

5 *Communism's Birth Pangs*

The Left, like all new creeds, was immediately torn by sharp dissensions at the top. Unbending dogmatism intermingled with an unabashed race for power split it in two. The primary reason was that the Left was no more homogeneous than the party itself. Diversity in background and tradition made it exceedingly difficult for the non-English-speaking groups to be fused with the Americans in a tight political body, though their differences were only a matter of nuance, the Americans being a degree less doctrinaire than the others.

The Left Wing was soon hopelessly at odds over its immediate objective: to take over the SP by capturing it from within or to wreck it from outside by forming a Communist Party without delay. The majority of the English-speaking held out for the former course, while the language federations impatiently insisted on a Communist Party at once.

A compromise reached at the national conference, June 1919, was soon broken by the federationists. Not one of them entered the National Council, nor did they participate in the *Revolutionary Age*. Secret maneuvering and double-dealing, chiefly on the part of the Russians, poisoned relations within the Left, and ended by cutting it in two.

NICHOLAS I. HOURWICH, THE ZEALOT

For the Russian Federation the Bolshevik Revolution was a wind-fall. From an insignificant 1,500 in 1915, it grew to 7,824 in 1919. Many Russians not at all Communists, intent upon returning home,

thought—or were led to believe—that a membership card in the federation would be useful in their native land.

Alexander Stoklitsky and Nicholas I. Hourwich were the leaders of the federation at that time. Nicholas, the oldest son of Dr. I. A. Hourwich, noted economist and writer, possessed neither the impressive appearance, the personal charm, nor the intellectual qualities of his father, inheriting only his stubbornness and belligerence. Nicholas, who had voted with the Bolsheviks at the historical convention of the Russian Social Democracy in 1907, typified the dogmatism and narrow sectarianism of the early Russian radicals. As the self-appointed guardian of Bolshevik purity, anyone who did not agree with him on a single point was no less than a traitor or, with equal dishonor, a Menshevik. His air of revolutionary superiority and his patronizing attitude to the American Left-Wingers was a constant source of irritation. Short of stature, near-sighted, with a little red beard, he could talk for hours, trembling with excitement.

Hourwich conceived the bright idea of subjecting Ludwig C. A. K. Martens to the control of his federation, insisting that only the Russian Communist group could truly represent the Soviet foreign policy in this country.⁺⁹ However, he was overruled by Moscow.

The Russians were consistently supported by the small Latvian Federation. The Letts compensated for their lack of numbers by their revolutionary ardor. In Russia the Letts had been among the most militant Socialists. And after the Bolsheviks seized power, the Latvian *strelki* (marksmen) regiments were their most trusted military unit. They accompanied the Soviet government when it moved from Petrograd to Moscow before the advancing German armies.

HILLQUIT MINIMIZES THE DANGER

The SP top were ready for certain changes in program and tactics to placate the Left. They were willing to participate in a new international that would include the Russian and German Communists. But they would not concede that the economic and political situation in America was nearing a stage that would require "revolutionary mass action." To them this slogan could only lead to the complete ruin of the Socialist movement.

The NEC of the party met the threat of the Left by a number of rapid extraconstitutional moves: reorganization of branches and

higher committees without the Left, expulsion of known Left-Wingers and of the Michigan State body, and the suspension of seven federations. Also annulled was the party referendum, whose results had been favorable to the Left.

Hillquit, who master-minded these countermeasures, was himself deeply affected by the impatient temper of that period. He was eager to reach a compromise with the Left, but he would rather have seen the party split than to lose it for the moderates.

In a letter from his sanitarium in the mountains to the *New York Call*, May 21, 1919, Hillquit outlined his views on the "old" labor movement and on the schism in the party. He called the former a privileged body within the working class, having a vested interest in capitalism. As to the split, he pleaded:

Let them (the Left) separate honestly, freely and without rancor. Let each side organize and work in its own way and make such contribution . . . as it can. Better a hundred times to have two numerically small Socialist organizations, each homogeneous and harmonious within itself, than to have one big party torn by dissensions and squabbles, an impotent Colossus on feet of clay. The time for action is near; let us clear the decks.

On the face of it, these lines were remarkable for their frankness and illusions. But Hillquit was too wise and too much of a realist to put credence in a harmonious coexistence. And his letter must have been primarily a tactical move to placate the neutrals in the party.

The countermeasures only added zeal to the insistence on an immediate Communist Party. The seven suspended federations formed a new body. They were the Russian, Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian, South Slavic, Latvian and Lithuanian. (The South Slavic joined later. From the Jewish and the Finnish only small minorities were part of the Left.)

