

CHAPTER FOUR COMMUNISTS IN AUTO, II: THE RISE OF WALTER REUTHER

Throughout the depression, Communists enjoyed considerable prestige among automobile workers. In the early years of the depression, workers turned to a union led by Phil Raymond, who had been the party's candidate for mayor of Detroit. In the federal AFL locals in auto, Communists forged an alliance with other militant workers against conservative AFL leaders to achieve a militant, democratic, industrial union of auto workers. The first vice-president of the UAW was known to be close to the Communist Party (in fact, he was a party member), and open party members were elected to leadership in several locals. When an anti-party auto worker criticized the widespread circulation of the Daily Worker during the General Motors sit-down strike, "a debate was held in the strike committee and the Daily Worker was accepted by a unanimous vote 'as the best paper that comes into the plant.'"¹ No restrictions were placed on the right of Communists to participate fully in the political life of the union. By the 1950's, the situation had changed drastically. Communists were forbidden to hold local or national union office.

¹A. Allen, "Party Building in Auto," Party Organizer, X (June 1937), 11. The situation in steel was similar: "In South Chicago and in Indiana Harbor the Daily Worker has become the semi-official organ of the strike strategy committee. The committee voted to bar the sale of anti-strike papers on the picket line. And the same resolution gave recognition to the Daily Worker. The picket captains were ordered to permit the sale of the Daily Worker on the line. At all the big mass meetings and gatherings, the Daily Worker is sold by the hundreds and thousands, while the capitalist press newboys stand idly by, unable to dispose of their papers." M. Childs, "The Party and the Daily Worker in Strike Struggles," ibid., (August 1937), 23.

Communist leaders were expelled from the union. Those who remained were beaten up inside the plants, sometimes with the approval of the local leadership. The union's national leadership cooperated with the House Committee on Un-American Activities to purge dissident local leaders.

Writing privately more than two decades later, Clancy Sigal, a staff member of the anti-Reuther wing of the union, described the struggle which led to the virtual annihilation of the Communists as "a death-struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of the most advanced, free-wheeling and libertarian section of the American working class." To Sigal, the struggle "was also a lethally bitter fight involving shop-floor democracy and spontaneity, the relationship with the factory owners, with Government and the law, between and among strong personalities embodying not only principle but personal ambitions and emotions, a settlement of past vendettas, and Christ knows what all else."¹ In an autobiographical novel, Sigal argued that the victory of Walter Reuther constituted a defeat not just for Communists but for all rank and file militants:

The people who most hated Hauser [Walter Reuther] were not us [ideological radicals] but the militants and old line shop stewards: theirs was the clearest case. These old ones (in the auto industry you are old at thirty-five) with their memories, looked back to the thirties as the high point in their lives because they had a chance, for the first time, to fight back and give the front office the well-deserved works, and now here was Victor Hauser, flanked by teams of social psychologists and campus economists, proposing replacement of this (granted, frequently anarchic) militance with a morbid

¹Clancy Sigal to the author, April 16, 1969.

philosophy of "sound labor-management relations," "centralization of union authority," "cooperation," "responsibility."¹

What caused the Communist defeat? Historians and participants have offered at least three distinct answers to this question. What could be described as the orthodox, anti-Communist position is perhaps the best known. According to this interpretation, the Reuther victory was the culmination of a "genuine rank and file upsurge" which began with a revolt against the wartime no-strike pledge.² The defeated incumbents, Thomas, Addes, Frankenstein and Richard Leonard, are pictured as apolitical opportunists manipulated by skillful Communists.³ Reuther's concentration on trade union issues rather than political questions has been presented as a major tactical contribution to the anti-Communist struggle in the CIO.⁴ Finally, Reuther has been credited with great restraint for not allowing a

¹Clancy Sigal, Going Away: A Report, A Memoir (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 329. Although a novel, Going Away presents a scrupulously accurate account of the crucial year between Reuther's election as UAW president with a hostile executive board in 1946 and the sweep of the Reuther slate in 1947 (see pages 314-37). While Sigal generally found himself allied with Communists, he maintained a harshly critical stance toward them. His attitudes are shaped by the time-span in which he observed the Communists: he became close to the movement just as it was falling apart. The experiences which shaped his views were not the organizing drives of the 1930's, but the expulsions in the late 1940's and the McCarthy period in the 1950's. Despite this cynicism toward the Communist Party, the novel is a highly personal, often perceptive, analysis of the strengths and weaknesses (in political, personal, and cultural terms) of American Communism.

²Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 458; Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, The UAW and Walter Reuther (New York: Random House, 1949).

³Kampelman, CP vs. CIO, 73-76; Howe and Widick, UAW, 150.

⁴Michael Harrington, "Catholics in the Labor Movement," Labor History, I (Fall 1960), 262-63.

"necessary political campaign against the evils of Stalinist totalitarianism to degenerate into vulgar redbaiting."¹ According to this view, the anti-Communist campaign in the UAW was a wholly admirable, rank and file rebellion which totally avoided "vulgar redbaiting."

A second interpretation can be found in the writings of a number of people once members or friends of the Communist Party who are now critical but not entirely unsympathetic to the party. According to this view, the prosperity of postwar America, the reformist ideas of the American working class, and the "ultra-left" response of the party to the cold war were major causes of the party's defeat. The politics of the men who express this interpretation are as varied as the forms in which the argument is expressed: a novel, an autobiographical memoir, and a recently published doctoral dissertation from Columbia University.² They agree, however, that Communists were out of tune with the American working class in the postwar period, and imply that they should have sought reconciliation with the right-wing of the labor movement.

A third interpretation was suggested in the final paragraph of the preceding chapter. According to this view, Communists were defeated in the postwar period because their position in the labor movement rested on such a weak foundation. That weak foundation was not the result of working class conservatism, but rather of the

¹Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 459.

²The novel is Sigal's Going Away, the memoir is George Charney, A Long Journey (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), and the dissertation is Joseph R. Starobin, American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

party's failure to put itself forward aggressively at a time when its prestige was high. This interpretation emphasized a number of aspects of Communist policy which are usually ignored: the failure to maintain party fractions inside the unions, the abandonment of shop papers published by Communist workers, the failure to maintain a Communist position independent of the position of the union leadership or the caucus in which Communists were included, the refusal to support Mortimer for national office, and the capitulation to red-baiting in the Chrysler strike in 1937. The roots of the party's defeat in 1946-1947, according to this view, lay in the failure to build a strong base in the 1935-1939 period.

These three interpretations are discussed at greater length in chapter eight. They should, however, be kept in mind as we survey the erosion of the party's position in the UAW.

I

Throughout the 1930's Communists earned the respect of workers and intellectuals by their consistent and energetic opposition to international fascism. Thousands of workers, led by Communists, volunteered to fight against fascist insurgents in Spain. In the midst of the campaign against Homer Martin, Communists sought, against the opposition of members of the Socialist Party, an endorsement of collective security against fascist aggression.¹ But when the Soviet

¹Mortimer led the fight for collective security, and the opposition was led by Socialists George Edwards and Victor Reuther. George Addes, Oral History Interview, June 25, 1960, p. 24. After a debate, Addes was appointed to decide the issue. He ruled that the caucus itself should take no position.

Union signed a non-aggression pact with Germany, American Communists went beyond mere support of the Soviet government's decision to an almost pro-German analysis of the war. Essentially, the party viewed the war as an imperialist squabble in which workers had no interest supporting either side. It was, then, the duty of Communists to oppose their own governments and to press for an early end to the war. In practice, however, this position often took a pro-German tone, as in a pamphlet which William Z. Foster published in 1940:

As Stalin recently said, "It was not Germany who attacked France and England, but France and England which attacked Germany, assuming responsibility for the present war." The imperialist Allies assumed further responsibility by rejecting the peace proposals of Germany, the Netherlands, and the Soviet Union.¹

Since Communists viewed the war as imperialist and sought an early peace, they opposed American entry and helped to popularize the slogan, "the Yanks are not coming."

A myth about Communist activity in the years following the Russo-German non-aggression pact has been created by anti-Communist scholars and the opponents of the Communists inside the trade unions. The myth is that "Communist-led trade unions" called a "series of strikes designed to hamper and embarrass America's defense efforts."² The North American strike has been singled out as "one of the most notorious" of the "strikes called against plants engaged in defense production."³ Irving Bernstein summed up the

¹Quoted in Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 389.

²Kampelman, CP vs. CIO, 25-26.

³Galenson, "Communists and Union Democracy," 233.

standard view of the strike when he wrote that at North American "a Communist leadership headed by Wyndham Mortimer was exploiting local grievances to slow the defense effort in the period prior to Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union."¹

There is, however, no evidence that Communists made any attempt to disrupt national defense and no sign of any series of Communist-led strikes in defense industries. The Bureau of Labor Statistics listed 352 strikes which affected defense production in the period between the summer of 1940 and the attack on Pearl Harbor. Slightly more than half of those strikes were said to be "of primary defense importance."² Communists have been charged with leading four of those 159 important strikes³—a paltry effort if Communists were trying to disrupt national defense. Moreover, if Communists had been trying to disrupt national defense, they would have attempted to foment strikes in the electrical industry, where eighty per cent of the workers were working on defense contracts and where the leadership of the United Electrical Workers (UE) was influenced by Communists.⁴ Yet in the period between January and June of 1941, there

¹Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 765. For similar accounts, see, in addition to the works cited on the preceding page, Galenson, CIO Challenge, 185-88; Howe and Widick, UAW, 79; Arthur P. Allen and Betty V. H. Schneider, Industrial Relations in the California Aircraft Industry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 27-28.

²U. S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Strikes in 1941 and Strikes Affecting Defense Production," Bulletin No. 711 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 27-28.

³Kampelman, CP vs. CIO, 25-26.

⁴A number of UE district presidents and local leaders were open party members. See chapter six for a full discussion of the UE.

were no strikes or walkouts and not a single man-hour lost in labor disputes involving UE.¹ Finally, Communists—particularly Mortimer—sought to postpone the walkout at North American; in no sense can it be said that Communists precipitated or provoked it. The actual causes of the strike were the intensive desire of workers to raise North American's wage rates up to the level which prevailed in the automobile industry, and the inept handling of the strike by the National Defense Mediation Board.²

In their campaign against the International Association of Machinists for union authorization, UAW organizers continually stressed the ability of the UAW to win major wage increases for North American workers.³ After winning a narrow victory, defeating the IAM by a vote of 3,043 to 2,973,⁴ the UAW was certified and a nine-man negotiating committee was elected by the local membership. After four weeks of negotiations, the company "still stuck to its fifty cents an hour minimum."⁵ On the advice of Frankenstein, the UAW

¹ Matles and Higgins, Them And Us, 207.

