

24 *Stalin Takes Over*

The American delegation which journeyed to Moscow to the fourth congress of the Profintern, March 1928, found the political atmosphere calm. Trotsky had been exiled to the Altai Mountains, his followers and allies ousted or jailed, and the Stalin-Bukharin-Rykov bloc seemed to be pulling together harmoniously.

But four months later, the much larger American delegation arriving in Moscow for the sixth world congress of the Comintern could already sense that the political calm was on its way out, and that the new victims would be Bukharin, Rykov and their friends.

The surface was as yet undisturbed. All decisions and resolutions of the congress were unanimous. But the doings in the lobbies were disquieting.

A struggle was already raging among the top of the Russian party, but Stalin, the initiator of that struggle, was biding his time, as usual, to complete the isolation of his rivals before destroying them—and with relish.

THE FIRST TROTSKY FOLLOWERS HERE

On returning home, the strategists of the Lovestone faction, hardly imagining that the Comintern would move against an impressive majority, set out to gather such a force for the forthcoming convention. Only John Pepper, knowing Stalin's ways, did not hide his pessimism. Pepper felt sure that if Stalin would succeed in ousting Bukharin, Rykov and Tomski from the Russian Politburo, their friends abroad would be next.

In the interim, a little scene of the big Trotsky drama was being enacted here, and the majority exploited it to the utmost, naively hoping to improve their case in Moscow. James P. Cannon, again ally of Foster, had contacted some of Trotsky's friends, and, on returning here, came out openly for Trotsky and his theories. He was immediately removed as secretary of the International Labor Defense and expelled from the party. His two chief aids, Martin Abern and Max Shachtman, were also expelled.

As a member of the political committee of the CEC, Cannon had to be given a chance to explain his stand. And though the Fosterites objected strenuously, the majority purposely invited him to appear at the meeting of the CEC, October 27, 1928, hoping to embarrass his former allies.

Cannon let this opportunity slip. His parting speech, in the crowded, hushed room, was formal and subdued.⁺⁴⁸ He left without waiting for an answer. But the majority oratory against Trotskyism went on long after his departure.^{*170}

Cannon took with him a small number of people. His followers in New York were of little consequence. But in the Midwest Cannon had a few influential men, notably the Dunne brothers in Minneapolis. They also had a small group in the YCL. At the convention in May 1929, in Chicago, the Trotskyites founded the Communist League of America, and published a weekly, the *Militant*. The Trotsky group did not prove to be ideologically cohesive either. They went through a number of splits and changes of name.⁺⁴⁹

To ingratiate themselves with Stalin, the Lovestonites proclaimed that *No Trotsky Meeting Shall be Held in This Country*. Party bands broke up Trotskyite meetings. A year later, they had to call the police to defend their meetings against similar attacks by party bands.

STALIN MOVES AGAINST THE MAJORITY

The Lovestone camp soon realized that their exertions in the Cannon affair had done them little good. The first blow was an order to Pepper to return to Moscow. The second was the news that the Comintern intended to call Lovestone and Bittelman, as the chief factionalists, for work in other countries. This measure against the

general secretary of the party, coupled with the recall of Pepper, was tangible proof that the Kremlin was ready to smash the majority leadership. Bukharin, Rykov and Tomski were then openly branded in the Soviet press as Right-Wingers. Pepper was confirmed in his forebodings. A Bukharin man, he knew what awaited him and had no desire to return.

Still, the top caucus continued to place its faith in amassing a large majority at the convention.

In labeling Lovestone and Bittelman the chief factionalists, the Comintern was not too wide of the mark. Of course, factionalism was not concocted by a few individuals, was not exclusively a fight for power, and not all controversial issues were artificially raised. But these two unquestionably added a large measure of spice to the stew. Still, placing both on one level was unfair to Lovestone. They differed not merely in background and character, but also in ability, Lovestone being far more constructive. Moreover, Bittelman worked in someone's shadow and his removal from the American scene would in no way hurt the party, while Lovestone was the accepted leader of the majority.

