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# THE GRAND ILLUSION



## The Communist Party and Trade Unionism

*James Weinstein*

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*Front cover: General Electric workers in Philadelphia clash with police seeking to enforce a court injunction prohibiting mass picketing.*

**THE GRAND ILLUSION:  
A REVIEW OF  
"THEM AND US"\***

*James Weinstein*

*The labor movement is faced with the most serious challenge since the 1930's. . . . It involves . . . a revolt which is growing in the shops day by day. [This revolt] is not based on ideology. It is not political in character. It expresses itself today solely in economic terms, BUT AS IT DEVELOPS IT IS BOUND TO HAVE FAR REACHING CONSEQUENCES.*

—James Matles (from a 1968 speech reproduced in *Them and Us*. *Emphasis added.*)

*How long, oh Lord? How long?*

—Anonymous

IN POLITICS, if not in all of life, to be governed by illusion is fatal. The persistent belief that militant trade unionism, or other forms of interest-group activity, naturally "radicalizes"

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\* *Them and Us, Struggles of a Rank and File Union*, by James Matles and James Higgins (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974, \$2.95).

people has been the left's most persistent illusion, and is enough in itself to explain the absence of a continuing socialist tradition in the United States. Time and time again, dedicated, disciplined, hard-working socialists have organized or led various union and reform movements involving thousands, sometimes millions, of people. In the end these movements have either collapsed or the political benefit has accrued to liberals of one sort or another. The left's failure has not consisted in its inability to have achieved a socialist revolution in the United States: such an event requires conditions over which no political movement, no matter how sophisticated and skilled, has complete control.\* But the inability to sustain a coherent organized movement, one that could have accumulated experience, kept alive a socialist tradition, and taken political advantage of social crises like the Great Depression, is a failure for which the left as a whole is clearly responsible.

But simple facts are sometimes not so simple, and the history of the UE—the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America—and the career of James J. Matles, a leader of the union since 1937, bears this out. The UE itself has not been a cause of the failure of the left as defined above. On the contrary, it has been a victim of that failure, for of all the left led or influenced unions in the United States in this century, the UE has been the most consistently democratic, militant, and principled. In its own terms, as a left union, it has been most successful. And yet the membership, although loyal

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\* The Bolsheviks, for example, did not create the crisis in Russia in 1917; it took World War I to do that. Similarly, no socialist movement could have created the Great Depression of the 1930s or the war in Vietnam. But the collapse of the czarist regime in 1917 became a revolutionary crisis only because the Russian Social Democrats had already been organized as a party, had strong roots within the working class and among the peasantry, and had the will to take power. Similarly, in the United States, a revolutionary crisis will require the conjuncture of a failure of capitalism (such as the Great Depression) and a previously existing, coherent and well organized popular movement for socialism, led by a party. A true crisis of capitalism requires the presence of both conditions. Capitalism cannot avoid creating one of these conditions, but only a self-consciously organized left can create the other—and it must do so in advance of the “spontaneous” crisis or the capitalist class will be able to reorganize itself and impose a new stability, just as the Roosevelt administration was able to do in the 1930s and as the liberal anti-war leaders were able to do in the late 1960s and early 1970s.



(even in places fiercely loyal) to the union and to its long-term leadership, is no more political, has no more socialist consciousness, than it did when UE was organized during the sharp struggles of the 1930s. Then, as now, the union was led by socialists (most of whom were then members of the Communist Party), and then, as now, the union was necessarily concerned not with "ideology" but with immediate economic and organizational problems. (Although it did engage in left trade-unionist politics.) And, of course, then, as now, the socialists (including the Communists) believed that as these workplace struggles developed they were "bound to have far reaching political consequences." They did. But not the consequences that the leftists had so hopefully anticipated.