² For a fuller discussion of the strike, see James R. Prickett, "Fifty Cents An Hour or a Communist Conspiracy: New Perspectives on the 1941 North American Strike," Pacific Historical Review (in press).

³ Four of the five issues of the Aircraft Organizer published during the campaigning which have survived in the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University had banner headlines emphasizing wage increases. Aircraft Organizer, February 12, 14, 19, March 10, 1941.

⁴ Decisions and Orders of the National Labor Relations Board, Vol. XXX, 1196.

⁵ Allen and Schneider, Industrial Relations in California Aircraft, 27.

vice-president in charge of the aircraft organizing campaign, the negotiating committee asked for and received membership authority to call a strike if the company did not agree to the wage demands of "seventy-five and ten"—a general ten cent increase and a seventy-five cent hourly minimum.¹ The local announced its intention to walk off the job on May 28 unless agreement was reached.

At this point, the National Defense Mediation Board stepped into the picture. The board asked the union to appear in Washington on May 27, the day before the strike. When the three members of the negotiating committee selected to attend the hearing arrived in Washington, no one seemed to know anything about the case. There were, a government mediator recalled, "no public members around" to serve on a panel.² As local president Elmer Freitag rather bitterly stated, "we found out later that one of the board members was fishing in the state, [and] another one could not be contacted." In any case, the inability of the Board to even convene a panel on the date it had selected got negotiations off to a poor start.

After the committee members had waited all morning and much of the afternoon, "a man appeared for the board by the name of Judge Stacy," who said that "since they could not get the board together he

¹New York Times, May 24, 1941; Dear Brother: A Letter to You From a North American Aircraft Worker (Los Angeles: Local 683 UAW-CIO, 1941), 4. Dear Brother is a pamphlet which the strike leaders wrote after the strike was broken. It is particularly useful for its statement of the local's position and for the day to day chronology of events for the sixteen days between May 27 and June 11, the day union leaders called off the strike.

²The Reminiscences of Cyrus Ching (Columbia University, 1959), 429-30.

would act for it." Although the committee members were angered by what they viewed as a casual approach to their strike deadline, they entered into serious negotiations with Stacy and Cyrus Ching on a possible postponement of the strike. Reluctantly, negotiators agreed to a proposal by the mediators which stated that any settlement would be retroactive to May 1 provided the union refrained from strike action for at least three days after the board concluded hearings and issued recommendations. This was not a no-strike pledge; it was merely an agreement that if the union did not strike it would be guaranteed a settlement retroactive to the first of May. Freitag recalled, "we asked Judge Stacy three consecutive times . . . what would happen if we [went on] strike," and Stacy replied that the agreement would "become null and void."¹

When the agreement was read to the remaining committee members in California, sentiment was strongly against accepting it. In a memorandum, John H. Ohly of the War Department noted that "the leaders here in Washington after several touch-and-go sessions are finally apparently convinced that the NDMB [National Defense Mediation Board] will be fair," but "the men are getting out of hand and . . . it looks as though they may strike anyway." The workers in California, Ohly continued, "think their leaders have sold them down

¹Elmer Freitag, Oral History Interview, ALHUA, June 22, 1960, pp. 6-7. The complete text of the agreement is available in U. S., Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Report on the Work of the National Defense Mediation Board, March 19, 1941-January 12, 1942," Bulletin No. 714 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 156. The text supports Freitag's interpretation rather than the interpretation advanced by Galenson, Kampelman, and Bernstein.

the river."¹ Only a forty-five minute telephone call from Frankenstein promising a favorable board decision persuaded the reluctant committee to postpone the strike deadline. As Frankenstein later recalled the conversation, he told committee members that "they had nothing to worry about, that we were going to get them 75 and 10."² Committee members agreed to a one week postponement.

At the precise moment when Frankenstein was talking to the North American negotiating committee,³ President Franklin Roosevelt was proclaiming a state of "unlimited national emergency" over a nationwide radio hookup. Roosevelt announced that "a succession of events" had proven that the Axis powers were seeking "worldwide domination" and that "indifference on the part of the United States to the increasing menace would be perilous." The President called on "our loyal workmen as well as employers to merge their lesser differences in the larger effort to insure the survival of the only kind of government which recognizes the rights of labor and of capital."⁴ The New York Times interpreted the speech accompanying the

¹This memorandum is part of a rich collection which Ohly compiled while serving on the staff of Under Secretary of War Robert Patterson and later with the headquarters of the Army Service Forces. The collection is found in entry #177, Record Group 160, National Archives. Hereafter it will be cited as Army File, NAA [North American Aviation] strike.

²International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, Proceedings of the Sixth Convention (Buffalo, 1941), 431.

³Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin No. 714, 156.

⁴"Unlimited National Emergency," Federal Register, VI, No. 105, May 29, 1941, p. 2617.

proclamation as a warning to "management and labor that the government is prepared to use all of its power to assure the production of armaments."¹ The President's proclamation seemed to weaken the union's position by limiting the right to strike. Shortly after the speech, on May 29, the House Committee on Un-American Activities heard testimony "that the members of our negotiating committee and our regional director were Communists." Freitag and secretary-treasurer Walter Wiitanen attended the hearings and asked to testify. They were ejected from the hearing. The scheduling of the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings just prior to those of the mediation board prompted local leaders to suspect "a conspiracy between the [Un-American Activities] Committee and the Mediation Board . . . to discredit us before we begin hearings of our case."²

Although Freitag and Wiitanen were annoyed by the board's delays and the congressional committee's attacks, they still tried to cooperate in averting the strike. At Frankenstein's suggestion, they flew back to California to urge North American workers to rescind the strike deadline. There was considerable opposition to this second postponement of the strike deadline, and no one argued that they should refrain from striking until after the mediation board had concluded hearings. Negotiators admitted that they would have been in a stronger position had they gone out on strike on the original deadline, before the Presidential proclamation, but they argued that it

¹New York Times, May 28, 1941.

²Dear Brother, 5; interview with Elmer Freitag, May, 1971.

would be foolish to boycott the mediation board now that it was finally ready to hear the case. The negotiators promised to call a strike if no progress was made in Washington, and the workers voted to give the committee the right to call a strike "when and if the committee considered such action necessary."¹

Negotiations before the board did little to dispel the increasing anger and suspicion of the negotiating committee. On June 2, the committee appeared before the board and presented its case. The following day, company negotiators did not show up. When company officials appeared on June 4, they refused to consider any increase in the hourly minimum wage. According to the local, Dr. Clarence Dykstra, chairman of the board, stated to the negotiators, "Gentlemen, you had better settle your differences with the company, by negotiations, because if collective bargaining collapses and this Board is forced to make public its recommendation, neither the Union nor the Company will like that recommendation." The negotiators interpreted Dykstra's statement as meaning that the board was "categorically committed . . . to the recommendation of a wage scale less than 75 and 10."²

That evening the negotiators in Washington reported the day's events to the majority of the negotiating committee in California by telephone. Frankenstein, whose forty-five minute telephone call had convinced the committee to agree to the first postponement, was in

¹Negotiating Committee, NAA Unit, Local 683 to Executive Board, UAWA-CIO, July 7, 1941, Addes Papers.

²Ibid.; Dear Brother, 6.

Detroit, working with his home local on the Chrysler negotiations. His presence would certainly have made the report more optimistic. Instead; the committee heard from discouraged and demoralized negotiators. After the telephone call, the six members of the negotiating committee in California unanimously voted to strike the next morning. Massive picket lines kept the plant closed June 5 and 6.

After discussing the strike with Roosevelt, who indicated that he would send troops to force workers back to work, CIO president Philip Murray called Frankenstein and told him "to get these workers back to work and not permit . . . the precedent being established of troops used against labor."¹ Frankenstein met with the negotiating committee and the UAW international representatives on Saturday morning, June 7. After demanding that strike leaders call off the strike, he turned to Mortimer, expecting Mortimer to echo his pleas.² But Mortimer "took the position that the strike should be authorized" and "said that if the strike was authorized the Army would not come in."³ Frankenstein fired him on the spot. The other international representatives were polled and all agreed with Mortimer. They too were fired.⁴

Although the strikers were having a general meeting Sunday afternoon, Frankenstein decided to make his back-to-work appeal in a

¹International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, Proceedings of the Sixth Convention (Buffalo, 1941), 435. The quotation is from Frankenstein's speech during debate on the strike.

²Frankenstein, ibid., 433.

³Mortimer, ibid., 423.

⁴Frankenstein, ibid., 433.

nationally broadcast radio speech Saturday evening. He sharply criticized "the irresponsible, inexperienced, and impulsive action of local leaders in violation of their own agreement" and pointed to "the infamous agitation and vicious underhanded maneuvering of the Communist Party" as a cause of the strike.¹ By the time of the mass meeting on Sunday afternoon, most of the North American workers had either heard Frankenstein's speech over the radio or read about it in the morning newspaper. Angered by the speech, strikers greeted Frankenstein with unremitting hostility. After he completed his speech, which was marked by loud booing, the several thousand workers adopted a resolution expressing full confidence in the negotiating committee and condemning the "union-busting" tactics of Frankenstein. The resolution was adopted unanimously.²

The support given to the negotiating committee and, conversely, the failure of Frankenstein to gain even minority support from the strikers provide strong evidence of the widespread rank and file support for the strike. The inability of the AFL, which urged its supporters to break the strike, the national CIO, and President Roosevelt to generate any back to work sentiment is particularly surprising when the rather weak position of the UAW local is considered. It had defeated the IAM by only 70 votes in the collective bargaining election, and the IAM maintained a vocal and hostile attitude toward the local generally and the strike particularly. Most of the workers had either not voted or voted for the AFL. These workers would

¹Los Angeles Times, June 8, 1941.

²Ibid., June 9, 1941.

appear to be a natural base for a back to work movement, but there is no evidence of any strikers supporting Frankenstein or any group of workers publicly calling for a return to work.

Over the weekend, a Presidential executive order was prepared which directed "that the Secretary of War immediately take possession of and operate the said plant of North American Aviation," and, further, that the Secretary of War "take such measures as may be necessary to protect workers returning to the plant."¹ Federal troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Branshaw prepared to move into the North American plant. Sunday evening, local and company officials indicated that they would "like to try their own plan" before troops were used. A company vice-president was convinced that "80% of the men will go back to work," and the Sheriff and Chief of Police felt sure that they could "cope with the situation," and were, in fact, "very confident and anxious to get into action."² Monday morning, Branshaw reported that a massive picket line has successfully intimidated workers from entering the plant. Branshaw thought that "the men would go in if the Army had control, but under existing circumstances, they won't go in."³

Los Angeles police were instructed to break up the picket lines. They moved into the line, throwing tear gas bombs at the strikers. Strikers threw the bombs back, and the police began to give ground.