Lovestone was an indefatigable worker, driving himself and others. He had no family, and the party was his primary interest. But he lacked the stamina and steadiness of a Ruthenberg, and was not above employing tricks in the party strife. He was not a forceful speaker, but a skilful debater, and he possessed a sufficient amount of leadership quality to hold a large faction together.

Not all who worked with Lovestone could be counted among his personal admirers. But he voiced the moderate tendency in the party.⁺⁵⁰

THE FACTIONS MEET HEAD ON

The sixth party convention, February 1928, in Irving Plaza Hall, New York, was a crucial one. It was not one convention but two, perhaps even three, the last one in heated meetings with the Comintern delegation, the German Philip Dengel and the Englishman Harry Pollit. The Lovestone group did have an impressive majority, but the two Comintern men had their clearcut instructions and refused to be impressed. The Foster forces were strengthened by Earl Browder, who had returned from China.

Each faction saw to it that their delegates were cut off from any

contact with those of the opposition. Divided into groups, each one headed by a captain, the delegates were housed in special hotels, arrived at the sessions together, sat and left together, and ate under the watchful eye of a captain and his assistant. And the system worked. The air in the hall was supercharged. Most of the work was done behind the scenes, the delegates sitting restive while their leaders argued and fought in side rooms.^{*171}

In their anxiety to placate Stalin, the top caucus decided that the convention cable the Russian party a demand for the removal of Bukharin from the Comintern.⁺⁵¹ The cable was as transparent a political move as it was unprincipled. The majority were known as Bukharin adherents.

The theses of both factions, overly long and confusing, defy any simple and accurate characterization. However, the essence of a basic difference can be summed up thus:

The thesis of the majority held that though crises are inescapable in the capitalist society, the American economy possessed sufficient vitality to overcome them. As Lovestone put it in his speech at the sixth world congress, "We accept the Bukharin thesis, . . . American imperialism is . . . on the ascent." Admitting a creeping crisis, he believed that "the American economy is still healthy. . . ." ^{*172}

The minority, which criticized the Bukharin thesis, demanding "a new word on America," took their cue from the Soviet press. They branded the majority thesis "rotten American exceptionalism." Their own thesis foresaw a steady decline of the American economy and the rising class consciousness of the workers. This "cheerful" prognosis was coupled with another deadly thrust at the majority—that they had been "trailing behind the growing radicalization of the masses," thereby forming a roadblock on the path of their militancy.⁺⁵² This fascinating piece of sophistry proved to be an effective weapon in Moscow against the Lovestone group.

THE SECRET PLAN FOR A FIGHT WITH THE KREMLIN

The delegation of the majority left for Moscow ostensibly to seek a change in the Comintern's attitude, and, particularly, to cancel the decision against Lovestone. This was the theme of the farewell for Pepper and, later, for the delegation. Pepper did not believe that they would secure such a change. His position was that the majority had reached a point of no return, that now they could either

part with the Comintern or surrender and be annihilated. As for himself, he thought of going to the American authorities, fall upon their mercy and ask for asylum.⁺⁵³ But his intention was frowned upon by his associates.^{*173}

Pepper was a sad man at his farewell. He tried to console himself and those present by saying, "No one can doom Communism, not even Stalin. World Communism will survive him." These were bold words, even at a caucus meeting.^{*174} But Pepper was not leaving; he was only going into hiding to try to weather the storm. And this was known only to Lovestone and a couple of others. The subsequent disclosure of Pepper's hiding weighed heavily against the majority in Moscow.⁺⁵⁴

Meanwhile, the few at the top were secretly preparing to defy the Comintern in case they should lose. Of the delegation, only Lovestone, Gitlow and Bedacht were involved in these defiant plans.

