

INTRODUCTION

The Popular Front, 1938-39: Hoodwinking the Public?

John Manley

THE DEPRESSION YEARS series ends in September 1939 with Canada's communists reeling from the double-whammy of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and Canada's war declaration. Relishing the communists' discomfort and the vindication of his organization's own long anti-communist crusade, RCMP Intelligence Officer Charles Rivett-Carnac reported the Communist Party's "profound confusion," "despair," and "disbelief." Manitoba communist MLA James Litterick spoke for many when he admitted that the pact had shaken the party to its "very foundations." Rivett-Carnac reported that language section members, most of all the Jewish and Polish comrades, were devastated. And yet, he added, the Party's "rigid faith in the Soviet Union" was holding it together. Indeed, it was emerging from the chaos "practically intact, and, in some respects, stronger than ever." As the memoirs of participants attest, his portrait of communist confusion was accurate. His estimate of the party's speed of recovery, however, may have been designed to remind the political elite not to become complacent about the communist threat or be taken in by the party's "false patriotism and misleading slogans" (the party continued to support a "war on two fronts" position).¹ Was the popular front simply what the RCMP declared it to be: a monumental confidence trick? Or did it contain sufficient promise to make the CPC's last pre-war demonstration of subservience to Soviet *raison d'état* a tragedy?

¹Canadian Security Intelligence Survey (CSIS), July to September 1939. The *Bulletins* appeared in this quarterly form between January and September 1939.

The Force, Fascism, and "Anti-Fascism"

Much of the Force's sense of vindication at the exploding of the popular front myth stemmed from resentment at having been forced to divert some of its attentions to what it considered the non-existent threat of domestic fascism. Before 1937 the *Bulletins* referred to this subject almost exclusively in the context of the communists' anti-fascist propaganda. In 1936 they mentioned Canada's most prominent fascist leader, Adrien Arcand, on a single occasion: when he invited Québec labour unionists to desert the international unions, which were run by a "pack of Jews and Communists."² During 1937, however, as the major capitalist democracies accelerated their rearmament programmes and the fascist states crowned a string of politico-military triumphs by signing the Anti-Comintern Pact, the Department of External Affairs evidently decided that it would be wise to possess information on potential fascist fifth columnists and prodded the RCMP towards the surveillance of Arcand's National Social Christian Party (NSCP) and a handful of other groups.³ The Force's first report on domestic fascism appeared in the 17 February 1937 *Bulletin*, and thereafter the "Report on Revolutionary Organizations" was retitled "Report on Communist and Fascist Organizations."

Before Canada's war declaration the RCMP dismissed the idea that home-grown fascism represented any threat to Canada or to democracy. By comparing fascist and communist influence, organizational strength and subversive capacity, it ruled the fascist movement "still in its infancy," "at a standstill," "at a very low ebb," in a "process of disintegration," "retrograding both in membership and financial strength." Only Arcand's NSCP and its successor the National Unity Party (NUP), enjoyed significant popular support. It had perhaps 6000 members, of whom over 5000 lived in the province of Québec, mainly in Montréal (though one report mentions a huge growth of fascist support in Sorel, site of the province's fiercest class battles in 1937). The status of the prairie sections was summed up by the NUP's Manitoba headquarters — a "lean-to shed."⁴ All sections outside Québec suffered from inadequate leadership and a susceptibility to schism. The Ontario organization, for example, was driven by old-fashioned Protestant-Catholic sectarianism.⁵ Even the NSCP was disrupted by a serious split, when Arcand's two right-hand men, J.E. Lessard and Gabriel Lambert, broke away in May 1938, in protest at the

²Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part III, 1936* (St. John's 1996), 454.

³Reg Whitaker, "Official Repression of Communism During World War II," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (Spring 1986), 137.

⁴*Bulletin #906*, 30 November 1938.