¹"Executive Order," Federal Register, Vol. VI., No. 112, June 10, 1941, p. 2777.

²Telephone Log, June 8, 1941, 11:35 P. M., Army File, NAA Strike.

³Ibid., June 9, 1941, 10:35 A. M.

When Branshaw saw the police routed, he ordered troops into action. Twenty-five hundred soldiers marched toward the plant with fixed bayonets. Two strikers were stabbed when they stood their ground.¹ The Army succeeded where others had failed. Branshaw's first step was "to clear the highways" of all strikers, supporters, and observers.² By the early afternoon, all gates were open and some employees had returned to work.³ Later that afternoon, Branshaw jubilantly informed Washington that the "nearest picket line is half a mile down the road and we are getting ready to push them still further."⁴ The Los Angeles Times noted happily, "it took no more than a single prick of a bayonet to deflate the bubble of defiance" and teach "a wholesome lesson to men who apparently could learn no other way."⁵ A large number of workers on the night shift, possibly convinced that the strike had been broken, returned to work.

The local met at five o'clock in the morning to assess the situation. Fortunately, for historians (if not for the workers), Army intelligence observed the meeting. Had Communists been interested in disrupting national defense, their strategy at this meeting would

¹Los Angeles Times, June 10, 1941.

²Telephone Log, June 9, 1941, 12:20 (Noon), Army file, NAA strike.

³Ibid., 1:46 P.M.

⁴Ibid., 3:25 P.M. For a discussion of the Army's tactics, see Wyndham Mortimer to Philip Murray, June 18, 1941, reprinted in Mortimer, Organize, 208-14. The letter is an excellent presentation of the strike issues as Mortimer saw them.

⁵Los Angeles Times, June 10, 1941.

have been to urge continuing the strike. There was, in fact, considerable support for militant action at the meeting. Army intelligence reported that the "young women present were insistent that the crowd not yield [and] that no concession from the present demands be made." These women "seemed to encourage continuation of the strike and a formative march on the plant." At the meeting, "occasional reference [was] made to 'crash' into the factory and to the use of other violence." Mortimer, however, the sole known Communist at the meeting, called for "an immediate return to work." His "general attitude seemed to be [that] more could be gained by peaceful and patient attitudes rather than by stubborn and resisting ones." Although obviously bitter about the Army's smashing of the picket lines, Mortimer "seemed to absolve troops from responsibility for interfering with demands." Partly as a result of Mortimer's calm speech, strikers agreed to return to work.¹

In an effort to maintain some morale, strikers decided to return to work together, marching four abreast to the plant. Government officials vetoed the idea, and the march was broken up about a mile from the plant. The men were sent to different gates and told to apply for work individually.² The Army favored widespread firings. Branshaw wanted to "take every man back on his own individual merits," adding, "I do not propose to get back here a barrel of rotten apples—lots of them we do not want." He directed that the entire

¹"CIO Meeting in Centinella Park, Inglewood, California," Army file, NAA Strike.

²Telephone Log, June 10, 1941, 3:50, 4:05, 4:07 P. M.

elected negotiating committee be fired, arguing that they "have been lawfully suspended as officials of their local union" and that their employment "would be inimical to the continued peaceful operation of the plant."¹ Mortimer later wrote that "over twenty-five union officers, chief stewards, and stewards were fired, and as they were fired they were immediately reclassified by their draft boards and made eligible for induction into the Army."² Frankenstein told the press that the "action of the Army under Col. Branshaw has been completely fair."³

With the elected leaders of the local barred from the plant by the Army and from office by the UAW, Frankenstein and Walter Smethurst, a CIO official, ran the local in the face of bitter and widespread rank and file opposition. An Army officer reported that "the old crowd is still in control" of the local and "the new crowd does not even dare to call a meeting and go before the workers." Another government observer noted that "the official grievance committee and the stewards, as well as a large part of the membership, were still recognizing the original officers and committee as leaders of their union." Smethurst "nearly got thrown out" of a stewards meeting.⁴ Frankenstein admitted during subsequent negotiations before the

¹Ibid., 3:45 P. M.; Branshaw memorandum, June 13, 1941, Addes Papers.

²Mortimer, Organize, 185.

³Los Angeles Times, June 14, 1941.

⁴Memorandum, Lt. Col. Edward Greenbaum, June 21, 1941, Eric Nicol, "Report on Industrial Relations North American Aviation During Operation by United States Government," Army file, NAA Strike.

National Defense Mediation Board that the UAW leadership's opposition to the strike "drove all of the militants who make an organization in its original stages, at least, away from sympathy towards our organization."¹ Frankenstein convinced the board: a provision was included in the final contract providing that no worker who had joined the UAW prior to the strike would be allowed to leave the union. The rationale for the clause was openly stated: rank and file workers were so bitter toward the leaders who had helped destroy their strike that it was "doubtful whether the national leadership could restore" the pre-strike strength of the local "without the assistance of the maintenance of membership clause."² On July 1, 1941, North American workers were gathered together, in front of foremen and supervisors, on company time and property, and the agreement was read to them. It was accepted without debate or discussion.³

II

Less than two weeks after American troops marched into Inglewood, German troops invaded the Soviet Union. Communists believed that the invasion transformed the war against Germany "from an unjust imperialist war to a just peoples' war" which American

¹ Transcript of Proceedings, National Defense Mediation Board, North American Aviation, Inc., June 18, 19, 20, 1941, pp. 64, 75, War Labor Board records, National Archives.

² B. L. S., Bulletin No. 714, 27.

³ Frankenstein, Sixth Convention Proceedings, 437-38; Mortimer, ibid., 426.

workers should support.¹ Those in or close to the party shifted their position on the war quickly. On June 21, 1941, the day prior to the German invasion, a Communist-influenced UAW local submitted a resolution to the Wayne County CIO Council calling for the CIO "to convene an anti-war congress such as proposed by the National Maritime Union, drawing together all the forces and allies of labor in a concerted struggle to keep America out of the war." On June 23, the day after the invasion, the same local submitted a second resolution noting the "unprovoked and criminal attack on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the only Socialist nation in the world," and arguing that "the real American interest is plainly to give full support to all peoples fighting Hitlerism, to help them deliver a crushing blow to German fascism."² Tracy Doll, anti-Communist president of the Wayne County CIO Council, had the secretary read both resolutions to the Council and innocently asked the president of the local to explain which resolution he wished the body to consider. Doll's intent, as he recalled later, was to embarrass the Communists and their supporters.³

Communists and anti-Communists approached the union conventions in 1941 with totally different objectives. Communists sought the broadest possible anti-fascist coalition. They tried to rebuild

¹William Z. Foster, "Questions and Answers," Daily Worker, November 20, 1941.

²The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU) printed the full text of both resolutions with an introduction. See "The Line Has Changed Again," ACTU Papers, ALHUA.

³Tracy Doll, Oral History Interview, April 21, 1961, pp. 39-40, ALHUA.

their ties with that section of the labor movement which did not oppose their participation in the movement. This placed them in an alliance with the people who had broken the North American strike. Anti-Communists, on the other hand, sought to make political capital out of the quick shift of the party and the divisions which the party's earlier position had created between its supporters and the leadership of the CIO. In the fall of 1941, then, anti-Communists were on the attack, while Communists and their supporters were on the defensive.

One aspect of the anti-Communist offensive at the 1941 UAW convention was Reuther's attempt to deny seating to the Allis-Chalmers delegation led by local president Harold Christoffel. The Reuther group argued that Christoffel's slate had been illegally elected, and Thomas supported Reuther. The convention ordered a new election, but the local leadership and the election committee could not agree on election procedures. As a result, the election committee recommended to the convention that the delegation not be seated. In what Christoffel later described as "the most dramatic incident of the entire convention," he presented "mimeographed stencils from the [UAW] regional office waste basket which proved that the so-called opposition was simply a creature of the regional office mimeograph machine."¹ The convention rejected the report, enlarged the committee, and ordered it to conduct a new election in Milwaukee. The original delegates won re-election and were seated without any

¹Harold Christoffel to Tom Christoffel, August 10, 1969. I am indebted to Tom Christoffel for a copy of the portion of the letter which dealt with the UAW.

objection.¹

The issue of the North American strike was more explosive. The international representatives fired by Frankenstein wrote to UAW headquarters protesting that their dismissals were "unjustified and unwarranted" and requesting a hearing before the executive board.² None appeared at the next meeting, however, and Frankenstein stated that they had waived their right to appeal. At the board meeting, Richard Leonard, an adherent of the Reuther caucus, moved, and Reuther seconded, a motion endorsing Frankenstein's actions at North American. The motion passed unanimously.³ At a later board meeting, a trial committee was appointed to try Lew Michener, the Southern California regional director for the UAW who had supported the strike, but on a motion by Frankenstein it was decided that "the entire subject matter of the North American situation be referred to the convention." The motion passed with Michener the only dissenting vote.⁴

The majority report of the grievance committee noted that "the interference of the Communists into the strike gave basis to the

¹International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, Proceedings of the Sixth Convention (Buffalo, 1941), 116-17, 328-32, 573-74.

²John M. Orr to George Addes, June 19, 1941; Arthur Kearns to George Addes, June 19, 1941; Stanford Douglas to George Addes, June 19, 1941; Wyndham Mortimer to George Addes, June 19, 1941; Johnson Orr to George Addes, June 19, 1941, Addes Papers.

³Minutes of the meeting of the International Executive Board, International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, July 9-14, 1941. Hereafter these will be cited as GEB Minutes.

⁴Ibid. , July 26, 1941.

charge of Frankenstein that the wildcat strike was engineered by Communists . . . interested in demonstrating their effectiveness in obstructing national defense." It specifically approved the breaking of the strike and the firing of the international representatives, and recommended that the region be placed under the control of the national office. A minority report made the additional demand that Michener be suspended from holding any union office.¹ The UAW officers, having broken the strike, fired the international representatives, and taken over the local, saw no need for further repression. They attacked Communists and deplored the strike while opposing any additional penalties other than placing the region under the control of the national office.² Thomas told delegates that the committee's recommendation would "clean up the situation in California" and eliminate the "abnormal influence" of the Communist Party.³

For the most part, the debate, although at times virulent, was marked by a clear consensus: neither side defended Communists and both advocated penalties against the regional organization. Only Mortimer challenged the consensus. He argued that the strike should have been authorized, bitterly criticized Frankenstein, and kept returning to North American's minimum wage of fifty cents an hour.⁴

¹Sixth UAW Proceedings, 245-46, 249-50, 254.

