

Introduction

From United Front to Popular Front: The CPC in 1936

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AS WITH PARTS I AND II of *The Depression Years* series, the present volume, covering 1936, is almost entirely taken up by the RCMP's assiduous scrutiny of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). RCMP informants and analysts identified "The Party" as the only serious threat to capitalist hegemony; by comparison, Trotskyism is almost completely absent from the following pages. There is a certain irony here, in that with the full adoption of the Popular Front in 1936 the CPC seemed to be enthusiastically embracing social democratic reformism. The RCMP, however, refused to be fooled: anticipating the verdict of a later generation of anti-communist historians, they interpreted the Popular Front line as an elaborate ruse, designed to gull respectable but soft-hearted liberals and socialists into unconscious sponsorship of the communists' unchanged revolutionary objective.¹

This introduction will consider the character of the Popular Front, if only to test the implicit verdict of the *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins* (henceforth *Bulletins*). Historians are divided in their interpretations of this moment in the history of the Communist International (Comintern). Eric Hobsbawm, reflecting the impact of 1970s Eurocommunism, has found a "usable past" in the Popular Front "strategy." He characterizes the post-Seventh Comintern Congress line as a strategy "of concentric circles. The united forces of labour (the 'United Front') would form the foundation of a wider electoral and political alliance with democrats and liberals (the 'Popular Front')." He rejects the view that the deliberate shift from "an insurrectionary to a gradualist, from a confrontational to a negotiating, even a parliamentary, way to power" involved

¹Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party, A Critical History 1919-1957* (New York 1962).

a betrayal of socialism.² Other historians, however, sharing the views of those Hobsbawm labels “purists on the ultra-Left,” have argued that the attempt to keep the two “concentric circles” connected led not to the progressive domination of the proletarian inner-circle but to a capitulation to Liberalism.³ The verdict of Cold War scholarship has already been mentioned.

Without wishing to be judged a mugwump, I would argue that all three perspectives are too essentialist to capture the lived experience of the Popular Front. They almost certainly impute an exaggerated degree of forethought to the Comintern. The Seventh Congress line had, after all, emerged from a troubled gestation and its application contained improvisation as well as planning.⁴ Though there was a clear shift away from the policy of frontal attack, most communists continued to believe that insurrection was their ultimate goal.⁵ Many of the elements that comprise a Gramscian “war of position” perspective became visible in 1936: the pursuit of alliances, the struggle for cultural hegemony in civil society, the political education of proletarian “organic intellectuals,” the need to win over *bourgeois* organic intellectuals to the working class.⁶ Whether their presence constituted a fully-articulated strategy — reformist or revolutionary — is another matter. Viewed without hindsight, the Popular Front of 1936 was not the finished article of 1938. All the CPC really knew was that the general direction of the new wind from Moscow was to the right. When Stewart Smith announced to a Lenin Memorial Meeting in Edmonton that the Seventh Congress line would be applied by every CP without exception (placing the humble CPC on a par with the mass parties of France and Spain), it is doubtful if even he, the most

²Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London 1994), 147-8, 162-3.

³See, for example, James Weinstein, *Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics* (New York 1975), chs. 3, 5.

⁴Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (Harmondsworth 1975), 166-99; E.H. Carr, *The Twilight of Comintern, 1930-1935* (Basingstoke 1982), 147-55.

⁵For examples of the various ways in which party leaders explained the new line, see Stewart Smith, Vancouver: *RCMP Security Bulletin* (henceforth *Bulletin*) #792, 5 February 1936; Jan Lakeman, Edmonton: #803, 22 April 1936; Sam Carr, Winnipeg #788, 8 January 1936.

⁶Though, of course, they were not conceptualized as such; the Italian theoretician's travails in fascist prisons were intermittently highlighted in Comintern circles, especially when the general political line of the movement shifted towards Gramsci's longstanding criticisms of the Third Period, but his proto-Popular Frontism was not common intellectual currency. See Maria Montagnana to Togliatti, 29 April 1937, Appendix 12, in Paolo Spriano, *Antonio Gramsci and the Party: The Prison Years* (London 1979), 181-2.

Moscow-sensitive of the CPC leadership, knew precisely where the line would lead by the year's end.⁷

My primary intention here is a modest one: to use the *Bulletins* to illustrate some of the key themes of CPC politics in 1936. Readers will quickly realize that I barely mention many others: the ritual of support for the Soviet Union, the role of protestant clergymen in the politics of peace and anti-fascism, the party's wooing of the CCF and Social Credit, the election of Canada's first communist provincial legislator (James Litterick), the emergence of solidarity with Republican Spain as a *cause célèbre*, the continued vibrancy of the unemployed movement, to mention just some (they might also note that while the RCMP clearly had excellent contacts inside the party, it either chose not to reveal the full extent of its knowledge here or failed to penetrate the inner core of the party leadership). I have concentrated on three themes that elucidate the growth of the Popular Front and point up issues of intrinsic interest to historians of the party and the period. The first two concern the way in which a section of the party leadership translated an "anti-sectarian" thrust into a "liquidationist" tendency that seemed to threaten every part of the party apparatus save the party itself. By way of contrast, the third, a brief examination of the party's attempt to build a national youth movement, hints at the positive potential of the Popular Front to extend the sphere of politics more widely and deeply into civil society than any previous party initiative.

Against 'Sectarianism'

THE AMOUNT OF TIME party leaders had to spend at the start of 1936 reassuring the rank and file that the CPC had not abandoned revolutionary goals suggests that a considerable number of ordinary members feared the opposite. Most rank and filers recognized the value of unity with the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and its Cooperative Commonwealth Youth Movement (CCYM); indeed at the local level joint action was already common. Many were prepared to work with the growing number of middle class sympathizers—including many protestant ministers—who were being drawn into struggle by the Canadian League Against War and Fascism (CLAWF) and the rapidly changing unemployed movement.⁸ Few, however, readily perceived the socialist potential of an alliance with Social Credit and some in

⁷ *Bulletin* #792, 5 February 1936.

⁸ On the participation of ministers in left wing activities, see *Bulletin* #788, 8 January 1936 (Montreal, Glace Bay); #790, 22 January 1936 (Toronto); #792, 5 February 1936 (Edmonton); #794, 19 February 1936 (Alberta); #796, 4 March 1936 (Kenora, Ont.); #797, 11 March 1936 (Edmonton); #801, 8 April 1936 (Winnipeg); #802, 15 April 1936 (Vancouver); #805, 6 May 1936 (Toronto).

a packed party audience at the Grand Theatre, Calgary, must have been aghast when they heard Stewart Smith declare that "its aims were similar to that of the Communist Party, i.e., to raise the standard of living in Alberta." In January the party refused to endorse the pamphlet *Hitlerism in Canada*, written by Vancouver sympathizer A.M. Stephen and published by the B.C. provincial organization of the CLAWF, on the grounds that it had labelled Social Credit and provincial premier William Aberhart "fascist and anti-semitic." Since this had been the standard party line on Social Credit only months earlier, some members may have wondered what fresh concessions would be required to create the People's Party.⁹