⁵*Bulletin #899*, 1 September 1938.

dictatorial tendencies of "the chief."⁶ When almost all the fascist groups united in the NUP in July, Arcand remained totally dominant.⁷

Not only did the Force fail to detect any evidence of subversive intent, but in its original report it characterized the NSCP as a natural outgrowth of Québec conditions and a useful counter-balance to communism. This unthreatening image of the NSCP/NUP may have been influenced by the knowledge that Lessard, the commandant of Arcand's paramilitary "Blueshirts," was a former Mountie.⁸ Apart from one report hinting at possible links between Joseph Farr's Ontario NUP section and the German Ministry of Propaganda, the RCMP could find nothing to suggest any intercourse between Canada and the Axis powers; it waited until war had actually been declared before discovering evidence of Arcand's disloyalty.⁹ When stories about fascist gun-running into Canada appeared in the national press in spring 1938, the RCMP reported that they were "totally without foundation." Some military-style drilling was being carried out, but "without arms" and solely to instil pride and discipline.¹⁰ Having excused this criminal offence, the RCMP endorsed the fascists' assertion that the stories were no more than communist mischief-making designed to increase popular revulsion against fascism by building up an exaggerated picture of the domestic fascist threat. Later it claimed the stories had been planted by the party's Control Commission (an organization it described as the Canadian equivalent of the Russian GPU), and suggested that the press' willingness to print them was further evidence of the reach of the communist octopus.¹¹

With its openly admitted relationship to the Comintern and endless admiration for the Soviet Union, the CPC seemed by far the likelier source of fifth columnists. To remind External Affairs of where the real threat lay, the RCMP accompanied its rebuttal of the gun-running rumours with some quotations from Dimitrov's 1935 speech to the Seventh Comintern Congress, revealing that the Comintern remained pledged to struggle for "the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of the power of the proletariat."¹² The 1938

⁶Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf* (Toronto 1975), 116.

⁷After Lessard's exit, the RCMP became more critical of Arcand's "rabid" anti-semitism and Hitlerian pretensions. *Bulletin #896*, 20 July 1938.

⁸Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf*, 90. The Force saw no need to mention this in the *Bulletins*, but it may have been common knowledge.

⁹*Bulletin #892*, 25 May 1938.

¹⁰*Bulletin #889*, 20 April 1938; *Bulletin #890*, 3 May 1938.

¹¹These comments may have stemmed from knowledge of communist involvement in organizing journalists into the CIO's Newspaper Guild. The reference to the GPU suggests that the RCMP was not updating its knowledge of Soviet affairs, the GPU/OGPU having become the NKVD in 1934.

¹²*Bulletin #891*, 13 May 1938; *Bulletin #894*, 21 June 1938; *CSIS*, April-June 1939.

Bulletins generally show an increase in anti-communist editorializing. Any development that appeared to discredit the party was pinpointed: rumours of financial improprieties in the disposition of Aid to Spain funds; disaffection among returning members of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion; the unhappiness of non-party members at their role in front groups; the CCF leadership's continuing hostility to cooperative action. And when party leaders appeared to let slip the moderate veil, the Force underlined that here were the party's *real* intentions. Readers were directed to A.E. Smith's "interesting" remarks on the "galvanic education" that the members of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion were receiving from their political commissars, and which would be "very useful ... when the Spanish struggle is over."¹³ When Stewart Smith offered an audience at the Toronto YMCA the standard party line on the ongoing Moscow trials — the USSR was "perfectly justified" in taking appropriate action against "wreckers and spies" — the Force described his answers as "evasive" and all the more insidious because the audience found them convincing. Tim Buck reportedly told the same audience that, in the event of a war in which Canada and Russia were on opposite sides, he would have to support the workers' state.¹⁴

Every exhortation communist leaders uttered to rank-and-file members to become more "Canadian" and every consequent display of moderation became proof of cunning manipulation. When communists started meetings with "O, Canada" and finished them with "God Save the King"; when they used "milder" slogans and removed from placards and banners "ridiculing caricatures of an objectionable nature" (and deprived the police of an opportunity for arrests); when they flew the Union Jack and Stars and Stripes at anti-war marches — they were shamelessly gulling the public. The peace rallies the League for Peace and Democracy organized in Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver to commemorate Britain's 1914 war declaration drew particular scorn. After labelling the "so-called" rallies as non-events, the RCMP railed against this latest expression of the party's "pseudo-struggle against war and fascism" and its attempt to "hoodwink the public into believing that the defence of Democracy is its purpose." The Force was delighted when many rank-and-file communists defied the party's official policy of ignoring the royal visit in spring 1939. However, it was oblivious to the damage its report of bolsheviks enthusiastically cheering the new King and Queen like regular Canadians did to its monolithic image of the party.¹⁵

¹³ *Bulletin #880*, 5 January 1938. The RCMP made no comment on the elder Smith's reduced status in the party.