²This was not a serious penalty, since the regional and national leaders were now allied against the Reuther caucus.

³Sixth UAW Proceedings, 255. See also Frankenstein, ibid., 250.

⁴Ibid., 423-28.

A conservative unionist who respected Mortimer's organizing ability complained that Mortimer was being punished unjustly while Michener was exonerated.¹ It is not hard to see why: after the strike, Michener worked closely with the administration. In his speech, he made no attempt to defend the strike because that would involve attacking the leadership. Instead, he went after Sidney Hillman "and his red-headed stooge in this convention, Walter Reuther," who were, Michener claimed, the real villains of the piece.² A super-minority report, barring Michener only from the executive board, passed.³ Delegates, then, voted for the mildest of the penalties recommended to them.

Mortimer and Michener were both members of the Communist Party. How, then, can one explain the different positions they took on the North American strike? One explanation would focus on the characters of Michener and Mortimer. Mortimer, it might be pointed out, remained a partisan of the left throughout the cold war despite personal hardships, while Michener was a government witness against Harry Bridges. Perhaps Michener was a careerist and an opportunist from the beginning. Ultimately, however, such an explanation is unsatisfactory, since it fails to explain why Mortimer was the only person who vehemently attacked the breaking of the strike. It seems clear that the party decided to ally with the people who had broken the

¹Sixth UAW Proceedings, 256.

²Ibid., 441.

³Ibid., 457.

strike, and that this alliance precluded a defense of either the strike or the party's role in supporting it. When Mortimer defended the strike, he must have known that he was alone and that he was placing his career in the UAW in jeopardy. Despite rank and file pressure, Mortimer, who two years earlier had an excellent chance to become president of the UAW, never worked for the UAW again.

The most important part of Reuther's anti-Communist offensive was a constitutional amendment barring Communists from national or local union office. A group of anti-Reuther unionists sought to bar both Socialists and Communists.¹ John Anderson, one of the best known members of the Communist Party in the UAW, attacked the

¹This has given rise to another anti-Communist myth. In the words of the authors who propagated the myth: "The Stalinists tried to counter Reuther's resolution by introducing a motion to bar Socialists as well as Communists from UAW office, but this silly maneuver failed. Actually, their motion was a stupid blunder. . . . By countering the possible anti-democratic implications of Reuther's proposal with an even less democratic motion, they simply proved that Reuther's characterization of them had been accurate." Howe and Widick, UAW, 80.

However, those who introduced the anti-Socialist amendment were clearly not Communists. James Lindahl, co-author of the proposal, stated, "We hold no brief for the Communist Party. In this we take our position from the CIO." Tracy Doll, the man who had tried to embarrass the Communists for their shift on the Second World War at the Wayne County CIO Council meeting, was the other co-author. He placed part of the blame for "a million dead in Russia" on the "peace mobilization parties" of American Communists and advised Socialists to "come out [of the Socialist Party] and go along with the CIO." In his speech in favor of the amendment, George Addes urged elimination "from this union once and for all of any minority party." The fourth speaker supporting the substitute asserted that "the man that stands up to protect a minority party at any time insults the flag that is over his head." The fifth and final speaker in favor of the proposal had but one complaint: draft dodgers should be added to the list. Sixth UAW Proceedings, 692, 700, 703-704, 706.

The passage reveals two of Howe and Widick's tactics: minimizing Reuther's anti-democratic behavior ("possible anti-democratic implications") and fabricating anti-democratic Communist actions.

principle of political exclusion behind both proposals. Since Communists had worked with all elements of the union, Anderson argued, they should have the same rights as anyone else.¹ Thomas and Frankenstein supported Reuther's proposal, while Addes backed the anti-Socialist, anti-Communist substitute. Although the leadership had come to power largely as a result of the party's leadership of the struggle against Homer Martin, not one of the national officers was willing to defend equal rights for Communist Party members. A modified version of Reuther's amendment passed.²

Addes later explained the controversies over North American and Allis Chalmers by arguing that Reuther was interesting in electing executive board members from California and Wisconsin, but "with the North American and AC [Allis-Chalmers] delegates seated, his chances to elect a board member from each district . . . were rather remote." Reuther's strategy, according to Addes, was to deny voting rights to those two locals, by having Allis-Chalmers unseated, and placing North American under an administrator.³ This analysis also

¹Sixth UAW Proceedings, 702-703. This John Anderson should not be confused with the John W. Anderson mentioned in the preceding chapter in connection with the 1933 Briggs strike and the Socialist Workers Party. This John Anderson "had run on the Communist ticket for governor of Michigan in 1932," according to Carl Haessler, the director of Federated Press and a close observer of the UAW. An opponent of Anderson's stated, "John Anderson, I recall, on many occasions got up and he took a card from his billfold and waved it in front of the delegates and said, 'Here is my card of party membership.'" Carl Haessler, Oral History Interview, November 27, 1959, October 24, 1960, p. 86; Joseph Piconke, Oral History Interview, April 13, 1960, p. 26, ALHUA.

²Sixth UAW Proceedings, 688, 691-92, 696, 724.

³Addes, Oral History Interview, 31-32.

suggests one reason why Addes opposed the moves: he did not want to see Reuther elect two more board members. There was, then, an alliance between the union leadership and the Communists in which Communists played a distinctly subordinant role.

Indeed, the most striking fact about the 1941 convention was the clear, anti-Communist positions, not just of Reuther, but of the entire UAW leadership. Thomas had agreed with Reuther on nearly every issue. He had voted to bar Communists from union office and to deny seating to the Allis-Chalmers delegation, and only differed with Reuther on the sanctions to be applied against the North American local. Addes had opposed the North American strike and backed the proposal denuing union office to both Communists and Socialists. The differences between Addes and Reuther, not to mention the almost imperceptible disagreements between Thomas and Reuther, were small compared to the conflict one might have expected between the Communists and the UAW administration. After all, a strike backed by Communists had been crushed by the UAW leadership, organizers close to the party had been fired, and the party's most popular mass leader ejected from the international staff. Moreover, most of the officers supported a resolution designed to inhibit severely the rights of Communist auto workers to participate in the UAW. By the time of the convention, however, Communists were no longer willing to attack the administration because the Soviet Union was facing an invasion of German soldiers and unity in the anti-fascist struggle was the prime concern.

III

As Communists discarded their militancy during the war years, the Reuther group, as well as the UAW leadership, shelved its intense anti-Communism. Communists, the Reuther group, and the union leadership all supported the wartime no-strike pledge and the suspension of overtime pay for the duration of the war.¹ Despite this fundamental agreement, factional fighting was still intense. The UAW convention of 1943 was one of the most bitterly contested in the UAW's turbulent history.

A major issue was a proposal to integrate the executive board. Nat Ganley, the sole Communist on the constitution committee, proposed a constitutional amendment calling for the election of a Negro representative on the executive board to be elected by the convention at large. As originally stated, the proposal won little support, so Ganley made a series of compromises to win majority support from his colleagues on the committee. To win the backing of Addes' supporters, Ganley labelled the post "director of minorities" and left the race unspecified. In his speeches, however, Ganley sought to limit the force of this concession by stating that the purpose of the proposal was to grant Negro representation and implying that the new post would be filled by a black man. To win over a Reuther supporter, Ganley limited the voting power of the new position.² By making these

¹Howe and Widick, UAW, 118-19.

²It was generally assumed that the director of minorities would come from the Addes camp, so Ganley sought to make his impact on the factional struggle insignificant by giving him only one vote.

concessions, Ganley was able to present his proposal as the majority report of the constitution committee.¹ The minority of the constitution committee also called for a director of minorities, but in the minority report the director would be appointed by the president instead of being elected by the convention and would not have a seat on the executive board.² In his speech, Victor Reuther ignored the specific differences in the two proposals, and attacked the idea of black representation: "if there is a special post for the Negroes, then in all justice there should be a post at large for the Catholics, the women, the Jews, the Poles, and all the rest."³ The proposal was defeated.

The major conflict came over an issue which appeared to have been resolved. At an executive board meeting prior to the convention, Reuther had made the following motion:

The International Union reaffirms its traditional opposition to incentive payment plans. In plants where incentive plans have or have not been in existence and the membership of such plants are desirous of having incentive plans, such plans must be approved by the International Union before such plans may become effective.

The motion passed and a committee consisting of Delbert McWilliams, James Wishart, Walter Reuther, Melvin Bishop, and Charles Kerrigan was appointed to bring to the board a set of rules on incentive pay systems.⁴ These rules were apparently never presented to the board,

¹ Interview with Nat Ganley, January 2, 1969.

² International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, Proceedings of the Eighth Convention (Buffalo, 1943), 370-71.

³ Quoted in Howe and Widick, UAW, 224.

⁴ GEB Minutes, March 1-10, 1943, p. 89, R. J. Thomas Papers, ALHUA.

and the issue was tabled at a later meeting.¹ At the convention, a resolution similar to Reuther's earlier motion was presented. Reuther proposed a substitute demanding that no incentive plans be approved.² The UAW leadership appeared to be surprised by the move, and the major argument it advanced against Reuther's substitute was that it violated the right of individual locals to decide whether they wanted piecework systems.³ After some debate, the UAW administration amended its proposal by adding a paragraph saying that national officers and international representatives "shall not be permitted to advocate, or promote, the extension of incentive pay plans."⁴ This amendment failed to mollify the delegates. Reuther's substitute passed.

In the debate, and within the UAW and the labor movement generally, Communists emerged as the strongest supporters of incentive pay. As one local president often identified with Communists argued:

Every worker ought to ask two questions of the brothers who are in opposition to an incentive system:

1. Are these brothers interested in increasing production for victory?
2. And if they are, then why are they opposed to workers benefiting from the increased production?⁵

But the second question assumed what needed to be proven: that

¹GEB Minutes, June 7-11, 1943, p. 76.

²Eighth UAW Proceedings, 170-71.

³Ibid., 174, 176, 186, 193, 199, 200, 206, 217, 225.

⁴Ibid., 223, 230.

⁵C. G. "Pop" Edelin, "Production With Incentive Pay," (Detroit:

workers did indeed benefit from an incentive plan. The experience of the labor movement suggested the reverse. Incentive systems pit workers against one another, and the rates are usually changed as the speed of the line increases. A piecework system was associated with speed-up in the minds of most workers, and the UAW had been organized in opposition to speed-up. Ganley later recalled that it was with "the fight against incentive pay, piecework, and so on" which gave Reuther his first large rank and file following.¹

In July, 1944, a group of local leaders formed a "rank and file caucus" to push for revocation of the no-strike pledge.² At the UAW convention of 1944, three resolutions on the pledge were submitted to the convention. One sponsored by the Communists and the union leadership called for reaffirmation of the pledge, a second sponsored by the rank and file caucus advocated outright revocation, and a third sponsored by Reuther urged revocation only in those plants not engaged in defense production. None of the resolutions obtained a majority vote, so the resolutions committee put two questions before the convention: should the pledge be reaffirmed, and should there be a membership referendum on the pledge? Reuther and the union administration backed both the pledge and the referendum, while

Local 51, n. d.), 2.