The appeasement of the "outer circle," moreover, was quickly backed up by an internal attack on the residue of Third Period sectarianism. Since ideological "purges" had become an established part of party life in the late 1920s, the leadership had usually been careful to call for equal vigilance against "right" and "left" dangers. During 1936, however, believing they had Comintern approval, they pursued the liquidation of sectarianism with such vigour that a general "liquidatory" tendency took hold. Their main target was the apparatus of "fronts" that had traditionally operated as "transmission belts" between the party and the class. As we shall see below, the first and most significant victim was the Workers' Unity League, but the Canadian Labour Defense League (CLDL) and even the Young Communist League (YCL) became vulnerable too.¹⁰

The CLDL's case is particularly instructive, not only for exemplifying the party's general rightward tendency but also for revealing the lack of clarity surrounding the new line and the disputes — understandable but hitherto undocumented — that were occurring within the party leadership over its implementation. Early in 1936 the party received a lengthy directive from the International Red Aid (the CLDL's parent body) on the "Reorganization of the Canadian Labour Defense League and the Building of a People's Defense Movement." This called for the CLDL to work for the construction of a more broadly-based defence organization reflecting the "progressive awakening

⁹*Bulletin* #790, 22 January 1936; #791, 30 January 1936. Perhaps stung by Tim Buck's charge that it had gone overboard in offering Aberhart unconditional approval, the provincial party quite quickly moved to a united front "from below" approach to the Social Credit rank and file. This was probably an example of the party centre emulating in its relations with the periphery its own relations with the Comintern; mistakes always lay in the implementation of policy on the ground. See #804, 29 April 1936 and #818, 5 August 1936. For Buck's rebuke, see Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto 1975), 108-11.

¹⁰On liquidationist tendencies in the YCL, see *Bulletin*, #803, 22 April 1936; #807, 20 May 1936.

among masses of middle class, church and professional people" to the emerging fascist danger. While honouring the CLDL's "rich history of struggle and achievement," the document charged that its "organization and leadership" were seriously marred by "hidebound sectarianism." To eliminate its over-close identification with the party, the International Red Aid ordered it to throw off "'old' Party forms and ideology," learn a discourse that reflected the "needs and thoughts of the Canadian people," and work in a way that would prove "palatable to all strata."¹¹

The Comintern's reference to the "hidebound sectarianism" of the CLDL's leadership could only have meant National Secretary A.E. Smith. Was it purely coincidental that, shortly after this message arrived, the veteran party leader should leave for a European trip that kept him out of Canada until October?¹² Questions like these reveal the limitations of the *Security Bulletins*; RCMP analysts often seem lacking in fundamental historical curiosity! Smith probably accepted the case for a broader organization, but he was surely not prepared for what happened in his absence. Sailing from New York on 14 March, he may not have attended the CPC National Executive Committee meeting three weeks earlier, which decided to *strengthen* the organization before "liquidating [it] at the earliest possible moment" and transforming it from a national organization into local Citizens' Defence Committees.¹³ He was not at the 7 March meeting in Montréal when Becky Buhay Ewan referred to the CLDL as a "second CP" and reported that the Comintern had ordered the liquidation of the International Red Aid itself.¹⁴ Liquidation was the message that reached the lower party units. Some quickly launched new organizations more attuned to the Popular Front thrust; Winnipeg's CLDL branch, for example, became the more *bourgeois*-friendly Citizen's Liberty Club.¹⁵ Often, however, CLDL branches simply fell into decline, to the detriment of workers' defence.¹⁶

When Smith returned from Europe in October, he immediately stopped the liquidationist movement in its tracks. News of the International Red Aid's death had clearly been exaggerated. Smith had brought home another of its

¹¹ *Bulletin* #794, 19 February 1936.

¹² A.E. Smith, *All My Life: An Autobiography* (Toronto 1977), 171-91. Smith makes no mention of the Comintern directive, nor does Jaroslav Petryshyn, "'Class Conflicts and Civil Liberties': The Origins and Activities of the Canadian Labour Defense League, 1925-1940," *Labour/Le Travailleur (LTL)*, 10 (Autumn 1982), 39-63.

¹³ *Bulletin* #796, 4 March 1936.

¹⁴ *Bulletin* #798, 18 March 1936.

¹⁵ *Bulletin* #801, 8 April 1936.

¹⁶ The campaign in support of Ontario unemployed activists arrested during a rash of militant relief strikes in the spring and summer was unusually weak. See *Bulletin* #814, 8 July 1936; #816, 29 July 1936; #826, 30 September 1936.

directives, again strongly critical of the CPC but this time on the grounds that the Canadians had exceeded their anti-sectarian remit. Since the CLDL had abandoned sectarianism, the party's decision to liquidate it was "totally untenable." Instead, it deserved the fullest support. Becky Buhay Ewan, now representing the British Columbia CPC District Committee (where, it is worth noting, the CLDL was never allowed to die), revealed her ability to swim with the tide by submitting to party headquarters a resolution recommending *inter alia* that "we endorse the proposed tour of A.E. Smith across Canada during which he will undertake to assist in every way possible the rebuilding programme of the CLDL." As events transpired, however, the CLDL never regained the importance it held in the early 1930s.¹⁷

Deeper archival research is needed to discover precisely what was going on here. The apparent alacrity of some leaders and ordinary members to wind up an important part of the party apparatus raises important questions. Were they, as the documents suggest, simply misreading the Comintern's signals? Or, given that the party certainly did read "liquidate" where the instructions said "reorganize," were other — possibly informal — communications encouraging them to read between the lines? Or were they positively seizing the chance to liberate themselves definitively from the "sectarian isolation" of the Third Period, never doubting the need for a vanguard party to coordinate their efforts but increasingly confident in their ability to swim otherwise unaided in the mainstream of the labour movement?

Some members, of course, including some leading members, were less than wholeheartedly committed to the Popular Front. It is no surprise to find the British Columbia CLDL resisting the liquidationist tendency or to see leading Vancouver cadre Malcolm Bruce emerging from the *Bulletins* as a "residual" sectarian element. When other sections were dismantling themselves, the B.C. CLDL was conducting an intensive six-week training school "principally dealing with [the] conduct of individuals under arrest for picketing or other activities such as street demonstrations, delegations, etc." Bruce, meanwhile, had been identified by the party centre as a loose cannon. Before a "peace rally" in Vancouver, at which he was the keynote speaker, he received a directive to be "very careful in [his] utterances and not openly antagonize anyone." Whether he complied is not known, but we next encounter him treating open-air crowds at Cambie Street grounds to his views on the German Social Democrats' responsibility for preparing Hitler's rise to power. Although some of the comrades at the centre may well have privately agreed with Bruce's extrapolation that the CCF was bent on following a similar path of misleadership, they found it politically embarrassing to hear this view

¹⁷ *Bulletin* #831, 4 November 1936. See also Petryshyn, "Canadian Labour Defense League," 60-1.

expounded continuously and in public.¹⁸ It needs to be stressed, however, that there were very few Malcolm Bruces. This is underlined by the lack of open defiance to the centre's trade union policy.