¹⁴ *Bulletin #881*, 19 January 1938.

¹⁵ *Bulletin #883*, 9 February 1938; *Bulletin #891*, 13 May 1938; *Bulletin #898*, 18 August 1938.

For Peace and Democracy

For all the *Bulletins*' didacticism, they contained little real analysis of the impact of the popular front on the party and the mass movement. Indeed, nowhere in the *Bulletins* was there a simple description of what the party meant by the popular front. So what did it mean? Eric Hobsbawm's image of "concentric circles," with a "united working class" forming the inner core of the struggle for the "unity of all democratic forces," captures its essence. Membership of the "outer circle" (which also, of course, contained all the members of the "inner circle") was open to virtually every Canadian. Since all white-collar workers and most professionals, merchants and petty commodity producers (farmers, fishermen) were being driven towards the "conditions of life of the proletariat," most members of the middle-class were eligible. They were *not* part of the *capitalist* class, which consisted of the owners and top managers of the 35 monopolistic corporations — out of 11,000 enterprises — which controlled the Canadian political economy to the detriment of everyone else. Apart from these few thousand monopolists, only the followers of Leon Trotsky, who served "the interests of fascism," were proscribed. The "Democratic" front's immediate objective was a centralized welfare state in which a federal government dominated by "progressives" would enhance its powers and use them to protect the interests of the most vulnerable (the unemployed, industrial workers seeking to organize, small farmers, poor provinces, municipalities stretched tight by welfare costs), defeat the threat of domestic "fascization," and support a "positive peace" policy. All of these goals would be realized by peaceful means, through the mobilization of broad but limited federal and provincial electoral pacts. An independent CPC, however, was still needed to guide the democratic front towards its ultimate destination: socialism. That final goal — the fulfilment of the "democratic unification" begun by William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis Papineau 100 years earlier — would not come by force but only with the consent of the Canadian people. Suggestions to the contrary were "alien" to the CPC.¹⁶

Party life was recast in line with democratic fashion. Although major policy decisions remained more centralist than democratic, comrades embroiled in the day-to-day issues were regularly taking decisions outside the direct control of the "higher bodies" and in doing so trying to practice the democracy they preached. They, and even more the new recruits from the broader movement,

¹⁶Tim Buck, "General Secretary's Report to the Thirteenth Dominion Executive Committee Session, June 1938," in *A Democratic Front for Canada* (Toronto undated), 8-41; William Rigby, "Exploitation and the Middle Class," *Party Builder*, July 1939; Norman Freed, "The Coming Federal Elections," *Party Builder*, July 1939.

expected no less from their leaders. An intense wave of “self-criticism” — only partly Russian in inspiration — swept over the leadership, which pledged to eradicate a bureaucratic, undemocratic, overly demanding, and even “bullying” style of work that seemed perfectly designed to frighten away new members. “We must outlaw use of the word ‘must!’” Sam Carr told the Dominion Executive Committee (DEC) in June 1938. Before that DEC session, all leading national and provincial cadres had their political and moral probity “verified” by the Control Commission. The authoritarianism of party “vigilance” was mitigated by its egalitarianism: no one escaped, least of all the members at the centre. “While we respect the personal life of our Party members,” the Control Commission pointed out, “moral looseness ... especially by a leader of the Party, undermines his ability to serve our cause” and could become a means of discrediting the party.¹⁷

As they entered more fully into the movement and their communities, many communists became aware of the party’s limitations and perceived the rationality in the popular front. For all that the CPC was immeasurably more popular than ever before, it still encountered widespread mistrust and hostility in the working class, let alone among the middle class. The call to abandon sectarianism, join the movement, and become part of a native radical tradition incorporated a conscious attempt to alter the popular image of communism as a way of life. Conforming to social norms and conventions in discourse, personal behaviour, and appearance was not a sell-out, but simply the necessary means by which communists would be taken seriously (and not, as had often been the experience of the first Canadian bolsheviks, as “freaks”) when they attempted to mobilize their communities around the construction of a sidewalk or a railway crossing or an extension of rural mail delivery. Nothing revealed more clearly their anxiety to be judged on society’s terms than the rejoicing that now accompanied every “breakthrough” on the “electoral front.”¹⁸ The bedrock of party members’ growing success in winning official positions in the labour unions and trades and labour councils was respect for their abilities *as workers*, then a combination of organizing ability — including

¹⁷University of Toronto (UT), Robert Kenny Papers (RKP), Box 2, folder 5, “For Vigilance in the Labour Movement,” Memorandum of Control Commission to 13th Central Committee Session, June 1938; Sam Carr, “Building the Communist Party,” in *A Democratic Front for Canada*, 42-60.

