

## 12 *The Open Party; the Freiheit*

The launching of a joint party of the Workers Council and the underground CP was not a smooth affair. The negotiations were conducted with the American Labor Alliance and dragged on for several months. There were times when it seemed that they would collapse.

The opposition in the Communist ranks to an open party hampered their negotiators, headed by James P. Cannon. The people of the Workers Council, for their part, were not of one opinion either. Men like Trachtenberg, Engdahl and Kruse, almost completely without followers, were hardly in a position to insist on any conditions that would guarantee the independence of the new party. Moreover, a party backed by the Kremlin presented an added lure. And Cannon was shrewd enough to drop a hint during the discussions that by joining the Communists the men of the Workers Council would be taken care of financially and provided with sufficient "space" for their talents. On that occasion Salutsky (from now on he will be called Hardman) interrupted him to ask sarcastically, "If we are for sale, I would like to know exactly what you offer." \*102

The spokesmen for the language groups were in a somewhat more favorable position. They had organizations behind them. Still, they were not all pulling in the same direction either. Some were pronounced pro-Communists, others were wavering, and some were definitely anti-Communists. Among the Jews, for example, Moishe Katz was pro-Communist; Hardman, Zivyon, A. S. Sachs, and Yuditiz were anti-Communists, while Olgin kept the power of Soviet Russia

uppermost in his mind. (Once, during a walk, Hardman tried to impart to Olgin his misgivings about the negotiations. Olgin, in his capricious manner, had one reply, "But I want to go to Moscow." \*103)

The long discussions in the *Naye Welt* on unity with the Communists mirrored this cleavage. And the final report by Hardman and Olgin met with a sharp division of opinion by their associates. Hardman was against approval of the agreement and Olgin was for it. It was ratified by a slender margin of two votes. The opponents went along out of loyalty to the group. \*104

### THE DISAGREEMENT OVER CONTROL

During and after the negotiations, the underground Communist press kept implying that the other side had yielded to placing the new party under CP control. But when a similar statement, though much diluted, of the Jewish Bureau of the American Labor Alliance appeared in the *Emes*, the *Naye Welt* reacted half threateningly and half pleadingly, a reflection of the differences within the federation. The Jewish Bureau declared that points four and five of the agreement made it "abundantly clear that the CP . . . considers itself the only revolutionary party affiliated with the Comintern. The new party will have to show, through its activities, that it deserves to stand on the same level with the CP. (A revolutionary mass party cannot be created at once.)" It added, "The CP . . . will seek to influence and to control the new party . . . until the new party will have the right to belong to the Comintern. . . ." \*105

The *Naye Welt*, in a lengthy editorial, formally objected that the CP was never a party to the negotiations and reproved the Jewish Bureau for putting up unnecessary difficulties at a time when the greatest need was a "truly permanent and healthy unity." The editorial went on to express the hope that the Bureau did not voice the opinion of the entire ALA. However, if "seeking to control" was the true intention of the CP, then "certainly the unity is as though it had never happened, and the new party is split before it was born." \*106

To further dispute the claim of control by the CP, the *Naye Welt* printed the essence of the main points of the agreement. They were: 1. Open existence; no control; 2. Recognition of the Third International; 3. A workers' republic as the goal; 4. A proletarian dictatorship as the means; 5. A mass movement and broad propaganda. As

additional evidence against control by the CP, the *Naye Welt* published in its next issue, November 30th, the memorandum of the EC of the federation against control by the underground.<sup>+23</sup>

#### THE WORKERS PARTY IS BORN

The Workers Party of America was formed at a convention held December 23-26, 1921, in New York City. Ruthenberg was serving his term in prison, and Cannon spoke for the Communists. Soviet power and dictatorship of the proletariat were swept under the rug; nor was the Comintern mentioned. There was a vague phrase about "work for the establishment of a workers' republic." But the rest of the program abounded in the usual Left and Communist terminology: revolutionary elements, revolutionary consciousness, revolutionary spirit. The program also hinted at centralism, a principle dear to Communists.