The End of the Workers' Unity League and the Rise of Workers' Unity

AS NOTED IN THE INTRODUCTION to the preceding volume in this series, unlike its counterpart in the United States, the Workers' Unity League (WUL) remained an active trade union force throughout 1935.¹⁹ Although its "liquidation" was ordered by the November CPC Central Committee Plenum and the immediately-following WUL National Convention, the WUL did not simply "dissolve" overnight.²⁰ The present volume shows in considerable detail that liquidation was a process — indeed party officials often preferred to use the more positive term "unity process" — that took several months to complete. Once the decision was taken, as Irving Abella justly observes, "there could be no exceptions." The party undoubtedly followed what Canadian Trotskyists gleefully described as a "Unity at Any Cost" policy.²¹ Yet while the WUL simply withdrew support from some small local unions, where the larger red unions were concerned it maintained at least the appearance of rank-and-file democracy. The party's determination to play a "responsible"

¹⁸ *Bulletin* #796, 4 March 1936; #804, 29 April; #808, 27 May; #812, 24 June 1936. On Bruce's leftism, see Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class in the Great Depression: The Workers' Unity League, 1930-1936," PhD dissertation, Dalhousie University, 1984, 132, 543-4. In the 1940s Bruce joined the Canadian Trotskyist movement. In an interview with the author, the late Reg Bullock claimed that Bruce broke emotionally with Stalinism during the Popular Front.

¹⁹ John Manley, "Introduction" to Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part II, 1935* (St. John's 1995), 12-4.

²⁰ Norman Penner and Irving Abella give this impression in, respectively, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough 1977), 138, and *Communism, Nationalism, and Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1973), 3-4.

²¹ *The Vanguard*, 16 September, 15 November 1935. Trotskyists considered that the party's "turn" had vindicated their longstanding opposition to the party's withdrawal from the international unions. For its part, the CPC tried to differentiate between its unity policy and the "right-opportunist liquidation which is sponsored by the counter-revolutionary fragments of Trotskyism in Canada." See "The WUL Fights for Unity," in *Towards a Canadian People's Front*, Proceedings of the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee, CPC (Toronto, November 1935), 122-26. On the WUL generally, see John Manley, "Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the 'Third Period': The Workers' Unity League, 1929-1936," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, NS, 5 (1994), 167-94. I spend little time on the unity process in that article and am grateful for the opportunity to say a little more here.

leading role in the unified unions meant that, if only for reasons of self-interest, it had to hold the red unions together while negotiating the best possible terms of readmission to the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

The *Bulletins* contain several useful documents on the CPC's trade union unity ideology and tactics. One in particular, a long report on "The CP and the Trade Unions," includes an outline of proposed trade union work in Southern Ontario that shows how the CPC leadership quickly accepted the general Comintern strategy of working for "one trade union in each industry; for one federation of trade unions in each country; for one international federation of trade unions organized according to industries; and for one international of trade unions based on the 'class struggle.'" It also shows that the party understood the need to explain retrospectively a tactic which summarily overturned five years of struggle and left many WUL members, as one ex-communist put it, "dazed and gasping for breath." Having been taught that the "reformists were the worse enemies of the working class, out of a clear blue sky came the ... announcement that these men ... were okay. They were fine, upstanding defenders of labor's right ... progressive, trustworthy fighters for democracy. We were ordered to throw all our convictions overboard, to turn our backs on the cause to which we had willingly given our life."²²

With the decision taken at the top, and with no real discussion of why the Third Period line was wrong, the party launched a "wide propaganda campaign" to explain the importance of trade union unity to the members of both the WUL and AFL unions. Party speakers, armed with speakers' notes (a product of the contemporary emphasis on internal party education) on the defensive and offensive advantages of workers' unity, dwelt on the real possibilities that now existed to "organize the unorganized" in the "basic" industries. They constantly hammered home this message at mass meetings and open forums, often with the participation of more intelligent AFL representatives who knew that once the party had determined to assist the international unions its members would apply themselves to the task with unsparing diligence.²³ Communists did not shirk the question of "trade union democracy," but they meant by this the fight to reinstate comrades who had been expelled in previous years and to oppose any "unprincipled splitting" of All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL) unions. Their greatest concern was to give practical proof to the AFL of their *bona fides*. All newly formed unions were to be affiliated to the AFL, and whenever possible red unions should be transferred to it without undue prevarication over the "procuring of charters." Most instructively of all, the party abandoned its "rank and fileist" tradition.

²² 'Ex-Communist,' "I was a Communist Agitator," *Labor Leader*, 18 December 1936.

²³ See Hyman Langer, "How Toronto Dressmakers Rejoined ILGWU," *Justice*, 15 August 1936.

Instead of organizing permanent "Opposition Groups," communists were instructed to organize on an *ad hoc* basis around the issues thrown up by the labour movement. The objective was not to have control of permanent factions but to draw "large numbers of workers who will help us carry through progressive policies and reforms in each union."²⁴

Local circumstances dictated the tempo of liquidation/unity. In Winnipeg, for example, negotiations for "the gradual liquidation of all W.U.L. unions in the City" were well advanced by January, largely as a consequence of a dramatic incursion by International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) organizer Sam Herbst during the previous summer. By the autumn of 1935 Herbst had engineered the negotiated entry of the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers' (IUNTW) into the ILGWU.²⁵ With the departure of the WUL's biggest local unit, it was merely a question of ushering smaller groups of railroad workers, truckers, bakers, meat packers, and furriers into the appropriate craft or Trades and Labour Congress (TLC)-chartered federal labour union.²⁶ The pace of unity in Montréal was equally swift. Devastated by the defeat of the 1934 IUNTW dressmakers' strike, during the spring of 1935 the party effectively abandoned its attempt to keep the union going. Veteran party member Alex Gauld, who had never surrendered his membership in the AFL Plumbers' Union or become truly reconciled to the Third Period line, emerged as the most prominent organizer of trade union work, which by the spring of 1936 was wholly devoted to organizing the unorganized, notably in steel, metal working, and longshoring, into the AFL.²⁷

The idea that trade union unity was always imposed without formal consultation can be dispelled by looking at developments in any of the more established red unions. Here we will look at the entry of the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union into the Lumber and Sawmill Workers' Union, a semi-autonomous section of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (UBCJ), but there were similar developments in, for example, the garment trades and coal mining.²⁸

²⁴SB #791, 30 January 1936; #818, 5 August 1936.

²⁵*The Vanguard*, 15 July, 1 August, 2 September, 15 October, 1, 15 November 1935; *Manitoba Commonwealth*, 19, 26 July, 16, 23 August 1935; Toronto, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, ILGWU Records, Sam Kraisman to Sam Herbst, 20 July 1935; Herbst to Kraisman, 19 August 1935; *Winnipeg Free Press*, 30 August 1935; *Young Worker*, 7 September 1935; *Justice*, 1 September 1935.

²⁶SB, #788, 8 January 1936; #789, 15 January 1936.

²⁷National Archives of Canada, R.B. Bennett Papers, microfilm, 94348, RCMP, weekly memorandum re "Revolutionary Activities in Quebec," 26 March 1935; SB #801, 8 April 1936.