¹Nat Ganley, Oral History Interview, April 16, 1960, p. 26, ALHUA. For Ganley's views at the time, see his letter in the Detroit News, June 3, Ganley Papers.

²Howe and Widick, UAW, 121-23. For more on the internal politics of labor and the no-strike pledge, see Nelson Lichtenstein, "Industrial Unionism Under the No-Strike Pledge: A Study of the CIO During the Second World War," (Unpublished PhD dissertation,

Communists favored a referendum only if it could be postponed until after the presidential election of 1944. The pledge was reaffirmed, and a referendum was authorized.¹

Communists vigorously supported the no-strike pledge in the referendum. In an article from the Daily Worker, which Communists reprinted as a leaflet, Roy Hudson argued that "all but the blind should now be able to see that the UAW referendum on the no-strike pledge . . . has been instigated as part of a conspiracy against the war effort, President Roosevelt, and labor."² Another leaflet reprinted from the party's press argued that "advocates of strike threats or strike actions in America in 1945 are SCABS in the war against Hitlerism, they are SCABS against our Armed Forces, they are SCABS against the labor movement."³ The UAW Committee to Uphold the No-Strike Pledge was chaired by W. G. Grant, who had worked closely with the party in the campaign to organize Ford, and included party activist John Anderson.⁴

University of California at Berkeley, 1974).

¹International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, Proceedings of the Ninth Convention (Grand Rapids, 1944), 147-51, 153-54, 193, 194, 197, 207, 214, 247.

²Hudson's article, "The Plot Against the No-Strike Pledge," appeared in the Daily Worker on December 24, 1944; a copy of the leaflet is in the Ganley Papers.

³Earl Browder, "High Stakes in the UAW Referendum," Daily Worker, January 7, 1945, Ganley Papers. Emphasis in original.

⁴A list of committee members can be found in "Straight Talk About the No-Strike Pledge," an undated leaflet in the Ganley Papers. On Grant, see James Couser, Oral History Interview, November 19, 1960, pp. 9-10, ALHUA.

In December, 1944, the United Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Employees Union called a strike against the Montgomery Ward corporation after the company's right-wing president Sewell Avery refused to abide by a decision of the War Labor Board. The strike revealed the intensity of the party's commitment to the no-strike pledge. There was little doubt that the strike had been forced on the union by the intransigence of Avery. Yet Communists within the union, particularly in District 65, a stronghold of the left-wing in New York,¹ opposed the strike, and Montgomery Ward warehousemen belonging to the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union continued to work during the strike. Support for the strike was debated throughout the CIO. The chairman of the Michigan CIO Council stated that he was "in complete sympathy" with the strike. He argued that the "failure of the WLB [War Labor Board] and of President Roosevelt and his appointees to enforce the WLB directive has precipitated this whole affair."² In a direct reply, Ganley argued that the no-strike pledge had to be maintained. "We can win these demands through our alliance with Roosevelt and the nation," Ganley insisted, "not by strikes."³

The differences between Communists and other groupings within

¹A perceptive discussion of the history of this union is Walter Linder, "District 65, RWDSU, AFL-CIO," Progressive Labor, V (March-April 1966), 11-20.

²John Gibson, "My Position on Avery," Michigan CIO News, December 29, 1944, Ganley Papers.

³Nat Ganley, "The Ward Strike vs. the UAW Pledge," The CIO Councilor (published by the Wayne County Industrial Union Council), January 6, 1945.

the UAW should not be exaggerated. With the exception of the rank and file caucus, all factions agreed that union demands should be subordinated to the war effort. The agreement on the no-strike pledge, the suspension of overtime pay, and cooperation with management against strikers¹ were more important than the disagreement over incentive pay. Reuther managed to firmly support wartime collaboration while making modifications to win the support of rank and file militants.² The alliance between the union leadership and Communists, clearly absent in the pre-war period, was a working reality during the war. Both groups had reason to fear Reuther: the administration because Reuther represented an alternative leadership, and Communists because Reuther would deny them the right to participate in the political life of the union.

IV

At the convention of 1946, Reuther challenged Thomas for the UAW presidency. His admirers have described what they call a "two-pronged campaign": at local meetings, Reuther "hammered away on the simpler union aspects of the fight," while at city-wide caucus meetings, he "would patiently explain the nature of Stalinism."³ The

¹United Automobile Worker, March 1, 1944; George Addes to the Presidents of all local unions affiliated with the International Union, UAW-CIO, March 21, 1944, Ganley Papers.

²Criticisms of Reuther reflect this dual approach. Foster accused Reuther of quietly promoting walkouts in local plants, while Sigal claimed that Reuther sold out the workers when he served on the War Production Board. Foster, History, 411; Sigal, Going Away, 328.

³Howe and Widick, UAW, 154-55.

elitism in this formulation is striking.¹ Perhaps more important, however, is the admission by those who supported Reuther's campaign that he attacked Communism primarily in the privacy of his own caucus while sounding militant on other issues in public. The glue of anti-Communism holding his curious coalition of socialist and conservative unionists together was, it appears, a matter of some indifference to the rank and file.²

The union leadership and the Communists had lost strength during the war. Indeed, much of the criticism leveled at Reuther, particularly by Communists, probably increased his popularity in the union. Foster, for example, wrote in the *Daily Worker* that "no organization has been more active than the CPA [Communist Political Association] in fighting against the strike incitements of such labor leaders as John L. Lewis and Walter Reuther."³ Reuther, of course, realized that it was not enough to criticize Communists and the UAW leadership. He sought to prove his competence and militancy in the General Motors strike of 1945-1946.

As the "first crucial engagement in the postwar battle between

¹The implication is that Reuther had to "hammer away" on the "simpler" issues to rank and file workers since they understood little else. In his own caucus, Reuther had to "patiently explain" anti-Communism; the image here is that of a patient teacher going over a lesson with a rather slow class. It never occurred to Howe and Widick that workers could reject anti-Communism because of the political lessons which they learned during the Flint strike, the campaign to organize Ford, or other union activities in which the Communists played a major role.

²For a description of this coalition, and a list of some of the prominent conservatives and socialists, see Howe and Widick, UAW, 155-56.

³Daily Worker, June 2, 1945.

the CIO and industry,"¹ the GM strike made an excellent platform for Reuther. Following President Harry Truman's announcement that wage increases would only be allowed if they did not result in price increases, Reuther submitted a brief to GM demanding a thirty per cent wage increase without any price increase. When GM asserted that it was impossible to increase wages without raising prices, Reuther challenged the company to "open the books" and prove its contention. Reuther's publicity director² invited reporters into the conference room during negotiations. GM representatives refused to talk while reporters were present, so Reuther released the transcript of the negotiations to the public. With that astute move, Reuther, although only a vice-president of the UAW, became the spokesman of the CIO's postwar aspirations in the nation's press.

Privately, the UAW leadership was dubious about Reuther's strike program, but there was little they could do about it. They had two objections. First, GM was "in a very strong position to fight a strike, for it enjoyed an immense capital reserve and could look forward to tax rebates under favorable provisions of the excess-profits law."³ Second, the ability-to-pay argument could cut two ways: under periods of deflation, corporations could use it to cut

¹Barton J. Bernstein, "Walter Reuther and the General Motors Strike of 1945-1946," Michigan History, IL (September 1965), 261.

²Reuther was always intensely concerned with publicity. Carl Haessler noted that in 1938 "Reuther was the only local union president at that time, and for almost a year, who had a professional publicity man on his staff to edit his paper, issue press releases, [and] ghost talks." Carl Haessler, Oral History Interview, 44-49.

³Bernstein, "GM Strike," 265-66; Howe and Widick, UAW, 131.

wages. Yet it was impossible to criticize Reuther's leadership of the GM department without undermining the morale of the strikers. In his column in the UAW newspaper, Ades called GM "one of the most arrogant and ruthless" of the large corporations, but he thought the union could "bring these barons of industry to their knees."¹

The strike was a defeat for GM workers but a victory for Reuther. As one labor economist noted, although "Reuther gained none of the points which he had advanced in the General Motors strike," he was able to obtain "national prominence as a labor leader."² As an explanation for the lack of concrete benefits, Reuther charged that a settlement between General Motors and the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America was a deliberate attempt to sabotage the strike.³ UE promptly denied the charge. Albert Fitzgerald, UE president, stated that UE had offered on three occasions to engage in joint negotiations with the UAW, but this offer "was repeatedly denied by the head of the UAW-GM Department [Reuther]." Moreover, Fitzgerald pointed out that the UE settlement followed a pattern set by the UAW with Chrysler and the United Steel Workers with Kaiser.⁴

¹ United Automobile Worker, March 1, 1946. This is interesting in view of Howe and Widick's contention that Ades "bitterly fought" against the strike.

² Steiber, Governing the UAW, 10.

³ This charge is recorded and endorsed in Bernstein, "GM Strike," 274; Howe and Widick, UAW, 140-41; Fountain, Union Guy, 183-84. Later Widick admitted that the steel settlement was more important, but stated that Reuther found it "more expedient" to attack a left-wing union. B. J. Widick, Labor Today: The Triumphs and Failures of Unionism in the United States (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964), 49.

⁴ Fitzgerald to Thomas, February 22, 1946, Carey Papers.

Both major Trotskyist parties, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Workers' Party (WP), gave their support to Reuther. Both parties regarded the GM strike as the major issue. Art Preis, the SWP's major writer on labor, argued that "in the minds of the majority of the delegates, the basic issue, although never clearly expressed, was the program and policies of the GM strike." The strike was seen as unique in that it raised "the question of prices, profits and the control of production—matters which the capitalist owners of industry have always insisted are the exclusive 'perogatives of management.'" Preis admitted that "Reuther's intimate machine included many questionable and reactionary elements." He mentioned in particular Richard Gosser, "who has been repeatedly condemned for his policy of discrimination against Negroes," and Melvin Bishop, "whose name symbolized conspiracy with the corporations" and who "was thoroughly despised by the workers in his region." Nevertheless, the SWP insisted that the Reuther victory constituted an implicit endorsement of the GM strike and that this "remains as the unique achievement of the convention."¹

Perhaps Max Shactman, American Trotskyism's leading intellectual and the leader of the WP, gave the most extensive argument for the notion that the GM strike was implicitly anti-capitalist. Shactman stated that the strike program signified "a demand for direct intervention by labor in the running of the economy as a whole." To Shactman it was "only one step" from "this demand to the demand

¹Art Preis, "The Atlantic City Auto Union Convention," Fourth International, VII (May 1946), 149-52.

for a government which will control wages, prices and profits, in the interests of labor and of the consumer." Shactman went on to explain the strike to the strikers:

You, the workers, say that the industry, while paying a fair profit to the corporations, can still pay a decent wage to the workers without charging a monopolistic price to the consumers . . . If you say that industry can do these things and the monopolists say that industry can not, then it is perfectly logical for you to take over industry and prove in practice that your demands are realizable.