The Workers Party was strongly in favor of immediate demands. On the trade unions, the program was emphatic: "The custom of seceding from the mass organization to form smaller unions, on the ground that . . . (they are) reactionary must be abandoned. . . ." \*107

Headquarters were opened in New York City, and the party began publishing a weekly, *The Worker*.

There were moments at the convention when the whole scheme was on the verge of crumbling. On the very first day, some of the non-Communist delegates had the uncomfortable feeling that the underground Communists were not in earnest, that they were only, in Hardman's words, "intent on building a new vehicle to carry the old Communist ware." This misgiving moved Hardman to call a caucus of all the WC delegates. The meeting took place in Olgin's bachelor apartment in the vicinity of Central Park. Hardman spoke of his suspicion and pleaded for withdrawing from the convention.

Discussing this episode with the writer 33 years later, Hardman tried to reconstruct that meeting: "After many hours of discussion, a decision was reached to continue in the forming of the new party, and to try, by all means, to keep it from becoming another CP. The majority realized that there was no turning back. Their chief argument was that the rank and file of all the groups were anxious to end the split in the radical forces and would not view a withdrawal at that time as bona fide. Besides, to continue the loose and detached

existence seemed unthinkable. The Italians, headed by August Bel-lanco, however, withdrew from the convention.

"As far as I remember, there were about 50-odd delegates at that caucus meeting. The total number of delegates to the convention was over 200. Under the preliminary agreement, these 50-odd delegates were to have five members on the EC of the party to be, out of a total of 17. The rest were to come from groups which claimed to be sympathetic to the general idea of Moscow, but not affiliated with the CP. In fact, however, they were pretty nearly all secretly committed to underground CP discipline. The preliminary agreement also stipulated the elimination from leadership of those who had been conspicuous in the various previous CP setups. William Z. Foster was favored above all, but that was long before it became publicly known that he had been a member of the CP. Despite this agreement, on the very first day of the convention, the old crowd was not only in evidence but in control." \*108

#### THE NON-COMMUNIST FACADE IS GIVEN UP

Hardman's apprehension was justified all too soon. The Workers Party began rapidly veering toward open Communism. At the second convention, the end of December 1922, in New York, the year-old program was scrapped and replaced by the familiar formula of the impossibility of establishing the new social order within the framework of the existing capitalist society. "The much-talked-of American democracy is a fraud. . . ."

The Soviet state was introduced without the cardinal premise, the Social Revolution. Instead, the program spoke of "supplanting . . . the existing government with a Soviet government . . ." through propaganda.\*109

The Comintern was brought in through a back door. Not affiliation but ". . . under the inspiration of the leadership of the Communist International."

Two years had scarcely passed and the fourth convention of the WP, August 21-29, 1925, in Chicago—party headquarters had been moved to Chicago—completed the Communist cycle. The name was changed to Workers (Communist) Party of America, the American Section of the Communist International. The Communist victory was absolute. In four and a half years, they had managed to disinte-

grate the non-Communist Left and absorb by far the largest part of them.

The transformation of the WP into a Communist Party, short as it was in terms of time, evoked an undiminished fight of a double nature, between the Communists and their partners and among the Communists themselves. New splits often seemed imminent. And, again, it was largely Moscow's promises and threats that managed to hold the warring factions together.

The underlying cause for the apparent ease with which the WC people were "integrated" stemmed from their vulnerability to the Communist attacks rather than to the attractiveness of the Communist doctrine. In detaching themselves from their base, the Socialist movement, and concluding a marriage of convenience with the Communists, they entered a vacuum. And unless they stepped out of it in time, as several did, Communism was bound to engulf them.

As to the Jews, not all were absorbed. Rogoff, becoming pessimistic about the prospects for a new paper, went back to the *Forward* almost immediately. Hardman began boycotting the Workers Party at the end of the first year, though he was on the NEC; he was expelled in 1923. Zivyon returned to the *Forward* the same year, publishing a booklet denouncing the Communists. (A practical man, he wrote the booklet while drawing wages, however meager, from the *Freiheit*.) He was followed by Lilliput. A. S. Sachs resigned earlier. The rest were "integrated" after a resistance lasting about three years.

