicago's progressive African-American mayor, Harold Washington. The Mayor's action unleashed a storm of red-baiting which was unsuccessful in stopping the appointment.

While part of the problem is with the left, we can't ignore the cultural and ideological hegemony of the ruling class, which is perhaps the most important element in the failure to build a mass socialist movement. Movements in the US certainly have been large and militant, but fundamentally reformist. The left has played an important role within these but none have grown beyond their agendas or ideology into an articulated socialist organizational structure and consciousness.

Thinking over his experiences Fine observed, "An interesting thing is to consider why does a center emerge and why does a center rarely win except historically. The centrist position is the early synthesis of the left and right extremes. Therefore, it suffers from being a premature synthesis. Eventually, somewhere, sometime it becomes the ultimate synthesis because the two extreme positions collapse." (Interview, 1982)

Perhaps we can see this "premature synthesis" from 1958 take form over the last 20 years in such organizations as the Workers Party in Brazil, FMLN in El Salvador, PRD in Mexico, MAS in Bolivia, the Left Party in Germany and the ANC in South Africa. This is not the place to analyze their success or the purity of their socialist character, but to recognize their organizational form and socialist content of their stated principals and party platforms. These groups brought together different organizations and social movements into mass socialist parties run along democratic lines now seeking to transform society through class struggle and democratic elections. The struggle of the communist reformers is part of this ongoing history to discover and build the road to socialism.