²⁸For the IUNTW, see Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 514-21; and for the Nova Scotia miners, see Michael J. Earle, "The Coalminers and

The process began with the union's Western District Wage Scale Conference held in Vancouver in late December 1935. The presence of fraternal delegates from the Vancouver UBCJ and Washington state locals of the LSWU underlined that the CPC was already actively promoting unity. Jack Stevenson, a prominent UBCJ leftist emphasized the advantages of unity with the AFL, citing the example of the 1935 longshore strike as a reminder of the dangers of isolation from the mainstream. LSWU delegates pointed out the unfavourable disparity in wage levels between Canada and the United States and called for the LWIU to unite in struggle for wage equalization. The conference duly voted to recommend unification with the LSWU as a step towards a stronger union and higher wages. During January and February the LWIU executive negotiated merger terms that could not have been bettered. The British Columbia LWIU became the B.C. district of the LSWU, with its existing — CP-led — locals intact and with full rights of representation on the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council. It put this proposal to a district referendum in April, and with the LSWU already supporting an LWIU strike at Cowichan Lake, there was never any doubt that unification would go through. Members voted by 1048-23 to accept the deal.²⁹

These events had obvious implications for the LWIU's Eastern District. Indeed, while unity negotiations between the LSWU and LWIU started later in the east, they were completed even earlier. Interestingly, the union's Ontario leaders initiated unity talks with the Port Arthur Trades and Labour Council (PATLC) as early as September 1935. At that time they took the position that the Council should rally behind the red union, since it was the only independent labour organization in the Ontario and Québec lumber industry. They apparently held that position until early March, but the speed of subsequent events suggest that other negotiations were going on behind the scenes. When the LWIU called on delegates from the LSWU, UBCJ and International Pulp and Sulphite Workers Union to attend its Eastern District Conference at the Port Arthur Trades and Labour Hall on 21-22 March, it clearly intended to catch up with developments on the coast. In fact, it surpassed them. The conference doubled as a unity celebration, with delegates voting *unanimously* to enter the LSWU.³⁰

Their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936," *L/LT*, 22 (Fall 1988), 130-3, and David Frank and John Manley, "The Sad March to the Right: J.B. McLachlan's Resignation from the Communist Party of Canada, 1936," *L/LT*, 30 (Fall 1992), 115-34.

²⁹ *Bulletin* #789, 15 January 1936; #793, 12 February 1936; #803, 22 April 1936.

³⁰ *Bulletin* #798, 18 March 1936; #800, 1 April 1936. For developments in 1935, see Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 339.

During the early months of 1936, then, the Workers' Unity League (WUL) was dismantled as fast as decency allowed. On many occasions J.B. Salsberg and Tom Ewan negotiated satisfactory terms of merger or readmission, but when the internationals proved recalcitrant they usually pressed for "organizational compromises." By no means every WUL member agreed that unity required the WUL's demise. At a meeting of over 1,000 Toronto workers in the Strand Theatre on 12 January, Salsberg acknowledged that "certain individuals ... are reluctant" to go back to the "reactionary" unions.³¹ But go back they did. In May a political bureau circular on the campaign against sectarianism specifically castigated the "leftist" course of the Nova Scotia members in the campaign to re-unite the red Amalgamated Mine Workers with District 26 of John L. Lewis' United Mine Workers of America. Showing a fine grasp of dialectics, it simultaneously charged the Nova Scotians with failing to appreciate the significance of Lewis' stand as the champion of industrial unionism and accused them of thereby weakening rather than strengthening "the fight against Lewis."³² This circular may have been the last straw for veteran Cape Breton communist J.B. McLachlan, whose growing alienation stemmed in large part from the party's unconditional *surrender* to the American miners' leader. Significantly, McLachlan was the only prominent party member to resign over the WUL's liquidation.³³

During the Third Period the connections between trade unionism and political class struggle were always clear. Now, however, the final conflict — though still on its way! — seemed far less imminent. What now was the purpose of industrial work? Communist spokespersons had alternative answers for different audiences. When they shared the platform with AFL notables, they emphasized harmony, responsibility, sincerity, unity for unity's sake. Speaking alone before party audiences, on the other hand, the watchword was struggle. In general, however, the party leadership was happy to settle in for the long haul.³⁴ Tom Ewan's appointment as B.C. provincial trade union chief in July was significant.³⁵ His commitment to the new line was not in question, but it was perhaps more politic to install as national trade union director J.B. Salsberg, who was both a former reformist union bureaucrat (in

³¹ *Bulletin* #790, 22 January 1936.

³² *Bulletin* #807, 20 May 1936.

³³ See *Bulletin* #825, 23 September 1936 for a report on Willie Gallacher's speech at Glace Bay and J.B. McLachlan's emotional intervention in which he declared his willingness to "die for the CP" and "was heartily applauded by a large number of the people present." See also, Frank and Manley, "The Sad March to the Right," 129.

³⁴ Compare reports of meetings in Toronto and Edmonton, *Bulletin* #790, 22 January and #808, 27 May 1936. See also, Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 350-3.

³⁵ *Bulletin* #815, 15 July 1936.

the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers' Union) and a casualty of Third Period "ultra-leftism." Once the return of the WUL into the internationals had been successfully negotiated, Salsberg turned to the tricky task of consolidating a left wing bloc at the forthcoming TLC Annual Convention while cementing an alliance with the labour establishment.

Under Salsberg's direction, the party did not abandon its leading role in building new trade union organization. Throughout most of 1936 communists continued to build on the WUL's pioneering achievements, sometimes in subdued, semi-clandestine fashion but often through strikes, several of which attracted close attention from the *Security Bulletins* (notably those involving B.C. loggers, sugar beet workers in Alberta and Ontario, Winnipeg furriers, and rayon textile workers in Cornwall, Ontario). For a clear understanding of the dynamics of these strikes, the *Security Bulletins* have to be supplemented.³⁶ In terms of the development of the Popular Front, however, there are hints here that party leaders were adopting a similar stance towards industrial militancy to that of their French counterparts — admittedly in more momentous circumstances — that same summer, when proof of revolutionary maturity was said to be knowing when and how to stop a strike rather than press it forward towards a premature "political" conclusion.³⁷

An intriguing report of an internal party discussion on the conduct of the Cornwall strike reveals, on the one hand, criticism of the strike leadership's early lack of militancy and on the other hand a marked hesitancy among the party leadership in deciding on militant solidarity action. One member proposed spreading the strike to textile plants in Welland, Toronto, and Hamilton — but only if negotiations at Cornwall failed. He also recommended picketing the Scarboro depot of the Toronto Transportation Company, which Courtauld's employed to ship the finished rayon. Another contributor felt that it would be too difficult to isolate the Cornwall-bound trucks from those plying between Montréal and Toronto and suggested that the strike committee in Cornwall should roll rocks down on the trucks as they left for the highway! Neither action was endorsed. Instead, agreeing that defeat seemed likely, the

³⁶On the Alberta beet strikes — and for a critique of Popular Front industrial tactics — see John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, "Workers, Growers and Monopolists: The 'Labour Problem' in the Alberta Beet Sugar Industry During the 1930s," *L/LT*, 3 (1978), 164-71. On the logging strikes, see Myrtle Bergren, *Tough Timber: the loggers of British Columbia — their story* (Toronto 1977), 90-6. See the September *Bulletins* for the Winnipeg fur strike.