Hardman was expelled on two charges: for refusing to intervene in behalf of the WP at the Conference of Progressive Political Action, in Cleveland, 1922, and for refusing to submit his magazine, the *American Labor Monthly*, to party control.

Because of his popularity and his strategic position as educational director and chief editor of the ACWA, the Comintern was not disposed to lose him. But Hardman was a stubborn man, and rejected the compromises offered by the Comintern man, H. Walecki.

#### FIFTY-FIFTY AMONG THE JEWS; THE FREIHEIT

The merger in the Jewish sector was concluded along different lines. Numerically, the federation was perhaps smaller than the

Jewish underground, but this disadvantage was more than balanced by their superiority in men of position and prestige. This superiority accounted for the better terms secured by the Hardman-Olgin group. The Jewish EC was to have nine members from each camp, the office of the secretary going to the Communists. Louis Hendin was elected to this post.<sup>+24</sup>

The editorship of the paper was also divided equally. And the Hardman people won out on the name of the new paper, too. Instead of calling it *Emes*, as the Communists insisted, as a continuation of their *Emes*, it was called *Freiheit*, for the organ of the German Independent Socialist Party. Trivial as the naming of a paper may appear, in this instance the name was symbolic of its non-Communist nature.

The offices of business manager and campaign manager—fund-raiser—went to George Wishnak and Rubin Saltzman, of the Hardman group.

The *Freiheit* was published April 2, 1922. The Communist editor was Shachno Epstein; the non-Communist, Olgin. Hardman, the candidate of the non-Communists, was elbowed out by the Communists, who feared his independence and strong will. Olgin was known for his pliability. And subsequent events proved that his choice was a happy one for the Communists.

The editorial staff was a mixed one too. Olgin, Zivyon, Lilliput, Buchwald, Novick and Paul Yuditz came from the federation. Kalmen Marmor, Melech Epstein, who joined the CP about that time, Morris Holtman, his wife, Rachel, and a few unknown young men were of the CP. Bittelman and Noah London were contributors. Because the Olgin group—except for Yuditz—consisted of established journalists and Olgin himself was more popular and an incomparably better writer than Shachno Epstein, they carried greater weight in the paper, to the constant irritation of the other camp. This uneven strength in the staff and the factional feuds that flared up a day after the merger prompted Bittelman and his lieutenants to raise the question, in the first year, of breaking away from the *Freiheit* and publishing their own penny paper, *Der Emes*. This plan was freely discussed at several meetings of the underground Communists. But they were held back by the CP.

The *Freiheit* did not start as a dried-out political journal. Following the pattern of the Jewish press, it contained feature articles,

novels, short stories and poems, both original and in translation, and literary reviews. Distinguished writers and poets who joined the *Freiheit* as contributors greatly enriched the literary content of the paper.

From the very beginning, the *Freiheit* numbered among its contributors such writers as H. Leivick, Moishe Nadir, Moishe Leib Halperin, David Ignatoff, A. Raboi, Baruch Glazman, S. Chester, Mani Leib, and, a couple of years later, Abraham Raisin, besides a larger group of younger writers. No other paper could boast such an array of literary talent.

These poets and novelists were attracted to the *Freiheit* for its regard for Yiddish and higher literary level. The seeming resurgence of Yiddish culture in Russia, actively supported by a friendly government, helped to induce a feeling in these writers, ardent workers in the vineyard of Yiddish letters, that contributing to the *Freiheit* they were actually cooperating with the cultural efforts in Russia. They regarded their work in the *Freiheit* as a bridge to reach the isolated three million Soviet Jews.

Another irresistible attraction was the *Freiheit* audience. Incomparably smaller than the army of readers of the other three papers, this audience was young, lively and responsive. In the literary evenings and forums, held regularly by the wide net of educational and social clubs, dramatic groups and summer camps of the young postwar immigration, these poets and novelists met their readers, a contact that most writers would cherish.

Furthermore, the *Freiheit* was not Communist in the beginning. Only in 1925 did it become a full-fledged Communist mouthpiece. And even then it gave wide leeway to cultural and literary expression.

This group of noted writers broke with the paper in the fall of 1929. Of this later.