Though disdainful of the Bolshevism of most of the Americans, the federations knew only too well that any party functioning in America must have American names on its letterhead. They succeeded in winning over several of the natives, including Ruthenberg, Fraina and Ferguson. Now a majority on the National Council, they took over the *Revolutionary Age*. The other faction, Benjamin Gitlow, Ludwig E. Katterfeld, Ludwig Lore, John Reed and James Larkin, issued the *Voice of Labor*, with Reed as editor.

The split in the short-lived Left Wing was now final. The new

bloc together with the Michigan group, headed by Dennis E. Batt, set out to launch the Communist Party.

TWO COMMUNIST PARTIES ARE BORN IN CHICAGO

Two conventions opened in Chicago August 30, 1919, those of the Socialist Party and of the federations-Ruthenberg-Fraina combination. But scarcely 24 hours passed and Chicago was host to a third convention, that of the Left-Wingers who had come with the hope of taking over the SP.

Intent on preventing the Left from capturing the party, those at the helm of the SP took appropriate steps. All contested Left delegates were barred from even entering the convention hall. Only 37, whose seats were not contested, were admitted.

The barred delegates opened their own convention in the same Machinists Hall building. A day later, some of the Left seated delegates joined them.

The two conventions produced two parties, the Communist Party of America and the Communist Labor Party. The first was formed at the original convention meeting at the "Smolny Institute," headquarters of the local branch of the Russian Federation on Blue Island Avenue; the second, at the gathering of the delegates who were barred or expelled from the SP convention.⁺¹⁰

The Communist Party convention numbered 137 delegates and claimed 58,000 members; the Communist Labor Party had 97 delegates, claiming 30,000 members, both figures well-padded for the good of the cause. The true figures must have been somewhere between 23,000 and 30,000 for the CP,^{*24} and about 8,000 for the CLP. Part of the Left rank and file and the neutrals dropped out during the internal struggle.

The CLP convention made several overtures for unity, but they were all rejected by the CP. Ruthenberg did make an attempt to have the CLP brought in, but the Russians were adamant. Pointing to Lore, who symbolized to them the despised German Social Democracy, they charged that the CLP had a "Centrist tail" dragging behind it. The Russians would make only one concession, to treat the CLP delegates as individuals, a concession that the other side could only reject.

Ruthenberg was elected secretary of the party; Fraina, international delegate and editor of the paper. The two formed an Amer-

ican facade for the new party. Besides, Ruthenberg was the most experienced organizer and Fraina was the chief theoretician and the most prolific writer in the entire setup.

The CLP elected Alfred Wagenknecht secretary and Reed international delegate. Cleveland, Ohio, was made party headquarters.

The convention of the CLP had a one-man desertion before it was over. Louis B. Boudin, an erudite lawyer from New York, an orthodox Marxist and a perennial rival of Hillquit, left the gathering in a huff after his amendments to cleanse the platform of Communism were defeated. Boudin was a genuine "Centrist."

Rather pedantic in his thinking, Boudin's Marxism was of a purely theoretical nature, having little relevance to daily experience. And because of this his influence in the movement never went beyond a limited circle. Steeped in the democratic tradition of Socialism, Boudin refused to accept the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, he remained strongly pro-Soviet for the rest of his long life. In his later years, Boudin was chairman of the American Federation of ORT.

"MASS ACTION" AND "ACTION BY THE MASSES"

To all appearances, the disparity between the platforms of the two Communist parties was largely one of emphasis. The CLP, trying to clear itself of the stigma of Centrism, vied with the CP in revolutionary formulas. Both advocated the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat; both were contemptuous of bourgeois democracy and against a labor party. And both had a touch of syndicalism, as evidenced by the importance attached to the trade unions in the future classless society. They did disagree on phrasing the relation of the political struggle to the final goal, and differed particularly in their attitude on the trade unions. The CLP was against destroying the old craft unions, while the platform of the CP stated: ". . . as against the unionism of the AFL, the Communist Party propagandizes industrial unionism. . . . It is a factor in the final mass action for the conquest of power, as it will constitute the basis for the industrial administration of the Communist commonwealth." *25

The program of the CP followed the main lines of the manifesto of the Left Wing. The negative attitude toward the existing unions remained literally the same.*26

A year later, at the second convention, July 1920, the CP, at a nod from Moscow, had a change of heart toward the trade unions. It was now for entering "the most reactionary unions for Communist propaganda and agitation." *27

The program of the CLP declared that its aim was "to create a unified revolutionary working-class movement in America."