¹⁸Becky Buhay, “Women’s Place in the Labour Movement,” *Daily Clarion*, 22 August 1936; “A Branch Meeting in Fort Frances,” *Party Builder*, May 1939; Ethel Carter, “In Niagara Falls,” *Clarion*, 5 August 1939; Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto 1989), 157-61; Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers’ Movement, 1929-1985* (St. John’s 1988), 51; A.E. Smith, *All My Life: An Autobiography* (Toronto 1977 [1949]), 192-4.

an ability to present a well-argued case — and staunchness: “if you come on a job and start putting up a fight for conditions, the men don’t give a shit whether you’re a communist or an episcopalian.”¹⁹ Their politics, on the other hand, especially now that organized anti-communist tendencies such as the CCF and Catholic Action were emerging, were a potential source of disunity and therefore weakness. Many activists kept their political and union identities in discrete pigeonholes.

Young communists embraced the popular front style with particular enthusiasm, ready “to grasp any suggestion, method, program or activity” and “sit with the devil himself” to advance their aims. Peter Hunter has stressed their idealism:

It was not a Russian plot when we called for slum clearance projects. It was not subversive when we called for a national youth programme on recreation, physical fitness and recreation rather than military training. It was not just youthful exuberance which made hundreds of young people picket stores selling Japanese goods.²⁰

As this comment suggests, many effectively abandoned the party for the “movement,” even at times neglecting the trade union work in which the Young Communist League (YCL) had always been conspicuously active.²¹ Work in and for the party suffered. Who wanted to attend alienating branch meetings that more often consisted of dues collection and a routine distribution of “tasks” than conformed to the ideal: “interesting, short, free of dull routine and full of lively political discussion during both the ‘business’ and ‘educational’ periods?” Falling attendance at branch meetings and the loss of “that old spirit of voluntary work for the party” caused concern.²² Since many of the most politically able and developed local cadres preferred leading roles “in any organization but our Party,” branch leadership was often indifferent.²³

This broader style of work produced one troubling complication. Members who engaged in “mass work” inevitably encountered contrary ideological

¹⁹“How Does a Communist Hold Down A Job?” *B.C. Workers’ News*, 1 February 1935; Howard White, *A Hard Man to Beat: The Story of Bill White, Labour Leader, Historian, Shipyard Worker, Raconteur* (Vancouver 1983), 29; James Napier, *Memoirs of Building the UAW* (Toronto 1976).

²⁰Peter Hunter, *Which Side Are You On, Boys ... Canadian Life on the Left* (Toronto 1988), 114.

²¹Report on Ontario CPC Provincial Conference, *Bulletin #906*, 30 November 1938.

²²Reports from Vancouver and Winnipeg in *Bulletin #884*, 17 February 1937; *Bulletin #904*, 1 November 1938; Sam Carr, “Building the Communist Party,” in *A Democratic Front for Canada*, 56.

²³Leslie Morris, “A Review of the Month,” *Party Builder*, June 1939.

influences. The party responded, somewhat paradoxically, by enforcing stricter ideological discipline, partly by means of "vigilance campaigns" and exemplary expulsions. The Control Commission, however, was not the NKVD, and control was more commonly exercised through political education. During the late 1930s education became a panacea for all party ills — it would raise the general political level of the membership, train new cadres, invigorate branch life — and a means of extending links to the wider movement though the provision of schools for non-party members.²⁴ Most importantly, it would help local officials become more thoroughly familiarized with the party viewpoint, more capable of promoting it where they worked and socialized, and better prepared to resist radical critique.²⁵ The party was particularly worried that rank-and-file members would be seduced by Trotskyism. Although it labelled Trotskyism a "petty-bourgeois opportunist" deviation, it was worried about being outleft by the Trotskyite "bacteria" and "scum" in direct action struggles among the unemployed or in fighting the fascists on the streets, areas where its own tactics were becoming more moderate.²⁶ A primary object of internal political education was to "destroy the last remnants of Trotskyism in Canada." Students who examined Russian bolshevik history, for example, would learn the difference between a "revolutionary" party and a "r-r-r-revolutionary" party.²⁷

