

13 *A Poor Beginning*

In the Workers Party, warfare between the two partners continued. Nor did the running fight among the Communists themselves slacken. Only the issues were changed and the alignments reshuffled. The immediate source of irritation was the air of superiority shown by No. One—as the underground Communists were called—over No. Two, the “Centrists.” However, the chief cause of the conflict was the relentless efforts to turn the WP into a Communist auxiliary. Ludwig Lore emerged as the strong man of No. Two.

Fortunately for the “Centrists,” a new division in the underground relieved them temporarily from being the prime target of attacks. No. One was soon torn between those who insisted on maintaining the underground party—they were nicknamed the Goose Caucus—and the Liquidators, who wanted to dissolve it in the belief that it would soon be possible to transform the WP into a Communist party. A third and smaller group, the Conciliators, consisting of W. W. Weinstone and his followers, tried to steer a middle course. This difference reflected, in a sense, the old cleavage in the Left Wing of 1919.

The leaders of the Goose Caucus, the larger group, were L. E. Katterfeld, secretary of the CP; Alfred Wagenknecht, Abraham Jakira, secretary of the Russian Federation; Israel Amter, Edward Lindgren and, in the beginning, Benjamin Gitlow. The Liquidators were headed by Ruthenberg, secretary of the WP; Foster, Cannon, William F. Dunne, Jay Lovestone and Earl Browder. The roster of these names might indicate the motivation of some of the persons

involved. Ruthenberg and Foster, with a following of their own, fretted under the inescapable limitations and futility inherent in an underground party. An open party, they calculated, would secure the leadership for them. The Goose Caucus, aside from their sectarianism, could not measure up in stature or prestige to Ruthenberg and Foster. They had a vested interest in an underground body, where it was easier to maintain tight control through manipulations. As for the Conciliators, W. W. Weinstone, a handsome young man with a booming voice, with a special gift for indecision and for shifting responsibility in matters of policy, was, at the same time, consumed by a hunger for leadership.

THE EMISSARIES FROM MOSCOW

In 1922, the factions were again running to Moscow, pleading their cause before the Comintern. For reasons of their own, the Russian leaders failed to issue a clearcut decision; instead, their long-winded instructions were shot through with *ifs* and *buts*, which only heightened the factional strife. At the same time, Moscow, pursuing a policy of playing with both of the larger factions, sent three emissaries to steer the party convention called for the latter part of August 1922. They were: H. Walecki, a Pole; John Pepper, a Hungarian; and Boris Reinstein, an American who had returned to Russia after the first revolution.

Walecki, a mathematician, formerly the leader of the Left of the Polish Socialist Party, and one of the three founders of the Polish Communist Party, was an exile in Moscow. Those who met him—including this author—were impressed by his personal wit and charm. Pepper—real name, Josef Pogany—was a Socialist journalist who had joined Bela Kun and become a minister in the short-lived Soviet government. He was also an exile in Moscow; his wife and two children lived there. A man of broad European culture, Pepper was cut from a different cloth than Walecki. His thirst for leadership led him to engage in unscrupulous deals. Pepper had a conspicuous part in the affairs of the Communist movement here in the 20's, and we will meet him later. Reinstein, a former druggist in Buffalo, N. Y., and a disciple of Daniel De Leon, was of little consequence. In Moscow he was in charge of the archives of the Profintern (International of Red Trade Unions).

The three arrived on the eve of the convention, which was held secretly in a deserted summer place near the town of Bridgeman, Michigan.

(The curious story of the Bridgeman convention, the government raid and the arrest of Ruthenberg are told in detail by Benjamin Gitlow in his book, *I Confess*, and by Theodore Draper in *The Road to American Communism*.)

Ruthenberg's opponents in the party openly suggested that his enormous vanity had led him, in a gesture of martyrdom, to wait for his arrest. But at that time there was already a noticeable let-up in the anti-Red campaign, and the Bridgeman episode was received by the public rather as an adventure in a dime novel. The Communists failed to derive any political capital out of a grotesque situation.

The failure at Bridgeman did not tone down rising feuds. The dissolution of the underground party in March 1923, as directed by the Comintern, did not usher in a healthier atmosphere either. (Moscow concluded that underground Communism in the United States was both childish and wasteful.) Only the scene was changed. The factional fights, unabated, were transferred to the Workers Party.

THE SCHISM IN THE JEWISH UNDERGROUND

The Jewish Federation was the arena of the first schism among the underground Communists. Three of the nine on the EC, Louis Hendin, Noah London and Taubenshlag, broke away from the Communist caucus as yet in 1922, circulating a manifesto in the party advocating the liquidation of the underground. They were threatened with party discipline and brought before a special party court, headed by Ruthenberg.⁺²⁵ Their defection destroyed the 50-50 balance in the Jewish EC, tipping the scales for the "Centrists."