Matles and Higgins wrote *Them and Us* with the apparent purpose of educating UE's current membership to the union's history of struggle. They seem also to have been motivated politically, for although UE has been a left union from its inception and has remained militant and taken formal positions against the Cold War, the Korean War, and the war against the Vietnamese, UE members have not developed appreciably greater political consciousness, even of a left-liberal variety, than have other workers. In fact, the younger and newer members of the union are almost entirely unaware of UE's traditions, partly because there is no generalized left political movement with which the union could have identified since the breakup and disintegration of the Communist Party during the 1950s. Matles and Higgins clearly want to revive a part of the old tradition and to bring UE's members back into political identification with the union's leadership. The book reflects this desire. It details the history of struggles to organize electrical workers and machinists in the mass-production industries, UE's success in establishing company-wide unionism and bargaining in the giant General Electric and Westinghouse corporations, and the destruction of this unified organization as a result of the Cold War and the anti-Communist policies adopted by the CIO in the late 1940s. And the book relates UE's survival and revival as the major union of electrical workers in the United States.

As a description of trade unionism in its most principled and skillful form, *Them and Us* is an instructive and in places

an inspiring book. Matles makes clear not only what a union can do, but also—and for the current crop of leftists this is equally important—what a union, no matter what the private politics of its leaders or members, cannot do. He describes the process of negotiation during several strikes and explains that “even the most militant struggles” of workers “are always exercises of self defense” on their part. They are always struggles to defend or advance the interests of workers as a subordinate class within capitalism. As such, all negotiations are processes of compromise, and all strike tactics, no matter how militant, are designed simply to strengthen the union’s hand in negotiations. This means that militancy is not a principle in itself, but is subordinate to the union’s goal of achieving the best possible settlement within a given set of circumstances. Militancy often strengthens the union’s hand, but at times it is necessary to accept a compromise that makes it possible for the union to survive and fight another battle later on. All this is illustrated by Matles and Higgins in their account of UE’s organizing campaign at the Maytag plant in Newton, Iowa, in 1938. After a company lockout and then a long strike in which the workers solidly supported the new union while the company refused to rescind a wage cut or grant union recognition, the governor announced a compromise and ordered the plant reopened under the protection of the National Guard.

The governor’s compromise consisted of a call to the company not to impose the wage cut, upon which, after three months of a solid strike, it had still insisted, and a demand that the workers return to their jobs without union recognition and without the rehiring of twelve leaders who had been fired by the company. “Order or no order, guns or no guns,” the strikers said, “we’re not going back into that plant without our leaders.” The overwhelming mood was one of resistance and defiance. At the meeting called to discuss the governor’s order, it was clear, according to Matles and Higgins, that if the local leadership had said “‘We are going to tell the governor to go straight to hell,’ cheers would have filled the air.” But, the authors add, “then what? That’s the question a leadership has to ask itself before it takes a position at a time when disaster is blowing in the wind.”

For two hours, the district organizer and the twelve fired

union leaders took the floor and argued that from a realistic point of view, it was necessary to comply with the governor's order. As Matles and Higgins write, "There are no cheers at a meeting of this sort. . . . Members who have staunchly withstood weeks on a picket line, and hardship at home, break down and weep without shame. As they did that day at Newton." But the workers voted to accept their leaders' recommendation to return to work to fight another day. They did so and soon won recognition, although the twelve union leaders were never rehired (pp. 92-100). This kind of compromise, as Matles points out, is the essence of any practical workplace organizing, so long as it is limited to the immediate interests of the workers in a given company or industry, as trade unionism always is. And, indeed, it is the essence of any interest-group politics.

Matles makes it clear that even while UE was working toward solidarity and militancy among the workers, its purpose as a union could not be to destroy capitalism or even particular corporations. Thus, during the early attempts to organize the RCA plant in Camden, New Jersey, Matles relates that "across the Delaware River in Philadelphia, Philco, the chief competitor in radio manufacture, had been operating under contract for three years and doing very well" (p. 56). And a year or two later, in 1938, when UE was trying to organize the Westinghouse chain, Matles pointed out that while the Westinghouse foremen and managers were up to their necks in snarls, the agreement between GE and the union "had instituted orderly grievance procedures" and given GE a substantially greater measure of stability in the workplace (p. 122).

This kind of argument, that it is in the interest of corporations to recognize the unions in order to achieve greater stability and work discipline, was earlier used by conservative leaders of the AFL, from Samuel Gompers on down, in attempts to convince corporation leaders to recognize AFL unions. In themselves, such arguments are not evidence of betrayal or disloyalty to the workers, but are simply a recognition of the limited nature of workplace organization. But given this truth, how and why should a leftist believe that militant workplace activity will create socialist consciousness among workers?