The great leap forward in educational work came in 1937, when the first National Training School (NTS) opened. The entire party was activated around preparations for the NTS, with each district asked to raise special funds to support it and submit appropriate candidates for the first enrolment. By 1938 most provincial and major city sections had established formal cadre schools, and the party made its educational apparatus accessible to sympathizers in the trade unions and other sections of the Democratic Front by launching several city Labour Colleges with courses ranging from trade union history to Marxist economics to public speaking and journalism.²⁸ Party teachers did not adopt a disinterested liberal approach. Large dollops of the party line made up most of the diet, whether in the branch or the NTS. Students encountered Marx,

²⁴ *Bulletin* #895, 6 July 1938.

²⁵ Report on Saskatchewan CPC Provincial Conference, *Bulletin* #899, 1 September 1938.

²⁶ Buck, "General Secretary's Report," in *A Democratic Front for Canada*, 38-40; *Vanguard*, April 1935, July 1936; *Socialist Action*, 1 May and 1 June 1939; *Bulletin* #895, 6 July 1938 (on the formation of the League for a Revolutionary Workers' Party).

²⁷ UT, RKP, Box 16, folder 2, Report of the Southern Ontario District Conference, CPC, 27-28 February 1937; William Lawson, "Trotsky and Terrorism," *New Frontier*, March 1937; "Studying History," *Party Builder*, July 1939.

²⁸ *Bulletin* #881, 19 January 1938.

Engels, Lenin, and Stalin in selected goblets and were exposed to bourgeois authors only when absolutely necessary. Through "study outlines" and "control questions," they were pointed towards the most important questions and told the official answers. A study of the Comintern, for example, revealed that Stalin was continuing Lenin's lifelong struggle against "revisionism and deviations," confirmed the correctness of the Seventh Congress decisions, and established the "changed role of Trotskyism from a political trend in the working class to an unprincipled group of wreckers acting in alliance with fascism."²⁹ Similar methods were used to disseminate the message of Stanley Ryerson's key 1937 text *1837: The Birth of Canadian Democracy*. Reworked for the purposes of mass political education through a course on "Canadian Traditions," it placed the party programme at the end of a democratic continuum started by the 1837 rebels and rededicated the party to the peaceful completion of the struggle against the "new Family Compact."³⁰

This is not to say that party education only consisted of dogma and indoctrination and was therefore worthless. It spoke to the demands of unknown numbers of working-class Canadians for expanded educational opportunities, brought out the talents of many who might otherwise have been lost in the depression, and gave rank-and-file members an intellectual confidence that enabled them to shine at, and sometimes carry, union meetings (though some independently minded unionists also found them glib and inflexible).³¹ Moreover, not all students were uncritical vessels. They often complained that their courses were too "crammed" and that they wanted more time to discuss what they were reading. Unimpressed by the poor preparation of their teachers and the poor learning materials they were expected to use, students at the Regina city school in March 1939 turned out of necessity to primary research. Walter Wiggins, a veteran activist in various party farmers' organizations, "haunted the libraries" for several fruitless days before turning up a treasure-trove of material on the Saskatchewan farmers' movements that would "be of real value to the Communist Party as a whole."³² Such initiative hinted at middle and lower-level cadres' capacity for the creative application of Marxism to the social transformation of Canada.

²⁹National Archives of Canada (NAC), Communist Party of Canada (CPC), Papers, Vol. 2, folder 6, CPC, Dominion Training School 1937, "History of Labor Internationalism" coursebook.

³⁰NAC, CPC Papers, Vol. 2, folder 26, "Educational Outline on Canadian Traditions," August 1938; Gregory S. Kealey, "Stanley Bréhaut Ryerson: Canadian Revolutionary and Marxist Historian," in *Workers and Canadian History* (Montréal 1995), 52.

³¹Napier, *Memories of Building the UAW*, 35; Alfred Edwards, "The Mill: A Worker's Memoir of the 1930s and 1940s," *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (Fall 1995), 287.

³²Eric Bee, "Regina Concludes its Section School," *Party Builder*, June 1939.