³⁷Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France* (Cambridge 1988); Claudin, *The Communist Movement*, 199-207.

party decided to send a representative "to assist the leadership so they may know how far to retreat."³⁸

This measured, even pessimistic, approach may have stemmed solely from a desire to terminate the strike on the best possible terms. One other factor, however, may have impinged on the party's reasoning. In July the CPC National Trade Union Commission had published its program for submission to the TLC, calling for a return to the principles of the pre-Third Period 1920s: industrial unionism, trade union unity, and Canadian trade union autonomy.³⁹ With the TLC Annual Convention in Montréal fast approaching, the party may have considered that its short term interests would best be served by a deck-clearing exercise elsewhere. A lingering strike in a nearby town, involving mainly non-craft-skilled young women, was an unnecessarily messy context for an intervention that was designed in part to demonstrate the left's new sense of maturity.

The left's passive demeanour at the convention suggested that the party had subordinated militancy to unity. Among the various proposals left wingers pressed through their unions and trades councils in advance of the convention was one calling for the creation of a TLC "organization department" to coordinate the activities of the growing number of directly chartered federal local unions and initiate the formation of new federal locals in the auto, rubber, textiles, steel, meat packing and leather industries; in other words, the industries in which the WUL had established no more than the bare beginnings of organization.⁴⁰ History eerily repeated itself; as in the early 1920s, not one left wing resolution was carried. The only real difference lay in the left's response. Given its analysis of the moment as one pregnant with organizing possibilities, one might have expected its members to greet TLC inertia with the sort of withering rhetoric that was *de rigeur* a decade earlier. But as the RCMP reported, the left was "rather inconspicuous."⁴¹ Not reported in the *Security Bulletins* was the one occasion when debate on the floor threatened to get out of hand: on the call for mandatory retirement of TLC officials at age 60 or 65. Emerging from the shadows, Salsberg chastised this attack on labour's "official family" and specifically cited veteran President Paddy Draper as a man whose experience was invaluable to the movement.⁴²

³⁸ *Bulletin* #822, 2 September 1936. On the Cornwall strike, see *Daily Clarion*, 4, 6, 7, 11, 12 August 1936 and Bernard Rawlinson, "Cornwall: Diary of a Strike," *New Frontier*, 1 (October 1926), 15-7, 23.

³⁹ *Bulletin* #821, 26 August 1936.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Bulletin* #825, 23 September 1936.

⁴² For an account of the Convention, see Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 375-8.

The failure of the left-wing bloc to press the issue of industrial unionism meant that it barely reached the convention floor. Behind the convention's bland official proceedings an unofficial "corridor congress" had been in constant session, in which the question of industrial unionism had been virtually the sole subject of hectic "discussion, lobbying and caucusing." In retrospect, Salsberg admitted that the party had probably underplayed its hand. However, he also managed to console himself with the thought that, once the party had translated "the CIO methods of organization [into] Canadian terms," the irrefutable logic of industrial unionism as the only possible mode of organizing the mass production industries would have to be recognized. If Salsberg's caution was tactically defensible, some on the left may have wondered whether and under what circumstances he would end his deference to the "official family."⁴³

That said, there is little doubt that the trade union unity process vastly enhanced the party's trade union influence. The many warnings in the *Security Bulletins* to this effect were not simply the product of paranoia. When compared with the position in 1928-29, when the CPC bolted from the mainstream, its influence in 1936 was incomparably greater. In passing, it is worth raising the question: would the CPC have been in an even stronger position if it had spent the Class against Class years embedded in the international unions or was its vitality in 1936 a consequence of the credit accumulated during the years of sectarian independence?

In any event, the *Bulletins* reported one communist success after another. The year began with Jan Lakeman, one of those expelled in 1929, defeating the conservative President of the Edmonton Trades and Labour Council (ETLC), Carl Berg, in the contest to become Council delegate to the Alberta Federation of Labor. Although the ETLC proceeded to invoke the AFL's anti-communist clause and narrowly overturn the vote, both the CPC and the RCMP felt that the industrial future in Alberta belonged to the left.⁴⁴ Prospects looked equally favourable in Montréal. In 1935 Alex Gauld had boasted that the shop paper produced for the Angus CPR shops, the *Headlight*, had a circulation of 500; in April 1936 an unidentified speaker reported that 2000 copies of the paper were now being distributed.⁴⁵ Although a later account revealed that victimizations had left party members in the railroad shops "afraid to carry on any work," it also noted that the CPC now had 21 delegates on Montréal Trades and Labour Council, including every delegate from the

⁴³J.B. Salsberg, "Lessons for Labour from the TLC Congress," *Daily Clarion*, 26 September 1936; Salsberg, "Where Our Trade Congress Fell Short," *Daily Clarion*, 3 October 1936.

⁴⁴*Bulletin* #790, 22 January 1936; #820, 19 August 1936.

⁴⁵*Bulletin* #807, 13 May 1936; #801, 8 April 1936.

Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union. The Montréal party now had an Industrial Commission to coordinate trade union work and was entrenched in 11 trades.⁴⁶ Similarly optimistic reports emanated from Winnipeg and Vancouver.⁴⁷

The RCMP was probably most concerned with the left's dramatic trade union advances in Toronto. The *Bulletins* report the "swing to the left" in the Toronto Trades and Labour Council (TTL) in May, when the TTL voted almost unanimously both to rescind its 1929 anti-communist clause and to endorse industrial unionism; by August more than 50 communists were delegates to the TTL. Unlike the 1920s, moreover, trades and labour council activity was not a substitute for shopfloor organization. The Toronto party's Industrial Commission was typically unsatisfied with the progress of "concentration work" — for all its growing influence, the party's longstanding inability to organize itself on a "bolshvized" workplace basis remained worrisome — but there were promising signs of new industrial life in the shop papers appearing at General Steel Wares and Massey Harris. Political and trade union advances made the party "dizzy with success," as witnessed by its mock funeral for Section 98 of the Criminal Code at Queen's Park, where a euphoric Tim Buck pledged that the CPC would recruit 100,000 new members for the AFL by the 1937 party congress.⁴⁸

In general, the RCMP reported in August, Canadian trade unionism was undergoing a "profound radicalization" largely due to the re-admission of former red unionists.⁴⁹ The *Bulletins* noted with dismay the appearance of the *Daily Clarion* in May, its special "steel issue" in November, when 4000 extra copies were produced for distribution throughout Canada's steel centres, and the surprising degree of trade union financial support the communist daily was receiving. Commenting on the paper's end-of-year press drive, it noted that where support in the past had come almost exclusively from the party's language organizations, in this drive the union locals and trades and labour councils listed as donors were "too numerous to mention." Not only the source but the amount of money raised was remarkable, given that the *Clarion* drive was run in tandem with another (equally effective) fund-raising campaign in support of Republican Spain.⁵⁰ The last issue of the 1936 *Bulletins* noted

⁴⁶ *Bulletin* #823, 9 September 1936.