In the 1930s, when UE and other left-led unions were being



organized in large part by Communists, and when the leadership worked closely with the party, this relationship in itself distinguished the left unions from other CIO unions and appeared to give the left unions an inherently revolutionary (which is to say socialist) character. And later, when the other left unions had been destroyed or absorbed into the AFL-CIO, or had simply become conservative, UE's continued independence, relative militancy, and democratic internal life served the same ideological purpose, both for its leaders and for its (privately) socialist organizers and members. The illusion of "radicalism," or of socialism and revolutionary purpose, could thus be sustained even though UE's members in general had the same consciousness as the members of many other AFL-CIO unions. And what would have been, and widely was, perceived as reformist or economist trade unionism in other unions was thus able to pass as somehow inherently "radical" — at least in the minds of the private socialists in UE.

DESPITE OVER 40 YEARS of experience as a militant unionist and as a private socialist, Matles' illusions remain undiminished, if *Them and Us* accurately reflects his personal beliefs, as one must assume it does. The result is a book that is in some ways wildly contradictory. For while *Them and Us* rightfully, if uncritically, praises UE for its accomplishments, it is also an implicitly devastating criticism of the left's role in the unions since the 1930s, and of left politics in general in the United States over the last four decades. In this regard the first and superficially the most striking thing about *Them and Us* is that it is a history of a union in which the Communist Party played a major role, but in which the authors fail to mention that central fact. The party is written out of *Them and Us* in much the same manner that Trotsky was written out of the official Bolshevik histories of the Russian Revolution. Even more striking, however, is the fact that this omission does not significantly distort UE's history, although it does mystify the history of the Communist Party. The book is manifestly unfair to the party as such, and also to the many dedicated and militant Communists who devoted the best part of their lives to the union.

But as a history of the union, and of the politics of the



1930s, the distortions are minimal. Honest, militant, democratic trade unionists could have achieved what UE achieved: a union that after thirty-eight years has no greater degree of socialist consciousness among its members than the average trade union, and that itself is not engaged in socialist politics and has been no force for the development of a socialist movement. A close relationship to a revolutionary party was not a prerequisite to UE's achievements. And the Communist Party, with which UE did have a close relationship, was not a revolutionary party, whatever its intentions.

Those who read *Them and Us* without their own independent knowledge of UE's history may conclude that the union's apolitical character is a result of UE having had no identification with the organized left. But, as noted above, while the Communist Party is absent from the book, it was very much a part of the union's life from before the official founding of UE in 1936, until the party tried to dissolve UE and have its members enter the newly-merged AFL-CIO in 1955. UE was formed as a coalition of AFL federal locals in the radio industry,\* led by James B. Carey, and of independent electrical locals at General Electric and elsewhere, led by Julius Emspak. In 1937, several locals of machinists from the Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union joined UE. These locals were led by James Matles and were part of the Communist Party's Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), a dual union of the party's Third Period. Emspak and Matles were Communists; Carey was not. All three were elected to top offices in the new union. Carey became president, Emspak was secretary-treasurer, and Matles, when his locals affiliated with UE, became director of organization, an office created especially for him.

Carey later became a staunch anti-Communist and in 1949, when the left unions were expelled from the CIO, organized the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) in an attempt to wipe out UE. Carey had been elected secretary of the CIO in 1938, and at least from that time on effective control of UE had rested in Matles' and Emspak's hands. In February

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\* A federal local was directly chartered by the AFL and was not a part of any constituent international union; such locals had traditionally been temporary organizations whose members were eventually assigned to existing international unions.

1941, when the Nazi-Soviet pact was still in effect, and when Matles and Emspak both espoused the Communist Party's view that the European war was not really anti-fascist, but was a "phony" war similar to World War I, Carey supported a Pittsburgh local's attempt to ban "Communists, Nazis and fascists" from holding office in UE. Carey was opposed on this not only by Matles and Emspak, but also by the overwhelming majority of UE's executive board, and by a vote of 373 to 192 at the union's convention in September 1941. By then, Carey's anti-Communism and his lack of attention to the day-to-day affairs of the union had led the left to oppose him for re-election to UE's presidency. In his place, Albert Fitzgerald of the Lynn, Massachusetts, GE local was nominated and elected—although by then the Soviet Union had been invaded by the Nazis, and Matles, Emspak, and Carey were once again in agreement on anti-fascism and on the need to support the war effort.