For every student who shared Wiggins' belief in the value of party education, however, probably at least two saw it as one more task to divert them from the real struggle.³³ Even the middle-class cadres in the closed clubs of Montréal's "Section 13" rarely had time to devote themselves to serious Marxist study (which helps explain why the "simple, unqualified, dogmatic catechisms" of Stalinist Marxism fit the bill so well).³⁴ If members could fit training in Marxist theory into their packed diaries, so much the better. But the really important thing was the struggle of the moment. A list of the most important late popular front struggles would include: Aid to Spain and China; protest against Duplessis' Padlock Law; the struggle to expose Hitler's treatment of the Jews and to pressure Ottawa for a more liberal policy on the admission of refugees; peace rallies — and rallies against the Chamberlain "sell-out"; the organization of white-collar unions; physical combat to drive the fascists from the streets (which moderates could silently applaud even if they could not join); cultural work; electoral mobilization behind progressive candidates; and myriad unheroic interventions in the community. The overall project also embraced the party's continuing class struggles to build the CIO, politicize the trades and labour councils, dissolve sectional barriers inside the working class, and, crucially, maintain the unity of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and Trades and Labour Congress. This interlocking network of campaigns helped to extend and strengthen working-class organization and built valuable alliances across class boundaries.

In appealing for inter-class unity, the party often targeted men and women with religious convictions and felt no embarrassment at addressing them primarily in moral and ethical terms. "It was very easy to stir up the emotions of the people at that time," Jack Scott observed.³⁵ Judaeo-Christian moral values featured as prominently in public left discourse as Leninism. Buck nevertheless observed the traditional pieties by claiming Lenin's authority when he denied that communism was "crass materialism" and attacked anti-clericalism as "anarchist phrasemongering." Contrary to a widespread misconception, he pointed out, there was a place for Roman Catholics at the popular front table. "We, Catholics and Communists," Buck insisted, had "the same warm, human sympathy and concern for the welfare of one's fellowman, the same generous desire for social justice and the same ardent aspirations for

³³William Lawson, "Party Education in Southern Ontario," *Party Builder*, June 1939.

³⁴Merrily Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, The Spy Trials, and the Cold War* (Montréal 1994), 91-2; Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London 1994), 390. As Hobsbawm points out, "whatever its lies and intellectual limitations [the *History of the CPSU (B) Short Course*] was pedagogically a masterly text." For more on the *Short Course*, see below.

³⁵Palmer, *A Communist Life*, 50.

a better life." As a serious comparison of Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* and *The Communist Manifesto* would show, there was no reason why communists and catholics could not work together "to make our Canada a better Canada for all of us."³⁶

Although Buck's bridge-building left the Roman Catholic church utterly unmoved, many United Church ministers and some from other traditions perceived the popular front as a revival of the Social Gospel. Well-known figures such as the Reverends Ben Spence and Salem Bland in Toronto and Samuel East in Regina lent visible legitimacy to meetings of the League for Peace and Democracy, the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, the National Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, the Committee for the Boycott of Aggressor Nations, and even the party itself. They turned up in Toronto, Montreal, Regina, Edmonton, Vancouver, and — in the shape of a Mormon bishop — Drumheller. Some became actively involved in domestic struggles, notably in support of the unemployed.³⁷ United Church minister Fern A. Sayles was moved more than most by the plight of the depression's victims. Speaking in defence of Welland's immigrant radicals in 1935, Sayles posed the question: "shall life or property come first?" The Reverend Robert Matheson from Vancouver joined him in choosing life. A regular speaker on left-wing platforms, he was a notable ally of the unemployed during the tumultuous events of May-June 1938.³⁸ When southern Ontario erupted in a new wave of protest at Mitchell Hepburn's latest relief economies in spring 1939, the unemployed immediately looked to and received support from the church.³⁹ But the ministers' greatest contribution was to strengthen the left's command of the moral high ground on the issue of peace and war. A leaflet

³⁶Buck, "General Secretary's Report," in *A Democratic Front for Canada*, 35. The party remained an anathema to Canada's Roman Catholic hierarchy. When the church did open out towards socialism during World War II, the CCF was the beneficiary. Several influential Catholic laymen saw the CCF as an appropriate vehicle of social christianity and used the eruption of hostility between the CCF and the new Labour-Progressive Party in 1942-43 to persuade the Canadian bishops to issue a public declaration which effectively legitimized the CCF and proscribed the LPP. See Gregory Baum, *Catholics and Canadian Socialism: Political Thought in the Thirties and Forties* (Toronto 1980), 127-9.

