

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.\*<sup>29</sup>

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.\*<sup>30</sup> 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.\*<sup>11</sup>

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.\*<sup>12</sup>

## 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!"\*<sup>31</sup>

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."\*<sup>32</sup> 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

how fast he had to run across the street to save himself from the angry strikers.)

#### MASS RAIDS AND ARRESTS

The "normal" development of both parties was abruptly interrupted by an avalanche of repression. In November and December, 1919, hundreds of raids were carried out by Federal agents and state and city police. Sixty-five Communist branches in four New York boroughs were raided on November 8th by police on orders of the Lusk Investigating Committee. Larkin and Lovestone were among the arrested. These were merely a prologue to the mass raids staged by the Federal government.

On the night of January 2, 1920, squads of Federal agents and city police descended on the headquarters and meeting places of the two parties throughout the country, seizing records and dragging away most of those who were present. Later the same night, thousands of men and women were taken out of their beds and arrested without warrants. The Department of Justice, under Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, was well prepared for these mass "visits," having had agents planted in many units of the two parties.

Almost all of the Communist leaders of both parties were indicted and sentenced under state criminal anti-syndicalist laws. However, only Ruthenberg, Larkin, Gitlow, Ferguson and Harry Winitzky, in New York, and a few more in other places had to spend time in prison. The rest had their sentences reversed by higher courts.

Another Federal agency, the Department of Labor, rushed deportation proceedings against the arrested. On December 21, 1919, 249 Russian-born were put on the old, unseaworthy SS *Buford*, built in 1885, and deported to Russia. Among the deportees were Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman. The *Buford* was nicknamed the "Soviet Ark." (On the trip, Berkman, chosen leader, took a poll of the deportees. In his *Bolshevik Myth*, published in Berlin, 1921, he tells that of the 246 men and three women, a majority belonged to the Union of Russian Workers; eleven were members of the SP. They were awakened in Ellis Island at two in the morning and led to the ship without any previous notice.)

It was estimated that in this short period no less than ten thousand persons were arrested, that 6,530 Labor Department warrants

were applied for, either before or after the arrests, and that about three thousand among those arrested were actually fitted up and held for deportation hearings.\*<sup>33</sup>

#### NON-CITIZENS FRIGHTENED

Both parties were driven underground, with only a fraction of their members. The rest were intimidated. The non-citizens were frightened still more after Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson declared the Communist Party illegal, in January.

A letter to the Jewish Socialist Federation from New England gloomily reported: "As a result of the raids, people were afraid to come to meetings, to write letters, to keep books, and to sell party stamps. Contact between the branches and the city committee was almost entirely severed. Only a few *genossen* met from time to time, laboring to keep the last sparks (of the movement) from being extinguished." \*<sup>34</sup> And the federation was anti-Communist.

Public opinion, alarmed by Communism in Russia, Bavaria and Hungary, was incensed against the "Reds" here, creating a favorable climate for the repressions, condoned by most of the press.

Louis F. Post, Assistant Secretary of Labor, a former disciple of Henry George, the single taxer, was the sole member of the Wilson government to openly criticize the illegal mass deportations, cancelling the greater part of the warrants. He was supported by 12 outstanding members of the bar who signed a "Report Upon the Illegal Practices of the United States Department of Justice," citing numerous violations of constitutional law.\*<sup>35</sup> \*<sup>36</sup>

Straining to maintain a functioning organization, some of those who remained in the two Communist parties found solace in the underground existence forced upon them. Assuming different names, meeting in secret and publishing underground literature fitted in with their social romanticism, creating the illusion of going through the revolutionary rigamarole of the Bolsheviks. One of these enthusiasts remarked to the author with a chuckle, "Let the Americans learn how to carry on underground work!"

Being forced underground proved to be not entirely a romantic game. Conspiratorial activity was alien to the rank and file; they had difficulty in adjusting to it. The CP top, therefore, drawing

upon the Russian experience, published a four-page pamphlet, *Rules for Underground Behavior*.<sup>\*87</sup>

#### THE BREAK WITH THE "TALK CONSPIRATORS"

The inner life of the CP was far from peaceful. Neither the Russians' sectarian concept of a Communist Party nor their crude schemes to keep their grip on it could be tolerated for long by the Ruthenberg-Fraina faction. The latter were accustomed to a wider political arena and a larger dose of inner democracy. Even some of the language groups resented Russian domination. The last straw was the decision by the Hourwich bloc, with a one-vote majority on the EC, to remove the organizer of the Chicago party district, and later the entire district committee. They were Ruthenberg's followers, and he was forced to act. Supported by a minority on the EC, he presented the Russians with an ultimatum.

(The Communists arrogantly ignored the political-geographical boundaries of this country. Neither the lower branches nor the higher committees were based on existing political and election units. Instead of a state committee, there was a district committee often embracing several states or based on an industrial area. And the chief local official was not called secretary but organizer.)

When the Russians and their allies refused to accept Ruthenberg's terms, he and the minority issued two spirited statements, dated April 8, 1920. The second statement expressed the exasperation with the Super-Bolsheviks:

Since the beginning of the party. . . . The majority of the CEC . . . "great theorists" . . . constantly talked about the word "principle," but never about how to relate Communist principles to the working-class movement in this country. . . . The kind of action this majority believed in was hours and days of sitting around a table, wrangling about who should go to Europe.

