

## THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND ME

By Don Hamerquist

What follows are truncated memories from my political past – undoubtedly softened and rounded off by the passage of time which also conveniently limits any contrary narratives. It's only an attempt to situate some of my early political views in relation to my rapid rise and fall in the CPUSA between 1967 and 1969 that is abstracted from a good deal of the politics I was involved in at the time. This was quite a chaotic period filled with actions, encounters, meetings and events that are difficult to remember in their actual sequence. Keeping that in mind, I remain quite certain about the major turning points.

**Some background:** Since early 1966 I had been an open CP member and the paid organizational secretary for Oregon. In mid-1967 I was assigned to national political action work with a general responsibility for contact with the new left, particularly SDS, but also Core, SNCC, and the NSM. My party background and the experience in Oregon had led me to a 'left' criticism of party policy and structure. However, for reasons that aren't worth detailing here, from the early sixties through much of 1967 I was also somewhat of a protégé of the national honcho, Gus Hall. During that period, Hall was concerned with developing a personal support base among the more active and radical young people who were beginning to join the CP in substantial numbers and frequently bloviated about the need to renovate the party, develop a more aggressive and radical approach to political work, and eliminate the 'dead wood' in the existing national leadership.

**More background:** The Party had been essentially illegal during most of the fifties and early sixties with its political leadership was either in jail or operating semi-underground. Not to mention that in the decade beginning with the Stalin renunciation and encompassing the development of the Sino/Soviet split, quite a few of the leadership had died and a number of others had splintered in various factional directions.

In any case, the party had taken some initial controlled steps towards election of a new leadership in a strange semi-legal/semi-public partial convention in 1966 where many of the delegates didn't know who was there and what, if anything, they represented – not to mention what was at issue when the heavily managed elections were held. (This led to some funny stuff not relevant to this particular story.)

In any case, the Party scheduled a full convention for early 1968 to elect a new leadership and adopt a new strategic program and the dissident

grouping I was a part of had great expectations. Hall prompted me to write up my positions and criticisms in a 'strategy document' for the pre-convention discussion. He understood I would criticize reformist and economist stage theories and the trade unionist limitations in the so-called "anti-monopoly coalition" strategy of the CP – the "strategy" that was the basis of a garbage C.P. 'Draft Program' that was up for adoption at the time. This critique was a major factor in my '1967' document [***Discussion Paper on Strategy***].

However, the political content overlapped issues that I had been raising to various national leftists in preliminary discussions about forming a substantive revolutionary left movement/organization from the ingredients that were emerging in that political moment. Of course, building a revamped radical left tendency that would incorporate substantial new left groupings as well as a range of party dissidents would have been a classic example of factionalism. However, notwithstanding the evidence that it went counter to the main thrusts of Moscow-aligned politics and, in retrospect, was never within the realm of possibility, in my fever dreams I (and a few others) saw this all as a reasonable path towards a new radical political alignment.

I wrote the first document sometime in later 1967 and circulated it to a few dissident comrades in the CP as well as some outside leftists (I'd be embarrassed to provide names). I also gave it to Hall and he asked me to pass it on to Henry Winston, the party chairman. Winston had been blinded in prison and needed a reader, so this was hardly a casual request. Initially, I got some fragmentary and perfunctory reactions from both Hall and Winston indicating that, at least, that they considered my arguments a legitimate part of the pre-convention discussion.

This brings us to an enlarged National Committee meeting in the fall of '67. There had been some sharp debate and discussion concerning different estimates of the radicalization of the Black Liberation movement. Based on our experiences of the immediate past period, our left grouping argued that effective popular unity had to be anti-capitalist, not 'anti-monopoly'. This crystallized some strategic divisions with sufficient clarity that I had begun lobbying the left faction to identify circumstances under which we would leave the party in an organized way.

A number of us were ignoring the rote speeches at an enlarged ceremonial post-meeting event, when Jim Jackson, a legacy Black leader on the downside of senility in our estimation, began a long diatribe against the petty bourgeoisie 'infection of our party' which needed to be purged. It amounted to an extended riff on the first sentence of my draft which he asserted had demeaned hundreds of thousands of working class militants who had died for the struggle by suggesting that the

revolutionary movement was in a crisis. Filled with rhetoric like; "...who is this scum that views the historic accomplishments of socialism as reversible?" Since my draft had not been circulated, only a handful of people knew that I was the intended target and there was no opportunity to challenge or discuss Jackson's nonsense although some party stalwarts like S.F. Longshore hero, Archie Brown, were provided an opportunity to pile on with the predictable themes.

Realizing that this could only have happened with the active intervention of Hall and Winston, I decided to quit more or less on the spot and prepared for the Port Authority bus station and a long trip back to Portland. Half a dozen comrades located me and made a big push to change my mind. They argued that we were likely to win major changes at the upcoming convention and that the assignment to develop a challenge to the Democratic Convention was still operative. I began pushing to clarify what changes would constitute a sufficient reason to remain.