The Bittelman group then demanded that the balance be restored by giving them three additional seats. Rejected by the new majority, Bittelman and the other five Communists then left the EC, on November 8th, declaring that they did not recognize its legality. They brought the issue to the NEC of the party, certain that the Communist majority there would decide in their favor; at that

time, the former Workers Council minority of seven had been reduced to four.

The Communist group issued a four-page printed statement, addressed to all members of the federation. Shrewdly avoiding the conflict over representation on the EC, the statement made a last-ditch defense for the underground party and its privileged position in the WP. "In the same way," it argued, "that the WP cannot tolerate attacks on the Comintern in its ranks, so it cannot tolerate attacks on its American section." Then followed an explanation why the underground could not be abolished: "The American government is still stronger than the American Communist Party. The government feels that the working masses are not yet sufficiently interested in the Communist Party to intervene for the party and to defend it. . . ."

Most characteristic for Bittelman's mind and methods is the passage about the *Freiheit* versus the *Forward*: "The struggle against the *Forward* must be . . . on the basis of Communist principles. We fight the *Forward* not merely and mainly because it is not a decent literary paper, but because it serves the reactionary and socially treacherous leadership of the labor movement. . . ."

"Our fight is for revolutionary unions and not merely for good unions. . . . The personal character of reactionary union officers should not become the main issue of our struggle against reactionary and socially treacherous union bureaucracy." *110

THE NEW BALANCE OF POWER

Called before the NEC, the new majority, represented by Olgin and David Siegel, and strongly supported by Hardman and Kruse, argued that the 50-50 balance had been agreed upon before the WP was born, and the NEC had, therefore, no jurisdiction to dissolve the present EC. Furthermore, the original agreement did not and could not ban either side from trying to win over the other by convincing them. Such a ban on winning over converts would have been nonsensical and contrary to the very spirit of the merger.

The two also stressed the stagnation of the Jewish movement, brought about by the furious fighting of the factions. The federation and the *Freiheit*, they pointed out, were actually paralyzed. For the first time now, the federation had acquired a working

majority, and could break the impasse. As a final solution to the inner feuds, they proposed the calling of a special convention, promising not to interfere with the rights of the Communist minority and to abide by the will of the majority.*111

As Bittelman and his friends had anticipated, the NEC came to their rescue. Olgin and Siegel later reported back that they were continuously interrupted. As the new majority would not yield to an arbitrary reshuffling of the EC, the NEC resorted to a maneuver which would reestablish the 50-50 balance in practice without touching the composition of the EC. A federation convention was decided upon, but—and here lay the gimmick—the preparations were to be taken out of the EC and placed in the hands of an arrangements committee consisting of an equal number from both sides.

The EC refused to accept a decision that would have spelled their actual dissolution. Warnings by the NEC and threats to have the party appoint the 50-50 convention were of no avail. In its answer, the EC pointed out that it had "not violated a single principle or tactical decision of the WP, and, therefore, the latter had no reason to mete out such a heavy punishment. . . . Such . . . punishment . . . would break the morale of the members, not only . . . the Jewish . . . but . . . the others. . . ." *112

After receiving the final ultimatum of the NEC, the EC began making quiet preparations for a break-away from the WP. However, there were disagreements as to procedure. Hendin, supported by Hardman, proposed an immediate split. The others wanted to continue negotiations with the NEC, meanwhile preparing for a split in case of failure. The latter opinion prevailed. Wishnak and Olgin were elected negotiators, and Hendin was sent on a tour to prepare for the eventuality of a break.

However, Bittelman, aware of the impending break-away, managed, through the NEC, to induce the two negotiators to desert their associates. Wishnak was offered a trip to Russia; Olgin, the sole editorship of the *Freiheit*. *113 Olgin and Wishnak returned to the EC with a plan for a new setup in the federation that would conform to the emerging bloc in the party, headed by Foster. Their defection demoralized the rest. And, at the federation convention in December 1923, in New York, the new combination of Communists and "Centrists" were at the helm. Hendin and a few others

were left out. Bittelman was elected secretary. The federation then numbered 60 branches with 1,765 members on their books, but the monthly dues payments showed only 1,050 members, a result of the disorderly internal situation.

But the new patch did not hold for long. The basic friction remained. It flared up anew, and more vigorously, though in a different form, echoing that of the parent party.