. . . Super-Bolsheviks . . . were quick to fling the epithet "Menshevik" at those who opposed them. . . . They have been aptly designated "talk conspirators," . . . They wished to keep the party a small sect of which they could pose as the high priests. . . . The Communist Party should not be a party of closet philosophers. . . .<sup>\*88</sup>

Negotiations with the Russians proving futile, the Ruthenberg group bolted the CP and joined the CLP. The product of this

merger was named, in all seriousness, the United Communist Party. The top of the new party was made up of five men each from the CLP and the Ruthenberg camp. According to the CP, Ruthenberg took with him only about 3,500 members, the CP remaining with a membership of 8,350.<sup>\*89</sup>

The program of the CLP was accepted almost *in toto*, with one distinct change. Both partners in the UCP having had enough friction with the federations, they were shorn of their power and reduced to mere sections of the party.<sup>+13</sup>

The person who carried out the mechanics of the split and the merger with the CLP, a man on whom Ruthenberg relied, was none other than the Chicago organizer who had been removed by the Russians. He went by the name of Fischer. Only in a sunless and airtight party could such a man function. His career is worth telling.

#### THE ADVENTURES OF FISCHER-BELSKY

Fischer was at that time in his early 50's, nearly six feet tall, with blond hair, thick eyebrows and a thin face. He was an assimilated Jew, born in Russia. Fischer was one of the original American Communists and would boast that he knew Lenin personally. But his past was obscure.

For some unexplained reason, Fischer picked for his protégé Dr. Louis Hendin, an excitable young man, just graduated from the school of dentistry. Fischer placed Hendin on the CEC of the UCP, himself remaining outside the committee. In confidential talks with Hendin over a few drinks, Fischer kept urging the necessity for a triumvirate to rule the party, naming himself, Hendin and a young man from Philadelphia, Gershon. He argued that one could not depend on the present American leadership. "They are not well versed in revolutionary Marxism," he said.

These talks and the fact that a few months earlier Fischer and several active people had been arrested in Chicago, Fischer being the only one to be released several hours later, aroused Hendin's suspicion. When Fischer made an appointment to meet him at his home, Hendin purposely came earlier. Fischer was not yet home, and his wife innocently disclosed that she had been a city detective in the red light district. The walls of Fischer's room were decorated with swords and pistols.

Hendin did not wait for Fischer. Excitedly, he told the story at the next meeting of the CEC, demanding Fischer's expulsion. But he was only suspended. No investigation was carried out. Several months later, Hendin found out that Fischer was given permission to go to Russia to clear himself. That was where the matter stood until Hendin, after the convention of the UCP in 1921, went to Russia to air his disagreements with the party.

On Hendin's arrival, he was immediately summoned to the Secretariat of the CC of the Russian CP. There, in the presence of Molotov, he was closely questioned for several hours about Fischer's activities in Chicago. Insisting on knowing the reason for the interrogation, Hendin was informed that Fischer, in reality Belsky, had been a member of the Moscow Bolshevik Committee as early as 1903. At that time, Lenin, from his exile, had proposed that the committee plant some people in the Okhrana (security police). "But," Lenin had added, "if someone will suggest himself for this job, expel him." Belsky had volunteered and was expelled. He had then disappeared, and the Russians had not heard of him until he reappeared as Fischer in 1921.

As shooting of Communists was not yet practiced in that early period, and the evidence against Fischer was merely circumstantial, he was ordered to leave Soviet Russia. But this was not the end. A couple of years later, at the opening of the trial of the director of the state bank in Leningrad, Krasnoschekoff, a lawyer and a Socialist returnee from America, for financial irregularities, one of the public prosecutors suddenly looked at the chief witness and recognized a familiar face. It was Fischer-Belsky. He had never left Russia, and managed to work his way to the position of Krasnoschekoff's assistant. Now he was ready to testify against him. Fischer-Belsky was immediately arrested and shot without a trial in the basement of the Cheka.

Dr. Hendin, a member of the editorial staff of the *Forward* since 1929, who told the author the tale of this master adventurer, added that Fischer-Belsky's wife had been entrusted with the complicated arrangements for the underground merger convention of the UCP. And while she had ostensibly taken extraordinary precautions for the safety of the convention, bringing the delegates in busses over circuitous roads through a wood near the Illinois-Ohio border,

rumor later had it that detectives had been watching the convention from a nearby spot.

The financial setup of the UCP and the CP was not as tight as one might have expected of small underground parties requiring large outlays for defense and propaganda. The members of the CEC of the UCP were quite well paid for those years, \$84 a week plus seven dollars a day traveling expenses. Hendin never noticed any lack of money. And when the UCP moved from Chicago to New York, he learned that instead of \$84, the leaders were drawing \$133 a week. He was astonished at the explanation given him by Alfred Wagenknecht, acting secretary during Ruthenberg's term in jail, that the CEC members, though they were now living in New York, still considered it a city they had to travel to, and charged the seven dollars traveling expenses.\*<sup>40</sup>

The CP felt no financial pinch either. It freely published propaganda material. Lower party functionaries had to exist on the meagerest of budgets, but the leaders traveled in pullmans and stayed at middle class hotels. And, with the exception of a few "angels," none could put his finger on any American source for these ample party funds.<sup>+14</sup>