Although Howe and Widick described Shactman's analysis as a "valid deduction from the GM strike program,"² the Trotskyist argument is seriously flawed. In the first place, it was not a demand for direct intervention by labor. Reuther asked that GM open the books for public inspection and prove that it could not maintain profits with a wage increase. The decision as to whether GM could pay the wage increase would be made by a government mediator, not by the labor movement. Reuther was asking for arbitration not socialism. In the second place, the program had conservative implications. The notion that higher wages were justified only if they did not result in lower profits or higher prices can hardly be viewed as a challenge to the capitalist system. A number of unionists rejected the notion because it implied that wage increases must come out of higher productivity rather than profits, and seemed to open the way to union commitments to speed-up.³ Finally, if a company was losing money, Reuther's

¹Quoted in Howe and Widick, UAW, 147.

²Ibid., 148.

³Frank Emmpak, "The Break-up of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), 1945-1950," (Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1972), 65.

program implied a wage cut.

Reuther barely defeated Thomas for the presidency. Trotskyist support, according to a member of the SWP, provided Reuther's margin of victory. John W. Anderson recalled that Reuther won by only 44 votes, "and these 44 votes were votes that were . . . gotten for Walter Reuther by the group that I belong to, the Socialist Workers' Party."¹ After narrowly electing Reuther, delegates selected Thomas and Leonard as vice-presidents, and Addes as secretary-treasurer. Although Leonard had run against Addes for secretary-treasurer with Reuther's support in 1943, he ran as an anti-Reuther candidate in 1946. The election was a tremendous personal triumph for Reuther, rather than a repudiation of the leadership as Reuther's opponents won a majority of the executive board. Both sides began to prepare for the next election, and the next year and a half was perhaps the most intensely factional in the UAW's history.

V

If Reuther's first campaign was an odd mixture of tactical militancy and anti-Communist rhetoric, his second campaign had a clearly conservative emphasis. In his first presidential column in the UAW newspaper, he attacked "that impractical brand of militance—so stubbornly advocated by narrow political groups—which serves only to isolate labor from the allies it needs to make orderly

¹Anderson, Oral History Interview, 114.

progress toward legitimate democratic goals."¹ The column was, of course, a thinly veiled attack on Communists, but it reflected a more extensive hostility to left-wing organizations.

More serious was Reuther's activity during the Allis-Chalmers strike of 1946-1947. Clancy Sigal has described the strike:

It was a brute of a walkout, probably the most viciously fought of the postwar strikes. The plant was owned by a family of American Firsters; the local leadership was militant; wages were bad, management was spoiling for a fight. It was like a blazing scene from the thirties, goons dragging pickets inside the plant gates and beating them up for "trespassing," trucks full of scabs ramming the massed union lines, mounted cops charging full tilt at strikers and being met with a barrage of ball bearings rolled under the horses' hoofs.²

Reuther attacked the local leadership of the strike as Communists.

He argued that "the circulation of Communist Party petitions on behalf of the party's gubernatorial candidate afforded the company a perfect basis for its propaganda campaign against the union."³ Addes replied that "division among our own ranks did more than anything else to destroy the effectiveness of the strike." In a clear reference to Reuther and his supporters, Addes pointed out that "some union members started red-baiting other union members and it was not long before the employers and a hostile press took up the same story." Addes urged the UAW to fight redbaiting with increased union solidarity.⁴

Reuther's activities in the strike came under heavy criticism

¹United Automobile Worker, May 1, 1946.

²Sigal, Going Away, 336.

³Quoted in Howe and Widick, UAW, 166. For corporate use of Reuther's attack, see Joint Statement of the Allis-Chalmers Team Before the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, February 24, 1947 (n. d., n. p.)

⁴United Automobile Worker, April 1, 1947.

from Thomas, who had been the executive board member placed in charge of the strike. The corporation had charged that the local was led by Communists and refused to negotiate directly with it. According to Thomas, the Policy Committee "had authorized you [Reuther] and a representative of Philip Murray to meet with the company in Chicago the following day to discuss solely the question of permitting Brother Mattson [of the Allis Chalmers local] or me to enter negotiations." If the company refused, "there was to be no negotiating." Instead, Reuther negotiated, despite the absence of representatives of the local union and other UAW leaders. At a second meeting attended by Thomas company proposals were presented and UAW leaders agreed that they were unacceptable. One of the company representatives, Thomas stated, denounced Reuther for telling the representative "that the strike could be ended at this meeting on these terms." According to Thomas, Reuther "did not deny that this was true."¹

In a letter to UAW locals, Thomas argued that the strategy of the Allis-Chalmers company was based on a new, two-pronged, anti-union program worked out by the National Association of Manufacturers. The first part of this program called for "an open all-out war against the CIO." The "second part—which is only beginning to come to light—calls for direct interference by management in the affairs of our local unions." In the Allis-Chalmers

¹R. J. Thomas to Walter Reuther, January 26, 1947, Thomas Papers. This six-page, single-spaced letter contained a full statement of Thomas' criticisms of Reuther, and was circulated throughout the UAW.

strike, for example, the company refused to sign an agreement with local leaders and insisted upon "negotiating only with certain persons in the International Union." As Thomas saw it, "stripped of all the fancy phrases, these companies are saying that they will refuse to negotiate grievances, wages, and contracts unless they can choose the union members with whom they must negotiate." Although the statement made no specific criticism of Reuther or any other UAW leader, Thomas clearly saw Reuther as aiding and abetting this strategy by his refusal to defend the elected local leadership.¹ Reuther admitted negotiating with the company, but claimed that Thomas had agreed to the negotiations and denied that any agreement was reached. John Brophy, present at the negotiations as a representative of Philip Murray, confirmed Reuther's denials.²

It is difficult for the historian to accept either Thomas' or Reuther's version of the events surrounding the strike, since neither are supported by hard, documentary evidence. It is even possible that there was an honest difference of opinion and that Thomas had meant for Reuther to negotiate solely on the issue of Allis-Chalmers accepting the representatives delegated by the union while Reuther thought he was to try to secure the participation of local leaders but to go ahead with negotiations if that proved impossible. But some observations can be made. First, Thomas' characterization of the

¹R. J. Thomas to All Local UAW-CIO Unions, undated, Thomas Papers.

²Walter Reuther to R. J. Thomas, February 11, 1947, Thomas Papers. This letter included another letter, John Brophy to Walter Reuther, January 31, 1947.

company's position was reasonably accurate. The corporation was asking that it be allowed to select those with whom it would negotiate or, at the very least, that it be permitted to reject duly selected negotiators. Second, Reuther described that demand in a remarkably sympathetic manner. He stated that the company had demanded, in his words, "the cleaning up of the local #248 situation and the insuring of a fair and democratic election of officers in the local union." At no time did Reuther indicate that he opposed the company demand for a new election, or that he objected to company charges against the local.¹

There were, then, two issues in the Allis-Chalmers strike as it appeared in internal UAW politics. First, would the union allow the corporation to decide with whom it would negotiate? Thomas' position was clear on this point: the union must not make that concession. Reuther's position was vague. On the one hand, he never disagreed with the contention that the composition of the negotiating committee was none of the company's business, but on the other hand, he frequently indicated that he accepted the company's charges against the local union. This naturally made it difficult for the UAW to withstand company pressure on this point. Second, how would the union respond to charges of Communism against strike leaders? Did workers have the right to elect Communists to union office. Here Reuther's position was clear: Communists had no right to participate in the political life of the union. Thomas was vague. He tended to

¹Reuther to Thomas, February 11, 1947.

imply that charges of Communist Party membership were baseless and insist that workers had the sole right to determine their leaders without specifically stating whether they could elect Communists. The strike was defeated.¹ After Reuther's sweep of union offices at the UAW convention of 1947, he dispatched Pat Greathouse to Milwaukee to take over the local. "We then spent six months or so reorganizing" local 248, Greathouse recalled, "as the people went back to work without a contract, completely demoralized."²

A second issue dividing Reuther and his opponents was the proposed merger with the Farm Equipment Workers (FE). In the spring of 1947, the UAW executive board, over Reuther's strong objections, offered FE a merger proposal granting the smaller union considerable autonomy in a special FE division within the UAW. The director of the new division would be selected by FE, FE staff would be maintained, and FE dues would finance the division. The locals would be entitled to full representation at the upcoming convention.³ These concessions were necessary to secure FE approval. In 1945, a CIO jurisdictional committee had called for "immediate amalgamation" of the two unions, but FE workers voted against any merger.⁴

¹Emspak, "Breakup of CIO," 159-66.

²Pat Greathouse, Oral History Interview, May 14, 1963, p. 55, ALHUA.

³"Proposal for Merger of UAW-CIO and FE-CIO," Thomas Papers.

⁴Kampelman, CP vs. CIO, 67. Howe and Widick ignore this background and simply state, "In the spring of 1947 . . . the Thomas-Addes group dreamed up a bright proposal." Howe and Widick, UAW, 166.