HILLQUIT AGAIN TRIES TO BE CALM

A striking contrast to the political and personal brickbats hurled between the CP and the CLP was the calm and conciliatory tone of Hillquit's second letter in the *New York Call*, September 22, 1919:

The division was not brought about by differences on vital questions of principle. It arose over disputes on methods and policy. . . .

The separation of the Socialist Party into three organizations need not necessarily mean a weakening of the Socialist movement as such. Our newly baptized "Communists" have not ceased to be Socialists even though in a moment of destructive enthusiasm they have chosen to discard the name. . . . And when the hour of the real Socialist fight strikes . . . , we may find them again in our ranks.

It is inconceivable that Hillquit could have been so shortsighted or carried away by the illusion of revolutionary possibilities in Europe. His seeming tranquillity must have been a shrewd and hopeful move by an astute leader anxious to minimize the grave setback suffered by his party. Whatever his motive, both his prophecy and his hope fell wide of the mark.

A curious situation arose in New York as an offshot of the forming of the CP. During the nomination for public offices in August 1919, the Left, still officially a part of the SP, contested the party candidates in many districts, and in several their nominee won out. But a month later the Left was already the Communist Party, and, according to the election law, their candidates could not be taken off the ballot. Had they wished, they could have waged Communist campaigns around their candidates, and they would have had Socialist backing, too. Walter M. Cook, state secretary of the New York SP, instructed his members to support these Communist candidates. "Forget personalities and wage the strongest campaign we have ever yet put up," he said.*28 Instead, the New York County Committee

of the CP chose to boycott the elections. They issued a leaflet appealing to the voters to do likewise. The leaflet explained the new party setup, and called the SP candidates "Socialist job-holders who promise cheap rent, milk, houses, bread, fare—cheap fairy tales." The CP assured the people that:

The USA is on the verge of a revolutionary crisis. Workers, through their strikes, are challenging the state. The CP's task is to unify these strikes, develop them into political strikes aiming them at the very power of the capitalist state itself.*²⁹

The SP, though seriously hit by the defection, managed to reelect five assemblymen to the State Legislature in that year.

EXIT LOUIS C. FRAINA

In that summer, the CP had a flurry of excitement. Louis C. Fraina was publicly accused of being an agent of the Department of Justice. The accuser was none other than Santeri Nuorteva, head of the Soviet Bureau in Washington, an able and clever Finn. The *Socialist Call* and other publications cheerfully printed this accusation.

The spy charge followed Fraina to Moscow, where he was sent by the CP as a delegate to the Comintern, August 1920. The American party and a committee of the ECCI (Executive Committee of the Comintern) found the charges groundless.*³⁰ Nuorteva still persisted, naming Ferdinand Peterson and Jacob Nosovitsky as his informants. Later it was discovered that the two were themselves agents of the Department of Justice.

Nuorteva was then arrested in Moscow under suspicion of being an agent of the British. He was imprisoned about eight months, and was released after the Cheka discovered that the leak from Nuorteva's office in Washington had been the work of his secretary, Williams, a British subject who had been planted there by Scotland Yard. Under Lenin, Nuorteva was demoted for his negligence and sent to the Republic of Karelia, where he occupied a minor post. He was never heard of again.*¹¹

As to Fraina, his name disappeared from the Communist press in the fall of 1921, and was never mentioned again. He was quietly expelled from the party in 1922.*¹²

6 In the Underground

The political activity of the CP consisted mainly of bombarding strikers with crude, bombastic leaflets. Replete with Communist slogans, the leaflets could only repel the workers. And the young distributors were often beaten up for their unsolicited advice.

A fair example of the attempts to inject Communism into economic strikes was the appeal issued in the fall of 1919 to the striking longshoremen by the New York CP. The leaflet berated the longshoremen's union, the AFL, the bosses, the courts and the government, and warned the strikers, "Forming an industrial union will of itself not solve your problems. . . . Going to the polls on election day will not bring your victory. . . . The only way is to get rid of the present government of the bosses and establish a workers' government in its place. . . . The answer to the dictatorship of the capitalists is the dictatorship of the workers. All power to the workers!"*³¹

During the Russian-Polish war, the summer of 1920, the CP issued an appeal to the transport workers to refuse to load arms and ammunition for Poland. The appeal solemnly added, "For the American workers it (a victory for Soviet Russia—M.E.) will also mean that American capitalism and imperialism will be more demoralized and will bring the day of the liberating proletarian revolution nearer in this country."*³² It is not surprising that a plea of this kind caused not a ripple in the ports of this country. (The last of this type of leaflet was distributed among the strikers of the Brooklyn trolley car barns, in 1921. Charles S. Zimmerman remembers