The committee of three left in charge of party affairs here, Robert Minor, Jack Stachel and the party lawyer, Joseph Brodsky, were confidentially instructed that at a signal from Lovestone, in Moscow, they were to sell the two adjacent buildings of the *Freiheit* and of the *Daily Worker*, on the east side of Union Square, together with their printing presses and other equipment, to raise cash for the fight as well as to prevent these two key institutions from falling into the hands of the enemy. The committee was left with signed papers for the transactions.

On their arrival in Moscow, April 11, 1929, the majority delegates found the political atmosphere rather cold. Vyacheslov Molotov, Stalin's right-hand man, had taken Bukharin's place in the Comintern. He was also the chairman of the commission on the American party.

The long discussions and maneuvers at the American Commission and later at the Presidium of the Comintern, and the moves and wire-pulling of both factions are outside the scope of this work. Sufficient to say that the draft of the decision by the American Commission, called an "Open Letter to the American Party," did not go as far as Foster, Browder and Bittelman had hoped. This was typical of Stalin's cautious and long-range planning. The Open Letter only insisted on Lovestone and Bittelman being taken out of the United States.

For the majority, Lovestone's removal became the touchstone of the conflict. They finally decided not to submit to it.⁺⁵⁵

It is tempting to note that Stalin, while indulging in a devastating criticism of the maneuvers of both factions, devoted much of his attention to a sharp attack on the majority for their "glorifying of American capitalism." He berated them for believing that the "general crises of world capitalism will not affect America. . . ." "I think," he said, "that the moment is not far off when a revolutionary crisis will be unleashed in America; . . . it will mark the beginning of the end of world capitalism. The United States party . . . must be armed to be able to meet that historic moment, and to head the forthcoming class combat. . . ." ^{*175}

The majority delegation, the proletarians included, stood fast. The exceptions were Max Bedacht and Harry M. Wicks. They yielded and signed the Open Letter.⁺⁵⁶ Bedacht, a native of Germany, a former barber, and a self-taught Marxist, was a soft and good-natured man. Not much of an organizer, he liked to delve into theory and was an able speaker and lecturer. Wittacker Chambers in his book, *Witness*, revealed Bedacht's involvement with Soviet Intelligence. No one who knew Bedacht would have suspected it.

Wicks, a former typesetter and also a self-taught Marxist, had disobeyed the Comintern on the forming of a legal party in 1921 and had gone with the dissidents into the United Toilers. He was a stubborn man, and the least likely to submit to pressure.

The situation of the delegates was tragic indeed. To sign the Open Letter was equivalent to admitting that they were engaged in unprincipled factionalism, that they had deceived the Comintern and had overestimated the strength of American capitalism—it would only discredit them in the eyes of the membership. Nevertheless, one may advance the cool suggestion that the chief obstacle to submission was not so much the censure, however humiliating—for the other group was also censured, though not as sharply—but the suspicion that the Open Letter was merely a trap to destroy them and that their signatures to it would close the trap on them.

LOVESTONE GROUP GOES DOWN TO DEFEAT

Lovestone and Gitlow were summarily ousted from the Comintern. As a stopgap, Moscow decided on a secretariat for the American

party: Bedacht, Minor and Weinstone, with a Russian chairman who went by the name of Williams.

Lovestone's grand strategy for fighting the Comintern collapsed. His trusted committee of three lost their nerve, and entered into secret negotiations with Earl Browder, who had remained here for the other camp. And when the Comintern brought down the ax on Lovestone, Gitlow and Bertram D. Wolfe, the three publicly turned against them. The Open Letter was published with a great display in the party press. Lovestone, unaware of what he later called "the double cross," cabled from Berlin to sell the two press buildings. His cable was published too. The rank and file, all this time kept in the dark about what was actually happening in Moscow, was flabbergasted by the Comintern's scathing denunciations and stunned by Lovestone's scheme against the party press. Such prominent members of his faction as Dr. J. Mindel and Olgin, then again *Freiheit* editor, rushed with loyalty declarations to the Comintern.⁺⁵⁷

Lovestone, Gitlow and Wolfe lost their case before reaching New York harbor. The party press and the party units were closed to them. They were expelled for opposing the Comintern, and the party took immediate steps to ostracize them socially. All those who expressed approval of Lovestone's action were either expelled or had to resign. However, the majority of the faction accepted, though grudgingly, the Comintern's decision. Belief in the absolute supremacy of the Comintern, built up in them during a decade, took the upper hand over their factional allegiance.