There was a lot to do around the Democratic Convention that kept me in Chicago through the winter/early spring of '67-'68 – away from Party intrigues and in extensive contact with a range of other leftists. I had already concluded that my trajectory was probably out of the party when I asked to have my piece circulated within the party as an aspect of the pre-convention discussion. That was denied and I was told to summarize my points in 1000 words or less and to defer all decisions about circulation and discussion to the current party structures. Then Hall and the Secretariat announced that the upcoming Convention would not include new elections to the leadership and the adoption of a new program. Instead, it would be another 'special' convention, limited to a discussion of policy for the 68 election and to setting guidelines for the production of another draft program revision.

In my view it was already clear that the party was not going to be transformed. However, we achieved a number of political and organizational victories at the Convention. Most notably we stopped Hall's attempt to run for president on a C.P. ticket after he had announced publicly (*N.Y. Times*) that he was running and that he planned to have the party lay out some hundreds of thousands in the attempt. At the time this was quite a coup although it doesn't seem so much now. We also got the previous draft program completely rejected – although like Phoenix it rose from the ashes a few months later. There were also a number of other 'victories' – specifics of which have faded in my memory, but the essential point is that none of this occurred because we had majority support, it all flowed from our asserted willingness to go 'public' with our

differences, potentially undermining Hall's status as 'leader' with the Soviets.

Then comes the French General Strike, and most important, the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring. Suddenly confused and demoralized liberals became iron fists of the rebellion in Party rhetoric, while at the same time our political alternatives, particularly the Demo convention protest, were immolating. So it was clear that while the prospects for a productive struggle within the party were essentially imaginary, unfortunately the non-party alternatives were also in big trouble.

Just to keep this related to the two documents...as it became clear that there was going to be no significant discussion in the CP, I began to modify what I had written to address new developments and a broader audience. This produced the changed intellectual points of reference in the second version [***Notes for Development of a Revolutionary Strategy***"], the most striking being the replacement of Andre Gorz and Lelio Basso with Althusser. Conveniently this allows me to locate the timing of the versions. Since my crowd was extremely disappointed in Althusser's stance on the French General Strike – regarding it as counter-revolutionary – I would not have written anything that laudatory later than May 1968.

Following the CP Convention, my role in the Democratic Convention saga had come to an ignominious end and Hall told me that I no longer had a national assignment and would be taken off the C.P. payroll. I was given the choice of going back to Portland or to Alabama as a public communist without a job. I chose Portland and became the first (only) person to draw unemployment compensation from New York with the Communist Party as the employer of record.

In this period, the fossilized old-line party began a counterattack that centered around sanctions against those that had publicly opposed the emerging official line on Czechoslovakia. I was among the dozen or so that were so sanctioned at the next to last national meeting that I attended. Following that meeting a group of us pulled together the major dissidents to decide what we were doing. Almost everyone that attended is dead now so I'm fairly comfortable with indicating some things about the participants. In attendance were the leaders of the New York and Southern California Districts, the current and subsequent editor of the West Coast paper, the '68 presidential candidate, the head of International Publishers, a previous editor of the *Daily Worker* and half a dozen younger members of the Central Committee – most of them Black.

The discussion quickly reached a number of impasses that made it clear that while there was little disagreement about the disastrous situation in

the Party, no organized split was possible. I'd locate four general reasons all of which I still believe had some merit. First, a number of older comrades who had gone through the splits of 56-60, argued that nothing could be won without a systematic and persuasive critique of Soviet Marxism; second, the same individuals could not be persuaded that there was enough political agreement between themselves; third, it was generally felt that there was insufficient experience and agreement in the general left to provide a viable initial base; and fourth, the substantial majority of Black participants indicated their first option to the CP would be a Black Nationalist communist formation – and were generally hesitant to break ranks since the CP had reluctantly fielded a Black presidential candidate and that campaign still had some months to go.

I went back to Portland, intending to quit the party as soon as alternatives could be developed. I was put under a lot of pressure to defer the decision including being hired to work with the presidential candidate. I set up some functions with new left contacts – including participating in an SDS NC in Boulder, Colorado. I also met with a lot of hostility from party structures in Minnesota, Michigan and Washington that was clearly nationally stimulated. Finally, I had organized a non-public meeting of the candidate with the Chicago SDS national staff collective and leadership of the Chicago Union of Organizers when the Chicago CP demanded that their functionaries be allowed to participate. I had gotten the meeting by promising that this would not happen.

In any case, I cancelled the meeting and quit the campaign and the party. I got on a bus with my suitcase and the FBI captured my underwear in Omaha as I slept... a fitting end to an inspiring story.

I can't remember my resignation letter, but I must have written one because some months after returning to Portland and organizing a substantial communist grouping outside of the Party, I received a strange request/demand from the CP: I was instructed to return to N.Y. for a national committee trial that would determine whether to accept my resignation or to expel me: Something along the lines of '*no one leaves the party*'. So I went back for my trial. It was a full day affair where I argued I should be expelled against a strange leadership argument "my resignation should be accepted" which greatly exercised the hacks. I lost that final vote 52 to 48 – so I guess that I resigned from the party rather than being properly expelled.

The two documents eventually worked their way into the various versions of the STO Party Pamphlet where they remain to entertain the enlightened.