⁴⁷ *Bulletin* #808, 27 May 1936; Vancouver; #812, 24 June 1936; #821, 16 August 1936; #832, 12 November 1936; Winnipeg.

⁴⁸ *Bulletin* #809, 3 June 1936; #814, 8 July 1936; #823, 9 September 1936; #816, 29 July 1936.

⁴⁹ *Bulletin* #819, 12 August 1936.

⁵⁰ *Bulletin* #834, 25 November 1936; #835, 2 December 1936.

another unwelcome development: Canada's first sit-down strike, at Kelsey-Hayes Wheel, Windsor.⁵¹

A Hegemonic Project? Children and "The Youth"

AS PETER HUNTER's important memoir demonstrates, the CPC made an early turn away from the Third Period in its work among "the youth." Not yet a YCL member, Hunter was chosen to attend the inaugural Paris World Youth Congress against War and Fascism in 1933. On his subsequent national publicity tour, he discovered that certain "bourgeois tendencies" had crept into party culture. Arriving in Winnipeg in rather bedraggled shape, he was surprised to be asked to wear a "presentable" (borrowed) suit before appearing at a banquet in his honour. The YCL was already active in the wider youth community, and in Winnipeg he addressed several meetings of high school students, university students, and the general public, to which the *Winnipeg Free Press* gave sympathetic coverage.⁵²

Thus when Bill Kashtan addressed the Seventh Comintern Congress on behalf of the Canadian YCL he was able to report that the Canadian organization was already well on the way towards transforming itself "from a narrow organization into a broad mass *non-Party* organization, standing at the head of wide sections and strata of youth." Its members now understood the importance of relating to young Canadians "as they are and not as we would like them to be," and Kashtan looked forward to the creation of a mass youth organization with 25,000 individual members.⁵³ The YCL had already become the prime mover behind the Canadian Youth Congress (CYC). First held in May 1935, when it was re-launched on a permanent basis in 1936 communists were thoroughly acclimatized to pursuing through it work of a progressive rather than strictly socialist character. The YCL ended 1936 predicting the imminent decline of the Cooperative Commonwealth Youth Movement (CCYM), one of the strongest forces in the CYC, because of its refusal to abandon "narrow socialist" perspectives.⁵⁴

RCMP reports on city, provincial and national conferences on peace, anti-fascism, "socialism and economic reconstruction" and the material needs of young Canadians show how communists struggled to create a national mass youth movement of high school and university students, young professionals,

⁵¹ *Bulletin* #837, 23 December 1936.

⁵² Peter Hunter, *Which Side Are You On Boys? Canadian Life on the Left* (Toronto 1988), 38-42, 46-7.

⁵³ Sections of the speech are quoted in *Bulletin* #811, 17 June 1936; my emphasis.

⁵⁴ *Bulletin* #835, 2 December 1936. On the CYC and 1930s student protest, see Paul Axelrod, "Spying on the Young in Depression and War: Students, Youth Groups and the RCMP, 1935-1942," *Labour/Le Travail*, 35 (Spring 1995), 43-63.

and rural and urban young workers. Inevitably, they reflect the security services' one-sided interpretation of communist motives. As YCL leaders were aware, the feeling was widespread that their work among young people and children was "a snare for unsuspecting innocents."⁵⁵ State officials saw the left's promotion of progressive rather than socialist issues as merely tactical; one RCMP analyst quoted the French Communist Marcel Cachin's comment that in pursuit of their goals communists were prepared to "ally ourselves with the devil" and commented that "The devil, in this instance, apparently means the bourgeois youth of Canada."⁵⁶ Communists made the counter-argument that their subordination of long term political goals to the daily struggle around the "immediate needs of the youth" simply reflected the level of consciousness of non-party youth; they added that they never hid their socialist purpose — an assertion that also spoke to the non-party left's claim that the party really had betrayed socialism.

One change in communist youth politics during the Popular Front saw a new practical distinction made between "children" and "youth." Fourteen had always been the age of eligibility for membership of the YCL. Younger "reds" could join the Young Pioneers, but both organizations had traditionally been activist extensions of the party itself, their members coming almost entirely from party families. Dissatisfaction with the Young Pioneers' exclusivity and lack of impact came to the fore in 1935-36, when the party launched an attempt to create a new organization, the Children's Council. As its name suggests, the emphasis of this organization was to be supervisory rather than participatory. One party document, reprinted here, virtually wrote off the Young Pioneers. Without once mentioning the organization, the document admitted that its methods had been inappropriate, not least because "parents [were not] willing to have their children act as shock troops of economic struggle." Thus, in the Popular Front, parents rather than their children were to be the key activists. The party intended to give them practical guidance on how to struggle on behalf of their children's educational, health, recreational, and housing needs. Meanwhile, the children themselves could be children rather than young bolsheviks. Another sign of changing times was the party's willingness to consider as potential allies groups once considered militarist auxiliaries of the imperialist state — cadres were even enjoined to learn from the "methods and forms of work" of the Boy Scouts!⁵⁷

The party's strategic objective was to exercise indirect but progressively deepening political influence on young people. It hoped to build a broad

⁵⁵*Bulletin* #831, 4 November 1936.

⁵⁶*Bulletin* #811, 17 June 1936.

⁵⁷See the report of the tour and speech of "Miss Turn" of the Toronto Children's Council in *Bulletin* #796, 4 March 1936.

“progressive” federation of children’s organizations and aimed to root it in existing non-party labour and left wing organizations (CCF, trough unions, socialist parties), its own associated “progressive” organizations like the CLAWF, “Women’s peace” organizations and “established” *bourgeois* youth and community organizations like the Scouts, Girl Guides, Y.M.C.A.s and Settlement Houses. By the middle of the year the party could point to several successful initiatives in the Toronto-Hamilton area: for example, an arts and crafts exhibit and “Peace Poster Campaign” organized by the Canadian Youth Council in Toronto, the organization of children’s sections by two Toronto CCF Clubs and a particularly impressive effort in Hamilton, where five groups had been “Set up by the CCF organization ... thru the indirect work of the Hamilton’s Children’s Council.”