By far not all of the active people belonging to the Lovestone group followed him out of the party. As much as they resented the Comintern action, they were also shocked by the plans to close the two papers and to sell the buildings and the printing presses. As to the essence of the Open Letter, their attitude can be expressed thus: "The Comintern is the expression of the collective will of world Communism. If the new Left course is proven wrong, the Comintern will have to change its course. And if it is proven right, Communists should be glad." The author was one of them.

(At a general party meeting in Webster Hall, after all the known Lovestonites were out, W. W. Weinstone delivered a long, elaborate justification for the expulsions. A vote by show of hands gave 1,375 for the Comintern and 52 against it. The proportion of the no's

may seem insignificant, but the very fact that these 52 did not refrain from expressing their frank opposition is indicative of a current of dissatisfaction among the rank and file. Many avoided being counted by staying away from the meeting.)^{*176}

Altogether, about 250 active party people left, among them Benjamin Lifshitz, secretary of the Jewish Bureau, Bert Miller and D. Benjamin, leaders of the New York party; Herbert and Miriam Zam and Will Herberg, of the YCL. Their new outfit was called the Communist Party of the United States (Majority Group). The group published a weekly, *Revolutionary Age*. Later the name was changed to Independent Communist League, and still later, to the Independent Workers League. The name of the paper was changed to *Workers Age*.

The "Majority Group" was small indeed. But almost all of them held positions of importance in the party, in the trade unions, and in the auxiliary bodies. And their defection was keenly felt in the beginning. The party fractions in the garment trades were split. Charles S. Zimmerman, Aaron Gross, Isidor Stenzor, Samuel Seldin, George and Pearl Halpern, Herman Zukowski and others went with Lovestone; Ben Gold, Rose Wortis, Joseph Boruchowitz and Gladys Schechter (Zukowski's wife) remained with the party. So did the majority of the fractions.⁺⁵⁸

PARTY LOSES "SEAT" ON UNION SQUARE

The two buildings, that of the *Daily Worker* and of the *Freiheit*, the pride of the movement, were sold anyway. And, in 1930, the entire party apparatus and the papers moved to a rented building on East 12th Street, with an entrance also on East 13th Street, thus giving up a much-desired "seat" on the strategic Union Square.

The explanation was that the party needed the \$20,000 gained by the sale. However, stories went around that the sale was pressed on the party by a few people who profited personally by it. The gross mismanagement of the party papers and, in the case of the *Freiheit*, the outright stealing by the business managers, amounting to dozens of thousands of dollars, that was disclosed but not published, seemed to lend credence to the stories.

Another reason put forward was the heavy debts of the two papers and the bankruptcy of the cafeteria on the ground floor. The latter

owed nearly \$100,000 for food supplies. The man who supplied the meat products, Joseph Katz, immediately brought suit to recover \$25,000 due him by the cafeteria. He claimed that the buildings had been sold to relieve the Daily Worker Association of the debts incurred by the cafeteria.¹⁷⁷

BROWDER MOVED TO TOP; FOSTER AGAIN SIDETRACKED

The party was flanked by two oppositions. The membership, unaccustomed to a barrage of criticism from fellow-Communists, was disconcerted. From the lowest units up to the district committees, new people came to the top. Active Fosterites were at a premium. The party machinery was loose and creaky. The new triumvirate, unsure of the course hinted at in the Open Letter and fearful of making a Right opportunist slip, acted nervously, increasing the confusion. An example of this nervousness was the doctrinaire treatment of the pogroms in Palestine, 1929, which will be dealt with separately.