From 1941, with Carey out of office, the left was in undisputed control of UE. And until 1955, both within the international and in many, if not all, of the union's districts, UE leaders continued to work closely with the Communist Party. After 1955, despite their sharp break with the party, UE's top leadership remained private leftists. UE officially called for an end to American intervention in Vietnam in 1964, before SDS had taken any notice of the war. And later, during the height of student unrest, and when other former left-wing unionists were telling students to go back to their studies, UE leaders maintained a friendly attitude toward the student movement and even hired some student activists as union organizers.

BY FAILING TO acknowledge the union's, and Matles' own, former links with the CP, the authors are forced into various distortions. Some of these are primarily unfair to individuals. William Sentner, for example, figures prominently in *Them and Us* as an organizer of the Maytag company in Iowa. Sentner was president of UE District 11, with headquarters in St. Louis. He was an open Communist who had been a section organizer for the party before he was elected to leadership in the union. As Sentner himself commented, "I couldn't have hidden the fact I was a Communist if I'd wanted to."<sup>1</sup> Matles

and Higgins do hide this fact, although they relate much of Sentner's activity and praise him highly as an organizer. In failing to mention Sentner's political affiliation they not only do him a disservice, but also deprive readers of the opportunity to understand in what ways, if any, Communists in the union functioned differently from left liberals.

Other omissions are more serious because they mystify developments that could otherwise be clearly explained and could provide insights into the weaknesses of the socialist left in the United States. The events of 1955, when the CIO and AFL rejoined forces to become the AFL-CIO, is an example of one such mystification. In December 1955, the Subversive Activities Control Board, set up under the Brownell-Butler Act of 1954, got the attorney general to file proceedings against UE on the charge of being "communist-infiltrated." This occurred almost simultaneously with the first convention of the AFL-CIO, also in December 1955. The result of these two events, as Matles and Higgins say, was "the second most serious crisis affecting the UE" (p. 229) in the postwar years. It was a crisis because four district presidents and about thirty international staff people and local union business agents "suddenly advised" the membership that UE "was finished," and "prevailed upon many locals to give up UE and go elsewhere" (p. 230). This happened after UE had already been seriously weakened by a series of decertification elections brought since 1949 by other unions—most notably by IUE, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (AFL), the International Association of Machinists (AFL), and the United Automobile Workers (CIO). Before UE quit the CIO in 1949 (when eleven other left-wing unions were expelled) it had had five hundred thousand members. IUE took many of these away in the early decertification elections, and from 1949 to 1955 UE gradually declined to about one hundred forty thousand members. But each election had been hard fought, and the losses were becoming less frequent and smaller, partly because the marginal locals had already been lost, and partly because it was becoming increasingly clear that the alternative unions, especially the IUE and IBEW, were less democratic and much less militant in defense of working conditions than was UE. Suddenly, in 1955, when



the union appeared to have reached a stable minimum membership, there were large-scale defections, not as a result of external attacks, but from within the leading ranks of the union. As a result another fifty thousand members, over a third of the remaining membership, were lost and UE was left with a rock-bottom ninety thousand.

As Matles and Higgins say, it was "a very strange turn of events." And as they relate them the events appear even more strange than they were. For the defectors were leaders who had developed militant reputations "over the years as fighters against redbaiting propaganda leveled at the union." Indeed, Matles and Higgins add, "all of them had been labeled 'Communist' more times than could be counted." But "now, at the very moment the government had selected to charge the union directly with being 'communist-infiltrated,'" these former leaders "had decided to run for AFL-CIO cover, taking with them those members in whom they had built up confidence" (p. 230).

The only explanation that Matles and Higgins can give for this turn of events is that some of the defectors "simply panicked" in the face of the Subversive Activities Control Board, and that "others confused the AFL-CIO 'merger' with legitimate rank-and-file unity in the labor movement" (p. 230). But, of course, such a defection cannot be explained by individual motives and was not the result of individual decisions. One of the reasons that the defectors had "been labeled 'Communist' more times than could be counted" is that most of them had been Communists. And the reason they suddenly abandoned UE was that the party was trying to reduce its isolation from the AFL and CIO unions and to re-enter the "main stream."