³⁷*Daily Clarion*, 2 May 1936; *Toronto Star*, 6, 10, 12 June 1936.

³⁸Carmela Patrias, *Relief Strike: Immigrant Workers and the Great Depression in Crowland, Ontario, 1930-1935* (Toronto 1990), 32. Sayles' lasting solidarity was displayed in a privately published and thoroughly partisan history of labour in Welland. See Fern A. Sayles, *Welland Workers Make History* (Welland 1963). On Matheson, see Steve Brodie, *Bloody Sunday: Vancouver — 1938* (Vancouver 1974), 10; Kealey and Whitaker, *Depression Years, Part III*, 165, 200, 502.

³⁹*Daily Clarion*, 14, 18, 21 April 1939.

issued in support of a Christmas boycott of fascist-made goods suggested that consumers — surely — would not want gifts that meant “terrible suffering to the people of Spain and China ... [or] the brutal persecution of the Jewish people by Nazi barbarism.”⁴⁰ A speaker who attacked the Roman Catholic church’s role in the Spanish conflict did so on the grounds that it had betrayed “christian principles.”⁴¹

Both party and movement benefited from the new approach. After a period of stagnation from late 1937 to mid-1938, party membership started to rise again during the Munich crisis. Many of the new intake were middle class. The party accommodated them in special sections and usually excused them from public activity, though not from normal branch life. It also gained a wider periphery of middle-class sympathizers who could be relied on for financial support if not consistent activism.⁴² Fund raising duly became easier. Appeals for Spain were often heavily over-subscribed, and even the drives of the permanently indigent *Daily Clarion* benefited (though not by enough to prevent its reversion to a weekly in summer 1939).⁴³ The new fraternalism also facilitated work in the labour movement, especially in trades and labour councils. An RCMP informant in Winnipeg complained that not only was the labour council treating communist delegates with respect, but *non-communist* members were actively participating in a range of *political* issues. Some had even attended “conferences held in protest against the foreign policy of Great Britain!”⁴⁴ Communist organizers started to make progress among such “white-collar proletarians” as office workers, commercial artists, insurance salesmen, and journalists.⁴⁵ On the electoral front there were definite signs, especially in the Ontario municipal elections, that a “labour progressive” coalition was not only taking shape but was capable of winning seats in “predominantly English speaking” areas.⁴⁶

On numerous occasions the party demonstrated its ability to mobilize the “people,” sometimes showing a theatrical flair that may have stemmed from

⁴⁰ *Bulletin* #907, 15 December 1938.

⁴¹ *Bulletin* #882, 27 January 1938. Interestingly, the individual who issued this rebuke was a *visiting* luminary, the British middle-class CPGB member and Spanish Civil War volunteer Ralph Bates.

⁴² Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream*, 91-3; *Bulletin* #897, 4 August 1937 refers to a plan in Vancouver to allocate a special card to close sympathizers who would be embarrassed by being publicly identified as communists. Possession of the card would imply a more than voluntary financial obligation.

⁴³ *Bulletin* #882, 27 January 1938; *Bulletin* #892, 25 March 1938.

⁴⁴ *Bulletin* #892, 25 May 1938.

⁴⁵ *Bulletin* #893, 7 June 1938. John Weir was secretary of the Toronto (Commercial) Artists’ Union.

⁴⁶ *Bulletin* #906, 30 November 1938; *Bulletin* #907, 15 December 1938.

its ongoing involvement in such projects as the Toronto Theatre of Action. According to the RCMP, most of the 1800 Torontonians who participated in the CLPD's Peace Rally on 4 August were "drawn by the novelty" of a "torchlight parade."⁴⁷ The Force could not dismiss so easily the same organization's single most impressive mobilization, when Arcand's NUP held its founding convention in the city exactly a month before. The fascists met in Massey Hall, but the CLPD put them in their place by filling Maple Leaf Gardens with 10,000 anti-fascists.⁴⁸ It was surely more than coincidental that, when the Western Division of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) met in Saskatoon two weeks later, communists received a respectful hearing. Emphasizing the left's commitment to open entry for Jewish refugees and the encouragement of Jewish culture, they invited the CJC to join the anti-fascist movement and, the RCMP concluded, "made considerable inroads" into an organization that had hitherto kept them at arm's length.⁴⁹