The party considered the Hamilton project especially promising for having drawn in sympathetic artists and boys’ camp leaders, for notwithstanding its new emphasis on indirect influence, the party retained a strong belief in the crucial importance of party-building. During the Popular Front, the CPC for the first time gave serious attention to the recruitment of middle class intellectuals. As well as winning over working class parents, the new orientation was designed to win over teachers, social workers and Settlement House workers to the progressive children’s movement. The party considered that many members of these professions working in daily contact with the working class, teachers in particular, were ready to align themselves with the labour movement. Moreover, “progressive” teachers and social workers were “a fine source from which to draw cadres — already trained to a certain extent — for the children’s movement.” With this in mind, perhaps, the Toronto Children’s Council (TCC) organized a two-week summer training school for young progressives (CCF left-wingers were specially invited) who were planning careers in work with children. In theoretical and practical classes they could study such subjects as Child Psychology, the History of Education, Child Welfare, and Teachers’ Problems.⁵⁸

It is interesting to observe RCMP responses to the party’s evident success in winning over middle-class converts: “Under the cloak of respectability [they manage] to attract persons who ordinarily would never think of associating themselves with the open Communist movement. The membership is constantly growing.” The reference here was specifically to the New Theatre Group of Montréal, but the analysis was typical. Setting aside the possibility that young middle-class people might be genuinely inspired by belonging to a cause, the “deluded dupes” approach overlooked another possibility: that the “respectable” had their own ulterior motives and were quite consciously using

⁵⁸Bulletin #818, 5 August 1936.

the party to advance them.⁵⁹ Like the TCC with its training school, the New Theatre Group (25 per cent of its 140 members were communists) offered aspiring young cultural workers in its various dance, drama, and writers' groups opportunities to learn and experiment, and perhaps obtain their first footholds on the professional ladder.⁶⁰

Claims and counter-claims about communist motives cannot be definitively evaluated here, but the "deluded dupes" interpretation is frankly patronizing to some of the country's brightest young people. Moreover, the RCMP's tunnel-vision produced errors of fact as well as interpretation. When a meeting of the Ontario Section of the CCYM passed a resolution on war, the RCMP ascribed its impeccably Leninist "revolutionary defeatist" politics (turn imperialist war into civil war by means of a general strike) to the presence of three YCL fraternal delegates: it is much more likely that at this moment the YCL would have supported the minority who voted against the resolution.⁶¹ The RCMP accurately reported the YCL's criticism of the "narrow socialist politics" of the Ontario CCYM's leadership, then added that the YCL believed that the CCYM was stagnating because it had expelled YCLers and *Trotskyists*.⁶² The latter, of course, formed one of the few groups with whom the YCL was not prepared to ally. All of this is to state the obvious, that these documents should be handled with care.

The RCMP was certainly correct in one important respect; the party's success among high school and student youth was in part a consequence of superior organization. As ever, communists were ready to do the donkey work and eager to generalize good and bad practice from accumulated experience. A report from a communist students' conference in Montréal, attended by delegates from McGill, Toronto, Queen's, Dalhousie, and two Montréal high schools, shows how the YCL was tackling the task of building a "front of the young generation." Particularly interesting is the description of work in the high schools. Although it insisted that there could be "no stereotyped formula," it offered the following rough guidelines based on work at three Montréal schools, Baron Byng, Commercial, and Strathcona:

When one or two contacts exist in a school they should be talked to with a view to organizing a club — as a rule they will be on the progressive side.

⁵⁹ *Bulletin* #835, 2 December 1936. On the idealism of middle-class young communists, see Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto 1989), 152-3.

⁶⁰ For a brief discussion of left wing theatre in the Popular Front period, see Robin Endres, "Introduction" to Richard Wright and Robin Endres, eds., *Eight Men Speak and other plays from the Canadian workers' theatre* (Toronto 1976), xxxiii-v.

⁶¹ *Bulletin* #795, 26 February 1936.

⁶² *Bulletin* #835, 2 December 1936.

The exact situation in the school must be found out from them, so that it becomes clear what type of club and activity are best suited. After three or four failures they get together between half a dozen and a dozen of their friends. After persuading these that the club must be neither a collection of intellectual giants nor ostensibly be interested in nothing but ping-pong while in reality acting as a snare for unsuspecting innocents, the club is under way. In two or three weeks, with constant prodding, its membership will be over 15, and then it is high time to organize circles and activities.

The ideal model was Strathcona High, where a handful of contacts was translated into a 60-strong "progressive" club with a YCL core of 15.⁶³

We see once again emphasis on recruiting the "most active and developed people" to the party and YCL. Among university and high school contacts activity was the more prized quality. Opening its doors to "all those interested in working for a new social order," the YCL provided new recruits with regular training in Marxist theory. Half of its meetings were pure "educationals" and 50 per cent of the time at other meetings was also devoted to some form of educational activity. This approach, it was thought, would sidestep the routine that haunted party life: "Dry as dust meetings are even more dangerous in the high school YCL than elsewhere." High school YCL cadres were not burdened with general responsibilities, but were encouraged to take a full and active part in the recreational activities of their schools. Reminding cadres that "socials and parties are an essential part of high school work," the YCL urged them to become "regular" citizens of the school community.⁶⁴

The YCL operated in a similarly flexible and realistic manner on university campuses. Communists believed that the popularity of the League for Social Reconstruction (LSR) and the McGill Social Problems Club (MSPC) indicated that a considerable section of the undergraduate population had deep interests in studying and thinking about social issues. The YCL's task was to find the right organizational forms to tap into this idealism. Impressed by the MSPC model, the YCL (which predictably had a fraction inside the McGill group) wanted to organize at each university a new dues-paying body that would be recognized as "the most alive and sensitive group of progressive students on campus," capable of attracting the support of outstanding profes-

⁶³ *Bulletin* #831, 4 November 1936.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* See also *Bulletin* #804, 29 April 1936 for a report on the YCL in Québec. Of 300 delegates at the Montreal Youth Congress, the vast majority were anglophones; only 5 of 135 groups represented were French Canada. Of the 15 (of 300) YCL delegates, the only two named were David Kashtan and one "Cowley" — possibly Kent Rowley, who joined the YCL at high school in 1934. See Rick Salutin, *Kent Rowley: The Organizer: A Canadian Union Life* (Toronto 1980), 9-15.

sors, willing to look towards the labour movement and active in deed as well as thought. Early in 1936 it attempted to create a Student League of Canada (SLC), only to conclude some months later that such an organization could only be built from the bottom up.⁶⁵

As they worked to create the SLC, communists also worked to organize a YCL unit on every college campus. Only the YCL could provide "consistent, collective guidance and leadership" to the new recruits who would be pulled to the left — like the several "religious" McGill students who had been convinced that they could work most effectively for "a new social order as members of the YCL." As in the high schools, it was not essential for these young men and women to have accepted "fully the programme of the Comintern" since Marxist theoretical training would be provided. Indeed, YCL campus meetings were largely devoted to educational work. Typically two hours long, they ideally broke down into 20-30 minutes on current events, 45 minutes on student issues, and 45 minutes to an hour on Marxist theory. YCL students were encouraged even more strongly to immerse themselves in marxist literature: self-study was the "most important and most obvious type of educational activity." The YCL was committed to showing the Canadian youth that "its full rights can only be granted by socialism," but it also urged communist students to "try to be students while they are in college."⁶⁶

Superior organizational skills alone would not have established the YCL's place at the heart of the youth movement. Communists also had the clearest vision of the issues that would mobilize Canadian youth. According to the RCMP, communists drafted the year's two most detailed statements of youth: the Declaration of Rights of the Canadian Youth and the Canadian Youth Bill presented (by non-party groups) to the 1936 Canadian Youth Congress.⁶⁷ These documents were frankly reformist. In line with the contemporary CPC tactic of rooting radical politics in national democratic traditions, they claimed political inspiration from the English 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688-89!; they appealed across class boundaries to all sections of the youth whose futures were threatened by monopoly capitalism (the young unemployed, exploited young workers, intellectually excellent working class youth excluded from the later years of high school and the universities by their inability to pay, young farmers faced with the prospect of dispossession, aspiring professionals facing unemployment, native Canadian youth on demoralized reservations, creative artists); and they proposed a set of demands that sought to place the interests of youth at the heart of a social democratic welfare state and protect them by

⁶⁵ *Bulletin* #797, 11 March 1936; #831, 4 November 1936.