Why a party should want to abandon a democratic and militant union in order to enter the main stream as powerless members of militantly anti-communist unions is a question that should be explored. Certainly it is more important than the attempt to find individual reasons for defection, to which Matles and Higgins are reduced by their omission of the Communist Party from their history.

Finally, because the union's links with the Communist Party

are neither acknowledged nor analyzed, Matles and Higgins at times slip into semi-deceptions of the kind that lend credence to the old slander of Communists as "Masters of Deceit." This occurs in Matles' discussion of the growth of anti-Communism in the CIO in 1946. At the time, the Textile Workers had requested that the CIO adopt an official anti-Communist position in order to make it easier for that union to organize in the South. Matles correctly pointed out that UE had the best record of organizing of any CIO union, despite being attacked as Communist since its inception in 1936. In 1946, UE had won 84.1 per cent of the 321 labor board elections in which it had participated. But in vehemently denying "the damnable slander of communism" used against UE (p. 162), he went beyond defending the union's right to have communist connections and strongly implied that it did not, and even that it was a damnable slander to suggest that it had.

How could the leader of a left union, led mostly by Communists, suggest that it was slanderous for this truth to be uttered? And how could an implicit denial of this truth be accepted by others who knew the truth? It could only happen if the Communists had no politics of their own beyond left liberalism, no visible political differences with the liberals who ran the CIO and who worked intimately with the Democratic Party. Matles answered these questions by saying that UE took on "the fight to organize simply on the proposition that this CIO movement of ours believes that all men are created equal—and we propose to fight for that principle. . . . And if we continue to organize this movement of ours on this principle, then the overwhelming majority of the unorganized workers will rally to us" (pp. 162-63).

But to what would they be rallying? To a working-class movement conscious of the possibility of socialism as an alternative social system? Or to a trade union movement subordinate to the liberalism of the New Deal and the giant American corporations? Since there was no visible political movement for socialism, since the party insisted that socialism was not an issue to be raised beyond its ranks or those of its close followers, and since the Communists in the CIO, including Matles, accepted the condition that their commitment to socialism

remain a private belief, the result could only be what it was: a trade union movement subordinate to the Democratic Party. During the New Deal days, and especially during the war, this policy was viable because it was expedient for the CIO leadership to allow their fundamental anti-socialism to remain muted. But after the war, when the Cold War and a permanent massive arms economy became necessary, the Communists could no longer be tolerated—not because they espoused socialism, since they never did, but because they refused to join the Cold War against the Soviet Union. To the public at large, and to most of the members of the CIO, this was the only issue that distinguished both the Communist Party and the left-led unions from the rest of the CIO and from New Dealers. Certainly, the Cold War was the most consistently articulated issue. And, although the Communists were on the right side of that issue, it nevertheless fed what was truly slanderous in the redbaiting of the left after 1945—that Communists and other opponents of the Cold War were simply tools of Soviet foreign policy.

ALL OF THESE ISSUES are buried or obscured in *Them and Us*, in large part because the very existence of the Communist Party, let alone its role within UE, is hardly mentioned. But for those who do know of the Communists' relationship to the UE and to other left unions, the ability of Matles and Higgins to omit the party and still present a substantially accurate history of the union raises profound questions about the role of socialist politics and organizations in relation to trade unionism, questions that have been central to socialist politics for almost a hundred years, but on which we are sadly not much further advanced than were the Russian socialists in 1902, when Lenin wrote *What Is To Be Done?*

For “revolutionaries” like those in the Communist Party in the immediate prewar and postwar decades (and like the “Leninists” of current vintage) Lenin has played much the same role that Christ has for the Church. He is abstractly and rhetorically worshipped, while his actual role in history is ignored or mystified. This was important in the 1930s because Communists could believe that they were acting as revolutionaries by rationalizing their activities with quotations from the



Lenin scriptures ripped out of historical (and sometimes even textual) context. And the same is true of today's "Leninists." For this reason it is necessary to review briefly Lenin's attitude toward trade unions and the proper relation of socialists to them.