Those supporting the merger had strong arguments. They pointed out the pernicious effect of the jurisdictional conflict between the FE and the UAW, and noted that concessions made to FE were similar to concessions made to other unions absorbed into the UAW. There is, in fact, little doubt that the merger would have benefitted the UAW by ending jurisdictional conflicts. But while there were good reasons for the merger, those good reasons were by no means the real reasons the agreement was negotiated. Since Communists were influential in FE, it could be expected to deliver anti-Reuther votes at the upcoming convention. Sigal has described the negotiations vividly in his novel:

Negotiations were begun . . . to incorporate a farm implement workers union into the AVB [UAW]. It was a left-wing union, and if the merger could be accomplished before the convention Tolliver [R. J. Thomas] would (or might) have the votes to defeat Hauser [Walter Reuther]. It was the wrong move. Wrong and fatal. It gave Hauser just the issue he needed to push him over the top. He publicly accused Tolliver of selling the AVB to the Communists for convention votes, and since the farm implement unionists had outsmarted themselves by demanding convention votes simultaneous with virtual autonomy within AVB, the argument was telling. I was involved in the negotiations with the farm implement people in Chicago, and I don't think any of us smiled once during this period. We were all desperate men involved in a duplicitous scheme which in our hearts we knew was going to fail.¹

At the 1947 convention, debate centered around the issue of the union's response to the Taft-Hartley Act in general and, more specifically, the provision which required that union officials sign non-Communist affidavits. The resolutions committee presented a majority and minority report on the issue, and the crucial difference was that the majority report instructed the officers to refuse to sign

¹Sigal, Going Away, 334.

the affidavits, while the minority called for signing "under protest."¹ No one argued that refusal to sign would mean jail for union officials; at that time, John L. Lewis, Philip Murray, and other major labor leaders had indicated that they would not sign the affidavits, and the thought of a Democratic administration indicting these men was unthinkable. Instead, those supporting compliance emphasized that refusal to sign the affidavits would mean the loss of services provided by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The NLRB would refuse to count votes cast for a union whose officials had not signed the affidavits in a certification election. A delegate from the Glenn-Martin plant illustrated the dilemma. After an NLRB election prior to the Taft-Hartley Act which the UAW had won, the company charged that the UAW had stuffed the ballot box. The NLRB refused to rule on the dispute until the affidavits were signed.²

Speakers opposing compliance did not talk about the benefits of the NLRB; instead, they stressed the need for independent power based on solid organization in the plants. Thomas told the delegates that a stronger local rather than compliance with Taft-Hartley was needed in the Glenn-Martin plant. The company "would not dare do a thing like that in the Dodge plant in Detroit or the Chrysler plant, or in local 174 [Reuther's local], such as they are doing in Glenn-Martin, because those outfits would hit the pavement and there would be no

¹International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, Proceedings of the Eleventh Convention (Atlantic City, 1947), 77-78, 81-83.

²Ibid., 105-106, 88-91.

stopping them. " Paul Silver was astounded when Emil Mazey, a member of the Socialist Party and the candidate for secretary-treasurer on Reuther's slate belittled strikes in favor of "independent political action" aimed at the repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act. The UAW, Silver argued, had gained recognition by striking in the 1930s and could do it again, with or without the NLRB. John McGill compared signing the affidavits to "one of the biggest mistakes that the United Automobile Workers ever made:" participation in "that damnable" Victory-Through-Equality-of-Sacrifice conference.¹ Both Silver and McGill had been prominent leaders of the rank and file caucus which had fought Communists and the union leadership over the no-strike pledge.² Both opposed Reuther in 1947. In the end, the convention voted to sign the affidavits.³

Reuther never stated what, in retrospect, appears to be a major reason for his support of the position urging UAW officers to sign the affidavits. By signing the affidavits, the UAW would be able to use the NLRB to raid left-wing unions. At the Caterpillar Tractor Works, for example, the company refused to sign a contract with the Farm Equipment Workers because FE had refused to submit signed non-Communist affidavits. Workers walked off the jobs in order to

¹Eleventh UAW Proceedings, 95, 92, 96-99, 94.

²John McGill, Oral History Interview, July 27, 1960, pp. 15-19, ALHUA.

³The controversy continued in the local unions. In the largest UAW local, those favoring compliance did not make anti-Communist arguments. Instead they claimed that "by refusing to sign the affidavits, we will be walking right into Taft-Hartley's clever trap." Workers voted to comply. Ford Facts, January 17, February 7, 1948.

win a contract. This posed the issue of resistance to Taft-Hartley very sharply. Would the UAW leadership, by this time (1948) totally dominated by Reuther, support its sister CIO union in the face of this company use of Taft-Hartley to refuse to bargain? The UAW followed a difference course. Close to one hundred full-time, paid organizers went sent to the Caterpillar plant to urge workers to leave FE, return to work, and join the UAW.

Company officials joined with the UAW to ask for an NLRB election to determine which union should represent the workers. FE was barred from the ballot because of its refusal to sign non-Communist affidavits. To win the election, FE would have to convince the majority of workers to vote for "no union" rather than any of the unions on the ballot. "The Caterpillar management," recalled a Reuther adherent, "wrote letters, bought ads, and put on radio programs urging the workers to vote for any union, but to vote for a union of some kind."¹ The UAW-AFL, Homer Martin's small splinter from the UAW, defeated both FE and the UAW. This sort of activity seriously compromised the campaign against Taft-Hartley. As Frank Emspak noted in his dissertation on the split in the CIO, "using Taft-Hartley to fight a union on strike was a strange way indeed to struggle against Taft-Hartley."²

By the time of the elections, Reuther's convention majority was so clear that none of the leaders of the anti-Reuther group was willing

¹Clayton Fountain, Union Guy (New York: Viking Press, 1949), 213-21.

²Emspak, "Breakup of CIO," 179.

to run against him. There were token candidates, but most of the anti-Reuther delegates abstained on the presidential vote. Reuther's slate swept the other offices. Mazey defeated Addes for secretary-treasurer, and Richard Gosser and John Livingston defeated Thomas and Leonard for the two vice-presidential posts.¹ The officers on the Reuther slate reflected the diversity of his caucus. Mazey, according to a critic of Reuther, was "militant, aggressive, tireless." His local "had a flying squadron which was instrumental in bringing unionism to a great many workers in small shops who could never have persuaded the boss without fraternal assistance."² Livingston and Gosser were "two of Reuther's more conservative supporters."³ Gosser, particularly, was widely known in the union as a racist.⁴

After the decisive victory of the Reuther slate, major opposition leaders either left the union or entered the Reuther camp. Addes opened a small tavern, Frankensteen became the head of a Detroit manufacturing firm, and Thomas took a job with national CIO. Only Leonard remained in the union opposition, but he soon was on the CIO payroll as an assistant to Reuther.⁵ As a staff official for the CIO,

¹Steiber, Governing the UAW, 13.

²Carl Haessler, Oral History Interview, 180-81. However, Mazey's refusal to "be the aggressive spokesmen for a more militant and radical wing of the Reuther group" was "disappointing" to many of his supporters. Howe and Widick, UAW, 175.

³Howe and Widick, UAW, 170.

⁴See above, page 273. An undated leaflet in the ACTU Papers issued by workers in local 600 noted that "it is Reuther and his followers who have refused to allow any steps to be taken against Gosser and his discriminatory practices against minorities in Toledo!"

⁵Steiber, Governing the UAW, 14-15.

Leonard worked closely with anti-Communists to purge the left-wing from the Los Angeles CIO Council.¹ Other potential opposition leaders were placed on the UAW payroll.² Although opposition was never totally eliminated, the Reuther caucus has dominated the union since 1947.

VI

An extensive discussion of the Reuther years is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but two generalizations can be made. First, the union became less democratic. Those opposed to the union leadership were subjected to far more extensive and stringent restrictions than opponents were in the Thomas-Addes years. Second, it became less militant. The fight against speed-up and, more generally, the struggle to control on the job conditions, was virtually abandoned under Reuther's leadership.

In his careful study of Reuther's rule in the UAW, Jack Steiber has chronicled the increasing power of the leadership and the gradual limitation of rights previously enjoyed by auto workers.³ Steiber pointed to the broadening of the executive board's authority, the elimination of opposition local leadership, and the restrictions placed upon local union newspapers. In each area, the Reuther leadership

¹Paul Jacobs, Is Curly Jewish?: A Political Self-Portrait Illuminating Three Turbulent Decades of Social Revolt, 1935-1966 (New York: Antheneum, 1966).

²Steiber, Governing the UAW, 14-15.

³Ibid., 131-57. Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is taken from this book.

took action which exceeded its authority under the UAW constitution.

At the 1949 UAW convention, Reuther pressed for the expulsion of the leaders of the major opposition caucus, Tracy Doll and Sam Sage. The Reuther-dominated executive board preferred charges against Doll and Sage and the convention grievance committee recommended that they be expelled from the union. The convention sustained the expulsion.¹ Nothing in the constitution authorized this procedure. There was no provision which allowed the executive board to bring charges against union members, nor was it provided that the convention could consider such charges. The constitution provided only that members would be tried in their local unions, but no charges were brought against Doll and Sage in their locals. They were tried instead by the convention grievance committee which had been appointed by the executive board, the very body which had filed the charges.

In 1951, a constitutional amendment granted the executive board the right to bring charges against members engaged in a conspiracy against the union and authorized the board to bring charges against members for actions taken prior to the adoption of the amendment. Thirteen members of local 205, accused during the convention debate of being Communists, were brought to trial for conspiring to take their local out of the UAW in 1950. The 1953 convention confirmed

¹For convention debate on the Doll-Sage case, see International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, Proceedings of the Twelfth Convention (Milwaukee, 1949), 261-77. See also Carl Haessler, Oral History Interview, 185-86, and Steiber, Governing the UAW, 132-34.

their expulsion. The suspended workers sued the executive board and the court ruled that the board had violated the union constitution. Although the workers were restored to full UAW membership, the repressive action crippled the anti-Reuther opposition. After the leftists had been expelled, local 205 elected a pro-Reuther slate of delegates.

The executive board placed local 248, a longtime center of opposition to Reuther, under the administratorship of Pat Greathouse. Greathouse removed local leaders. The constitution, however, provided that the suspended officers would return to office in sixty days if new elections were not held before that time. As the sixty days drew to a close, Reuther suspected that the suspended local leaders still enjoyed enough popular support to defeat a pro-Reuther slate. The executive board then revoked the charter, granted a new charter with the same number, and by this constitutional sleight-of-hand permitted the administrator to remain in control for an additional sixty days. During this period, a slate of pro-Reuther delegates were elected. They promptly preferred charges against the former leaders of the local and had them expelled from the union.

Reuther's biggest problem was continued opposition in local 600, the largest local union in the CIO and probably the world. In 1950, Reuther supported Carl Stellato who defeated Tommy Thompson for the presidency of local 600. Stellato followed the pattern of other Reuther-supported candidates by preferring charges against five members of the local's governing board, the General Council, under

the provision of the UAW constitution barring Communists from local office. A trial committee was elected and hearings conducted. Ford workers bitterly resented the trial. In elections for the General Council, all but one of the members of the trial committee were defeated. Stellato's slate suffered a serious setback, winning only 64 seats on the 224 member General Council.