However, the severe depression following the financial panic at the end of October 1929 seemed to confirm the Comintern prophecy of a crisis. Before long the party had bread lines and Hoovervilles to shout about. It was making deep inroads among the angry unemployed and footloose intellectuals suffering from a keen and despairing sense of uselessness.

The minority did not have to wait long before Stalin turned the party over to them. The secretariat was replaced in 1930 by a single general secretary, Earl Browder. To everyone's surprise, Foster was sidetracked. He was elevated to a post created for him, chairman of the party. This post carried prestige but little voice in policy-making.

For a couple of years, Foster still headed the TUEL, a real job. But the TUEL was quietly buried in 1934 under the new "democratic" orientation shaping up in Moscow.

Browder had meanwhile been moved into the position of sole leader, leaving for Foster the writing of articles and making of speeches. Though a member of the political committee, Foster was a figurehead, and a pathetic one at that. After 1932 he was passed up as the party's Presidential nominee, which he had been since 1924. Browder, formerly Foster's humble lieutenant, openly slighted

him.¹⁷⁸ Only Browder's downfall in 1945 cleared the way for Foster to actual leadership. Foster then fully avenged Browder's poor treatment of him.

One can only surmise why Foster was not made the general secretary. A reasonable explanation would be that Stalin was looking for a man with less roots in American labor and more amenable to his wishes. For all his yielding, Foster could, in his own way, be stubborn. Browder, on the other hand, had little executive experience and was almost entirely unknown to the rank and file in the East, where the bulk of the party strength lay. He had been out of the United States a great deal of the time and could never have been elected general secretary on his own.

After defeating the Right opposition in Russia, 1929-1930, Stalin began to elevate to the high command in the Communist parties abroad faceless people—usually of a coarser grain—men who would be obligated to him and dependent upon his will. In France it was the young miner of shallow mind and glib tongue, Maurice Thorez, who was suddenly made general secretary; in Germany, the burly longshoreman from Hamburg, Ernest Thaelmann, was kept at the helm despite all his mistakes. In Italy, Togliatti (Ercoli) replaced Serra, a man of far greater stature; and in Britain the colorless Harry Pollitt was named secretary of the party.

"MAJORITY" STAYS SMALL; CONSPICUOUS IN AFL

The split-off groups made no headway. The reason was obvious. Neither had shed the premise of Communism, nor challenged the one-party rule. The Soviet Union was to both a workers' state. Now, on the outside looking in, they demanded democracy within the party. Their Communism disarmed them in their struggle against those who personified the Soviet Union. Power and success are fascinating. Often they are the only standards by which men measure greatness.

The Lovestone group made vigorous attempts to reenter the ranks of the Comintern. But these efforts were foredoomed. Neither Stalin nor the party here could accept their two basic demands: the reinstatement of the expelled groups as a unit and internal party democracy. The negotiations were officially broken off early in 1932. By that time Lovestone had participated, in Europe, in the forma-

tion of an international body of Right-Wing Communists, headed by August Thalheimer and Otto Brandler. (For the group's version of the negotiations, see the booklet, *Some Plain Words on Communist Unity*, by Gitlow, Workers Age Publishing Association.) Negotiations with the Comintern were resumed in 1936. But they failed too.

However, the "Majority Group" took one stand totally at variance with official Communism, that on the trade unions. They spoke out strongly against the dual unions initiated by the party, and their followers left the new Communist-Left unions and returned to the old ones. Lovestonites were conspicuous in the great and decisive union drives in the 30's. Many of them became leading people in the old and newly formed unions. In the ILGWU alone, Charles S. Zimmerman and Louis Nelson proved to be highly competent union builders, and rose to the vice-presidency of that big union.

Whatever little political impact the Lovestone group may have had, one cannot deny them credit for the organizers and educators they contributed to the labor movement.