⁶⁶ YCL circular letter to All District Committees, 10 June 1936, in *Bulletin* #812, 24 June 1936.

⁶⁷ See *Bulletin* #808, 27 May 1936.

means of a permanent Canadian Youth Commission. Broader political concerns were confined to criticism of Canadian rearmament and the possibility of conscription; those who supported such policies were the "enemies of youth."⁶⁸

The *Security Bulletins* provide useful information on the Canadian Youth Congress (CYC) and the party's role within it. Although numerical claims have to be taken with a good pinch of salt, there is little doubt that consistent party — and non-party — activity among youth organizations since the inaugural 1935 CYC was reflected in the numbers attending. There were 456 delegates compared to 300 in 1935, and they were said to represent more than double the numbers of young Canadians (from 162,705 to 343,666). More provinces were represented, but the vast bulk of delegates continued to come from Ontario (337) and Quebec (79).⁶⁹ The only provinces without representation were Prince Edward Island and, more significantly, Alberta, where consumer resistance to left-wing student politics was quite marked.⁷⁰ The YCL's willingness to settle for indirect control was reflected in the size of its delegation; at 29 it was smaller than those of the United Church (42), the YMCA (37), and CCYM (30), though of course the YCLers may well have been present within other delegations. Labour representation was weak, with only eight delegates, and the size of the French Canadian delegation was not only small but, in the form of the *Jeunesses Patriotes*, disruptive. Perhaps to placate the ten Liberal and five Conservative delegates, YCLers made no mention of socialism in presenting their case for maximum unity behind the Declaration of Rights and the Youth Bill. They underlined their commitment to unity by offering Bill Kashtan's place as one of two CYC delegates to the forthcoming World Youth Congress to René McNicoll, a member of another French Canadian group, the *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Canadienne*, who had fallen two votes short of Kashtan's second place (first went to the CCYM's Kenneth Woodsworth, nephew of the CCF national leader).

How Communists mobilized around youth and student groups at the local level cannot be discovered here in any detail (the report on the October students' conference in Montréal is the best single source by far). We learn that the YCL national office sent out a circular to all district committees on 10 June ordering unspecified propaganda and practical activity around the CYC Youth Bill and urging special attention to work in union locals and trades councils. Student groups were encouraged to make links with the organized working class, for example by joining picket lines, and it was clearly the

⁶⁸The Canadian Youth Congress is reported in *Bulletin* #811, 17 June 1936.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*Bulletin* #833, 18 November 1936.

party's prompting that led to the creation of a CYC Industrial Committee with plans to mobilize inside a select group of unions — all with a substantial communist presence.⁷¹ The YCL also helped build YMCA and United Church youth groups by joining — or “infiltrating” — them.⁷² Was it this work that led to an apparent breakthrough among black Canadian youth? A report in August stated that the YCL now had organizers and organized groups in the black communities of Montréal, Toronto, London, Windsor, and Chatham, enjoyed the support of several black churches and was planning to organize a Canadian Negro Youth Association.⁷³ Finally, a definitive study of communist youth policies would have to take up the Spanish question. The emergence of solidarity with Republican Spain as a youth issue, reflected in a report of Bill Kashtan's speech at the Toronto Labour Forum, coincided with quiet pressure to convert the idealist pacifism of youth into practical internationalism.⁷⁴

Not the Conclusion

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of 1936, it is difficult to separate out the “reformist” and “socialist” components of the Popular Front. One could well argue that the YCL's emphasis on articulating student and youth issues to the broader working class movement was implicitly socialist. Much the same could be said of the inclusion within the movement of the oppressed (and hitherto largely silent) minority of African Canadians (surely a theme that would reward a graduate student searching for a path-breaking dissertation topic!). An assessment of the meaning of the Popular Front in the labour movement would have to go over much of the ground first ploughed by Irving Abella — but with greater attention to rank-and-file experiences and the party-class relationship. We need to know more about how the party operated among its traditional working-class constituency, on the shop floor, and in union meetings. Even less is known about the socialization into “party consciousness” of a layer of middle-class activists. What combinations of idealism, gullibility, self-interest, and political commitment comprised the individual and collective agendas of the middle class women and men — teachers, high school principals, college professors, cultural workers, social workers, youth leaders, ministers — who entered the party during the Popular Front? How did they relate to the proletarians who made up the vast majority of the pre-Popular Front membership? How and to what extent did the CPC change them and they it? What part

⁷¹ *Bulletin* #830, 28 October 1936. The unions were the railway carmen, machinists, men's and women's garment unions, painters, millinery workers and furriers.

⁷² *Bulletin* #812, 24 June 1936.

⁷³ *Bulletin* #820, 19 August 1936.

⁷⁴ *Bulletin* #828, 14 October 1936.

did identification with the Soviet Union play in their socialism? And when, if ever, and why did the odd ritual of Stalin worship start to erode? What were the implications of the CPC's readiness to create special clubs for new members who "would not fit into our units as they are now established." Was this concession, clearly aimed at the middle-class (among whom we might arguably include a layer of union officials) who could not afford to be too open about their politics, indicative of socialist strength or weakness?

If our objective is to produce a Social History of Canadian Communism a case can be made for "bending the stick" away from the party's relationship with Moscow towards party life and activity at the base.⁷⁵ Even if we accept that ultimately the Popular Front was a massive fraud perpetrated by the Comintern on "boudoir bolsheviks" who would be made to "walk the plank in good time," it set in motion an interactive process that was not remotely controllable on a day-to-day basis.⁷⁶ Until the work has been done on these and other questions, this writer will content himself with stating that this series is an appropriate starting point.⁷⁷

⁷⁵In his study of the largely African American CP in Alabama, Robyn D.G. Kelley states at the outset his intention to take for granted, then ignore, the CPUSA's ultimate subservience to the Comintern. Ignoring also the liberal anti-communist historiography that is fixated on that very relationship, he plunges into a brilliant exposition of ground-level communist practice. While admiring Kelley's boldness, I feel that both dimensions of the communist experience require consideration. See Robyn D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill 1990), xiii-iv.

⁷⁶These expressions are taken from the memoirs of Jan Valtin, *Into the Night* (London 1988 [originally 1941]), 608. One of the important insights to be drawn from this neglected classic is the degree of *detachment* that existed between Comintern strategists and functionaries and national CPs.

⁷⁷The paucity of published materials on the Popular Front in Canada is reflected in its complete absence from Bryan D. Palmer's panoptic *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992).