Three groups were now struggling in the WP, two for control, the third for the right to exist. The first was headed by Ruthenberg, Pepper, Lovestone and Gitlow; the second, by Foster, Cannon and Bittelman; the third, by Lore, Olgin and Juliet Stuart Poyntz. The first two groups, with the exception of Foster and a few of his former IWW lieutenants, were of the early Communists. Only the third group, the "Centrists," had a common political ground. Their main effort was spent in resisting the encroachment of total Communism, though at that period they were already semidigested. Like a man pushed in a certain direction, resisting every step, but taking it nevertheless, this group, calling themselves only pro-Soviet, resisted Communist domination step by step while steadily yielding to it.

The strength of the Lore-Olgin group came primarily from the Jewish and German federations, and partly the Finnish. The importance of the Jewish group lay, above all, in the sizable number of Lefts active in the trade unions and in the Workmen's Circle, where the major contest between Left and Right was beginning to take shape. And, while not all of the Left belonged to the federation, they worked in the Jewish periphery, and the *Freiheit* was an indispensable weapon to them.

As to the German Federation, not strong industrially—in New York it had considerable influence only among the German bakery workers—it was a well-knit body with its own building and a daily paper that paid its way. Lore was its undisputed leader.

STAGNATION AND DEFEATISM PREVAIL

The feuds among the underground and the warfare between the realigned groupings bewildered the membership. It was impossible to find one's way through the maze of charges and countercharges.

Most of the rank and file, therefore, followed either previous links or popular individuals. (In later stages they simply followed Moscow.)

In the shuffle of the factions in the winter of 1922–1923, the two editors of the *Freiheit*, Olgin and Shachno Epstein, resigned. Benjamin Gitlow was sent in by the party as both editor and business manager; Harry Winitzky, Gitlow's Sancho Pancho, became his assistant. But, not knowing Yiddish and ignorant of Jewish problems, Gitlow's function was merely that of a commissar. The editor *de facto* was Melech Epstein.

Neither the *Freiheit* nor the federation made headway. The uneasiness and distrust that permeated the formation of the WP and the hostility that blazed into the open proved to be the greatest drawback for both. Those who dropped out during the internal struggle in 1921 did not manifest any eagerness to join the new body. And those who did were sharply divided.

The *Freiheit* was saddled with two staffs—adherents of the Ruthenberg and Foster factions—working at cross purposes. The struggle chilled the air around the federation and reduced the effectiveness of the *Freiheit* as a tribune of all the dissident elements in Jewish labor.

The financial neglect of the *Freiheit* made its existence highly precarious. The *Freiheit* was started with but a few thousand dollars cash, hardly sufficient for the first couple of weeks; the founders were confident that the very appearance of the paper would evoke the enthusiastic response of numerous followers.⁺²⁶ As there could be no question of establishing a printing shop, the operation of the paper had to be divided. The business office was at 49 Christy Street; the composition was done in the Up-to-Date Printing Company, on Canal Street; the editorial office was a room in the back of the shop. And the press work was sent to the German *Volkszeitung*.

The "enthusiastic response" was drowned in the stormy internal quarrels. Contributions came in a dribble. On the fourth week neither the Up-to-Date, the *Volkszeitung*, nor the editorial staff were paid. The debt to the *Volkszeitung* was not threatening. Lore saw to it that his publishing association had patience with a sister paper. The Up-to-Date, getting more and more involved, had to

accept payment partly in advance checks. And it took the *Freiheit* many years to make good on these checks.

The high expectation of drawing away a great number of readers from the *Forward* and *The Day* was unwarranted. The *Freiheit* circulation, under 8,000 in the beginning, was negligible in comparison with the other Jewish dailies, to say nothing of its rival, the *Forward*. The paper's above-the-average literary content and its preoccupation with the class struggle were two prime reasons for its small audience. Innovators that they were, and eager to show that they could issue a more serious paper, the editors adopted the latest Yiddish orthography, making reading the paper difficult for those used to the old spelling.

Without any commercial advertising to speak of, the regular income of the *Freiheit* could cover only a fraction of the cost of its publication.

"Commissar" Gitlow, in the thick of factional strife, had to find time to run around to the CEC of the party and to the various institutions within the movement to press them for help to pay the most urgent bills. As one can imagine, salaries for the editorial and the office staff were the least urgent. Continued weeks without pay did not contribute to the maintenance of morale. The spirit of the staff was low and defeatist.

Stagnation at the top was seeping through to the lower units, and would have brought complete disintegration were it not for two decisive factors: the youthful radical element in the postwar immigration that attached themselves to the Communist periphery and the enormous opportunities opened to the Left in the largest bodies of Jewish labor. These two factors lifted the Communists and the *Freiheit* out of the morass and placed them in command of great battles involving masses of people.