Lenin assumed and consistently argued that socialists must work in trade unions because the trade union movement was the primary form of spontaneous workers' organization within capitalism. This assumption is implicit in *What Is To Be Done?* and is explicit in its sharpest form in his post-Revolutionary critique of Western European "vanguardism," *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. Lenin stressed the necessity to struggle against the "labor aristocracy" in the name of the workers, "in order to attract the working class to our side." But he insisted that those Communists who removed themselves from the unions entirely were guilty of political "stupidity." These leftists, Lenin argued, could see only "the reactionary and counterrevolutionary character of the *heads* of the trade unions," but not that the unions themselves were necessary arenas of struggle for the political support of the workers. Having given up the struggle where the workers actually were, these leftists "jump to the conclusion that it is necessary to leave the trade unions," and "to create new, fantastic forms of labor organization" that were politically pure only because they were isolated from the mass of the workers.<sup>2</sup>

But if it was necessary for socialists to work within the unions and to be concerned with the everyday problems of workers, it would never be possible to develop a socialist consciousness among workers simply "by keeping within the framework of the economic struggle, for *that framework is too narrow*." Indeed, Lenin argued, for those who desired to develop a socialist consciousness among workers, "making the workplace the exclusive (or, even, the main) starting point, making it the exclusive, or, at least, the main basis" of their political strategy was "fundamentally wrong." Lenin insisted that "class political consciousness" could be brought to the workers only "from outside the sphere of workers and employers." The only sphere from which it was possible to obtain socialist consciousness was from the "sphere of relationships

between *all* classes and strata and the state and the government." Conducting the "economic struggle against the employers and the government" was not enough. "It cannot be too strongly insisted," Lenin wrote, "that *this is not yet Social-Democracy.*"\*<sup>3</sup>

If this was not yet a socialist politics, then what was? The answer, according to Lenin, was that socialists "must be able to generalize" all the immediate experiences of workers, "must be able to take advantage of every event, however small," in order to explain their "socialistic convictions and [their] democratic demands to *all.*" Socialists must attempt to explain to "everyone the world historic significance of the proletariat's struggle for emancipation" (for socialism). Communists, Lenin reiterated, were obliged to participate in all democratic movements, but "without for a moment concealing [their] socialist convictions."<sup>4</sup>

Being a vanguard did not mean to Lenin that the party should have a private socialist consciousness while fighting openly only to defend the workers' immediate interests. To become a vanguard for socialism meant that the party "must act in such a way that *all* other detachments shall see us." And he meant "see us as socialists." To make this point, Lenin constructed an imaginary conversation between an economist (by which he meant syndicalist) and a radical (by which he meant liberal). The economist socialist announces to the radical that he represents a vanguard party that is confronted with the task of lending "the economic struggle itself a political character." The radical, if he were at all intelligent (Lenin says), "would

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\* By this, Lenin did not mean that socialists should not participate in parliamentary politics, but that they should do so as socialists and not simply as militant trade unionists—that they should not simply bring trade-union grievances into the political arena. Socialist politics (Social Democracy in Lenin's phrase) required more than the militant defense of workers' rights as an interest group within capitalist society. But the Communist Party and the left unions in the 1930s and 1940s did precisely what Lenin argued against, just as various left organizations and parties are now doing. Publicly, they were militant liberals, even when individual Communists admitted their affiliation or ran for public office. Their socialist convictions, their belief that socialism was a necessary alternative to capitalist society, remained buried and the only issues they raised were those that arose spontaneously in the course of the defensive struggles of the workers themselves.

only laugh at such a speech." He would say to himself, "Your vanguard must be made up of simpletons! They do not even understand that it is our task, the task of the progressive representatives of bourgeois democracy to lend the workers' economic struggle *itself* a political character. Why we too . . . want to draw the workers into politics, but *precisely into trade unionist, and not Social Democratic politics*. Trade union politics of the working class are *precisely bourgeois* politics of the working class."<sup>5</sup>

As *Them and Us* sadly but most forcefully demonstrates, the privately socialist trade unionists working within UE could not proclaim their politics even among their own members, much less "act in such a way that all the other detachments" could see them as socialists. They could not do this because the question of socialism vs. capitalism was not made a political issue by the Communist Party in the 1930s or 1940s. Of course, individuals could and did proclaim their allegiance to the party, as did, for example, William Sentner. But it did not make much political sense to proclaim that one was a communist while also insisting that socialism was not really an issue.