At the 1951 convention, however, Stellato broke with Reuther over a proposed dues increase. In March, 1952, the executive board placed the local under an administratorship. The administrator first removed the five accused Communists from the General Council despite their acquittal. At the end of the administratorship, Stellato was re-elected without opposition, but the five accused Communists were barred from the election. Again, this procedure was not in conformity with the UAW constitution. Once the administratorship had been lifted, it was not within the board's power to bar individuals from office, let alone candidacy, without a trial. Furthermore, the men had been acquitted, and the UAW constitution states that a verdict of acquittal is final. The appeal was denied. To avoid this constitutional problem in the future, Reuther proposed, and the convention accepted, a constitutional amendment allowing the executive board to simply set aside acquittal verdicts when the worker is charged with Communist affiliations.¹

In addition to eliminating critics from union office and even

¹This constitutional amendment is a backhanded tribute to automobile workers' reluctance, even in the midst of the cold war and the McCarthy period, to convict on this charge. Rank and file workers, in other words, were less anti-Communist than the leadership.

from membership in the union, Reuther controlled the content of local union newspapers. One of the officially stated reasons for the administratorship over local 600 was to "stop Ford Facts from publishing material in violation of . . . the constitution which states that "local union publications shall conform with the policies of the international union." Another local newspaper was accused of support of the Communist Party line and warned to cease publishing articles in support of "policies diametrically opposed to the democratically adopted policies" of the UAW and the CIO. Still another local newspaper drew fire for a series of articles critical of Reuther's five year contract with General Motors. Here there was no question of pro-Communism: articles denouncing the agreement were titled, "The Five Year Plan," and "Russia or America?" The executive board ordered the local to stop printing those articles and in 1954 put the local under an administrator. As Steiber has pointed out, "the actions of the executive board against these few local publications have not been lost on other local unions." Anxious to avoid similar attacks, they have either supported the Reuther leadership or criticized it with restraint.

It is only fair to note that Steiber considers the UAW to be a democratic union. His conclusion rests on two assumptions. First, he believes that it is perfectly all right to deny democratic rights to Communists. Second, he compares the UAW to other unions rather than to itself in the pre-Reuther years. There is, however, little doubt from the evidence presented that the UAW underwent a serious decline in union democracy following the triumph of Reuther.

According to a well-informed observer, Reuther's victory also meant a sharp decrease in UAW militancy. After "the defeat and discrediting of the Communist element within the United Automobile Workers," wrote Alfred P. Sloan, chairman of the Board of Directors of General Motors, "our labor relations were changed for the better." Before Reuther's victory, there "was a tendency for every side to compete with others in a show of 'militance' against the corporation." Sloan found the agreements negotiated by Reuther particularly gratifying. The first contract negotiated under his administration "eliminated annual economic negotiations with the union and introduced the idea of longer-term contracts." It was followed by a five year contract in 1950. The strike which propelled Reuther into the leadership of the UAW was to be the last strike Reuther would call against GM. As Sloan put it, "the record of the past seventeen years [1946-1963] seems almost incredible," particularly since the corporation had "achieved this record without surrendering any of the basic responsibilities of management."¹

The five-year contract signed in 1950 would have been unthinkable had an active left-wing remained in the UAW. It was not merely that, as Fortune noted, GM "got a bargain" in that it "regained control over one of the crucial management functions . . . long range scheduling of production, model changes, and tool and plant investment." Equally important was the "union's acceptance of the

¹Alfred P. Sloan, My Years With General Motors ed. by John McDonald and Catharine Stevens (New York: McFadden Books, 1965), 390-96.

principle that advances in real wages are to be gained by advances in productivity." This notion was implicit in the GM strike program in 1946, hailed by Trotskyists as a socialist program, but now its conservative implications were obvious. A union which conceded that wage increases must come out of increases in productivity was not a union which could wage a serious struggle against speed-up. The contract allowed GM to introduce new machinery and to establish, without bargaining with the UAW, the work rules which governed the new machinery:

The parties agree not to bargain or negotiate changes on any subject in the agreement, any subject which refers to the agreement, or with respect to any subject matter not specifically referred to or covered in this agreement, even though such subjects or matter may not have been within the knowledge or contemplation of either or both parties at the time they negotiated or signed this contract.

With a stroke of the pen, the union had, for a five year span, given up virtually all control over production which it had won in its first decade of struggle.¹

These contract provisions qualitatively transformed the basic character of the union. From its inception, the UAW, like most of the CIO unions, performed two, somewhat distinct, roles. It championed the workers' interests against those of management, and it enforced the contract and insured stable industrial relations during the life of the contract. Some observers have suggested that the second function, that of enforcer of the contract, must, of necessity, take precedence over the defense of workers' interests. But it matters

¹Both Fortune, July, 1950, and the GM contract are quoted in Emspak, "Breakup of CIO," 365.

enormously what sort of contract is being enforced. The length and content of the contract, not the UAW's commitment to enforcing it, were key factors in the transformation of the union.

But why should the duration of the contract be so important?

It is important to realize that a five year contract is not simply five times as long as a one year contract; it is qualitatively different.

Under a one year contract, workers who fail to win contract demands can immediately organize and press for the inclusion of those demands in the following year's contract. The contract can be made an issue in local union elections, thus increasing rank and file participation in formulating contract demands and forcing local officials to give greater consideration to the wishes of the membership. Under a five year contract, local union politics are divorced from contract demands and workers participate, if at all, in formulating demands only two times in a decade. The membership becomes increasingly divorced from the leadership, and more and more apathetic in union affairs since it is extraordinarily difficult to affect union policy. The union then becomes a remote entity from the worker except, and this exception is crucial, in its daily role as the enforcer of the contract.

One should not over-emphasize the passivity of workers in the face of long-term contracts, however, since they actually resisted by engaging in unauthorized or "wildcat" strikes. James Boggs, a Ford worker, described the union response to this resistance:

Finally, after 137 wildcats at U. S. Rubber in one year and 700 wildcats in the Chrysler plants in three years, the union agreed with the company that any worker who wildcats should be first warned and then summarily dismissed. That put an end to wildcatting. Then came what was for all practical purposes the end of the union when,

in 1958, under the pressure of the company and for a period of four months, the union insisted that the workers continue on the job without a contract. Meanwhile, the company introduced new work standards when and how it pleased, daring the union to strike. When the 1958 contract was finally signed, there were few workers in the plant who did not realize they had returned to fully company-controlled plants. Time-study men and work layout specialists roamed the plants like sniffing bloodhounds, spying, taking pictures, watching over the workers' shoulders, while the shamed union representatives hid behind pillars or in the toilets.

Boggs' conclusion, although harsh, is warranted:

Thus, after 25 years, the UAW has given back to management every right over production won in the movement of the 1930s and the war years. Today the workers are doing in eight hours the actual physical work they used to do in twelve. At 6:30, a half-hour before the day shift begins, you can see workers setting up their operations so that they will not fall behind during the hours for which they are paid. They are afraid to go to the toilet, to get a drink of water, to take time off to go to the funeral of a relative. If they refuse to work overtime, they are written up and sent home on a regular working day.

The observations of the chairman of the Board of Directors of General Motors and those of a man who worked in the Ford plant for two decades are remarkably similar. Sloan appreciated the changes which Reuther's victory brought, while Boggs deplored them, but both agreed that management's power over the workers had been increased.

A third observer writing in the Labor Law Journal noted that the UAW was more willing to provide relief to individual firms through adjustments in productivity rather than hourly compensation since the former technique could not be so easily known to outsiders and, hence, involved less possibility of adverse secondary effects.

The productivity approach, however, is concededly a long and difficult one, and from the union's point of view is a very delicate one to handle. While the top officers of the union may attempt to convince the membership that prevailing standards are relatively low, they must overcome work habits which have been established and

¹James Boggs, The American Revolution: Pages From a Negro Worker's Notebook (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1963), 21-27. This first chapter of this book, a perceptive discussion of the UAW, has been reprinted by the New England Free Press.

accepted over a long period of years. Neither can the union leadership ignore a long history of union organization and strike action against the so-called "speed-up."¹

At this point, we have come full-circle. The basic complaint of automobile workers, and the principle grievance behind the Flint sit-down strike, was speed-up.² Now the union, by its commitment to productivity increases, virtually sanctions speed-up.

VII

Two months after Reuther's victory in 1947, Michigan Communists met to discuss the defeat. The proceedings of that discussion are not available, but the outline of the report of national auto coordinator Saul Wellman was published in an internal party bulletin. Wellman argued that the party's policies were basically correct, but that they had been incorrectly applied. The "policy of welding coalition of progressives in trade unions into United Front, with communists as a respected component of coalition, was and is correct," Wellman noted, but "we failed to fully understand and master coalition and united front tactic." As a result, "we were often maneuvered into the position of a prisoner of our allies in the coalition." The party's two main weaknesses were connected: it neglected mass work among rank and file workers, and it tended to measure the party's trade union strength by its relations with the leadership. "Fearful of breaking the coalition, self-conscious over our numerical weakness,"

¹Quoted in Harvey Swados, "The UAW—Over the Top or Over the Hill?", Irving Howe, ed., The Radical Papers (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 241-42.

²Fine, Sit-Down, 55-59.

Wellman lamented, "we failed to move boldly to participate in, develop, and advance the shop and other struggles of the workers." On issues like the Ford pension plan and the party's "correct fight for a Negro vice-president," Wellman admitted, "when we did separate ourselves from position of coalition, workers did not know it."¹

Wellman's analysis is consistent with the interpretation suggested at the outset of this chapter: Communists were ultimately defeated because of the party's failure to put itself forward at a time when its prestige was high. Although the actual defeat occurred in the post-war period, the roots of the defeat were in the party's relative passivity in the second half of the nineteen-thirties. Certainly, the other two interpretations outlined at the beginning of the chapter can not stand up under examination. The Reuther victory did not create a more democratic and militant union. Although Reuther's election as UAW president in 1946 was partially the result of dissatisfaction with the no-strike pledge and the wartime policies of the Communists and the UAW leadership, by 1947 many of the opponents of the no-strike pledge opposed Reuther. Nor can the party's defeat be traced to "ultra-left" policies, since the policies regarded as ultra left (the firm opposition to the Marshall Plan and the support of Henry Wallace for president) were not adopted until after 1947.

While Wellman's analysis makes sense in terms of the UAW, there is some question about its applicability in unions where

¹Saul Wellman, "The Party and the Trade Unions," Emphasis, no date, Ganley Papers. This issue contained "discussion outlines of major reports made at the [Michigan] State Committee meeting, December 13-14, 1947."

Communists took a more aggressive leadership role. The following two chapters examine unions in which Communists or pro-Communists shared leadership. In one case, anti-Communists succeeded in defeating and expelling Communists, and in the other the anti-Communists were defeated. After examining those two cases, and looking at the conflict within the national CIO, it will be possible to return to the issues raised by the party's defeat.