It was analogous to announcing publicly that one was a Buddhist, and since neither Buddhism nor Communism was particularly attractive to working people there was hardly any point in making such an announcement. To do so and survive would have been a victory for tolerance, but not for socialist politics. Indeed, after the Progressive Labor group split with the Communist Party in the late 1950s, PLers for a while made a point of announcing publicly that they were Communists. This was an expression of their understanding of the Communist Party's "revisionism" or opportunism. But because PL had not broken with the essentially syndicalist\* politics of the party, they, too, pursued a politics of militant defensism even while proclaiming to one and all that they were Communists. The results, of course, were not good because to most people the meaning of

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\* I use the term syndicalism here in place of economism because it is a slightly broader term that includes any sectoral struggles and not just those around workplaces. Syndicalists share a belief that it is unnecessary for the working class to confront state power directly, to organize in the political arena through a party. Parliamentarism is not the opposite of syndicalism: a society-wide struggle for state power is.



being a Communist was defined by the prevailing liberal anti-communism. PL did not try to make the necessity for socialism an issue and to identify being a Communist with that. They simply proclaimed their faith in public. Unfortunately, it was a faith worse than death as far as most people were concerned, and PL soon adopted the mode of the CP: secret members and public leaders.

Because the politics that Communists put forward, whether operating openly or under cover, were left-liberal, rank-and-file workers could fully support the party's public policies and remain good Democrats. This is exactly what most of them did. The necessity for socialism, the understanding that a truly democratic and socially rational society could never be achieved under capitalism, did motivate the Communists and their trade-union militants and leaders. But there was no way of generalizing this belief as long as it remained invisible to the public. The best that could be done was that individuals could be proselytized and recruited.

HOW, THEN, CAN MATLES still believe that the "revolt" in the shops, the rank-and-file militancy on which UE's success has been based, is "bound to have far reaching political consequences" in a left direction? Thirty-eight years of CIO history argue against this view. True, UE's leadership still remains privately left, but UE is almost unique among the many formerly left-wing CIO unions. Virtually all the others, some of which are reasonably democratic and militant, are well within the political mainstream. To understand the tenacity of Matles' belief we must look not at his experience, but at the political theory that he absorbed from the party. This syndicalist dream is not his alone: it belongs to almost the entire left in the United States, wittingly or unwittingly, as a legacy from Communist politics over the years. The view that "a strong and consistent fight for democratic rights under conditions of decaying capitalism must ultimately lead the American people to the choice of a socialist path" was officially adopted at the Communist Party's ninth convention in 1936. And Earl Browder, the leading Communist in the 1930s, declared even more mechanistically that "history marches toward socialism," and

that "everything that organizes and activates the working class and its allies is progress toward socialism." <sup>6</sup>

But, as Lenin and others argued against the economists in Russia, and as subsequent experience once again demonstrated, only a public movement that makes the question of socialism an issue can march toward socialism. If the socialists are invisible, or are visible only as militant democrats, then the liberals must remain unchallenged and will always be able to devise solutions to immediate problems, in the sense that they will be accepted as the best available alternatives. But even if the liberals should fail to find a temporary solution and chaos should ensue, the socialists will be no better off. In fact, they will be worse off, for without a political base of their own, without a self-consciously socialist base among the workers, socialists will be totally disarmed in the face of a resurgent reactionary right. As long as the only visible alternative to liberalism is reaction, the failure of liberalism can only lead to reaction.

The disappearance of the Communist Party from the history of UE as told in *Them and Us* underlines this point, despite the fact that Matles and Higgins still appear to accept the Communists' underlying politics. Of course, this is only implicit in the book; it is neither acknowledged nor apparent unless one knows what has been omitted from the book as well as what has been included. For most readers *Them and Us* will have a very different meaning. It will be an interesting and at times an exciting history of a militant, democratic union, one that has survived with a degree of independence and integrity unparalleled among left-wing unions in the United States. But just for that reason, *Them and Us* is also a strong implicit argument that a socialist movement cannot come into being through militant workplace activity alone. If our goal is to create a socialist revolution, and not continually to recreate unions that are like UE at best, then we must have a party that will constantly agitate for socialism in the arena of public politics. □

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