As the party struggled to root itself in a native radical tradition, it refused 1837 rebels Samuel Lount and Peter Matthews, the Riverdale Park (Toronto) party club created a new tradition that merged the two tendencies.⁵⁰ In promoting the Canadianization of its foreign-born or descended members, the party's only concession to a still rampant nativism was to have some leading cadres change their names (Muni Ehrlich became "Jack Taylor," John Wevurski became John "Weir," and so on). The party criticized ethnic organizations for remaining too "narrowly sectarian," too hesitant about engaging with their non-progressive compatriots and with the outside world, and urged their members to undergo the ordeal of naturalization. At the same time, however, it encouraged them to become the "foremost proponents and champions for the culture and rights" of their compatriots in Canada.⁵¹ Using the facilities

⁴⁷ *Bulletin #898*, 18 August 1938.

⁴⁸ *Bulletin #896*, 20 July 1938. Lita-Rose Betcherman's brief account of this rally offers a good example of "Cold War-liberal" scholarship. She writes: "Although the League's leadership had been infiltrated by communists, its active members included liberals, intellectuals and idealists and its public meetings drew ordinary men and women united by a common desire to stand up against current threats to democracy." Thus we have the loaded term "infiltrate" (in respect of an organization the party had *created*); the implication that communists were quite apart from both "idealists" and "ordinary men and women," and a failure to appreciate that 10,000 protesters do not simply materialize. See *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf*, 122-3.

⁴⁹ Compare *Bulletin #883*, 9 February and *Bulletin #899*, 1 September 1938. See also, M. Muni, "Some Problems of Territorial Work," *Party Builder*, May 1939.

⁵⁰ "Toronto Celebrates Two Day Holiday," *Daily Clarion*, 1 May 1939.

⁵¹ UT, RKP, Box 2, folder 6, Paul Phillips, "Memorandum on the Work of the National Language Organizations," prepared for the 8th National Convention, CPC, 8-12 October 1937; *Bulletin #891*, 13 May 1938.

of the Independent Mutual Benefit Federation (IMBF), it promoted inter-ethnic solidarity through "increased leisure-time contact." Formed in 1934, the IMBF was dominated by Hungarians, Slovaks, and Germans but by 1935 it also had Polish, Jewish, Italian, French-Canadian, and English-Canadian branches. Members of the smaller ethnic groups often used Hungarian social facilities.⁵² Class, ethnic, and national identities meshed together on May Day 1938 in Winnipeg. Most of the 4500 marchers, including large contingents from three immigrant-based industrial unions, the Fur Workers, Ladies' Garment Workers, and Meat Packers, came from the ethnic communities, many underlining the fact by wearing national dress. What made this procession different from any that took place in the class against class period was that it was headed by a trade union delegation led by impeccably "native" Trades and Labour Council leaders, Grant McLeod and Robert McCutchan, and everyone marched behind the Union Jack.⁵³

Restraining the Struggle?

There were, however, definite tensions in the popular front. No matter how often party leaders insisted that the CPC remained a revolutionary party; no matter how often they urged members in the labour unions to "come out" openly as communists, a section of the rank and file clearly felt that the party was making too many concessions to democratic unity and pushed for a harder, more definably proletarian programme. At a CCLU meeting in Montréal, Canadian Seamen's Union (CSU) leader J.A. Sullivan stressed that the best way to fight "reaction" was to build a "united labour movement." The next speaker, however, R.L. Calder, K.C., president of the Montréal's CCLU branch, pitched his appeal in clearer popular front terms, insisting that a "people's party" open to all manual workers, office workers, small merchants, and the middle class was the best medium of social change. Class tension was also evident at a meeting in Vancouver's First Baptist Church, held to discuss the Christmas Boycott of Aggressor Nations campaign. With the mainly middle-class platform (with speakers from the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Ministerial Association, and the League of Nations Society) content to pass resolutions calling on Ottawa, London, and Washington to embargo exports of war materials, a member of the audience intervened to disparage the passing of resolutions "of which no-one took any notice" and

⁵²Carmela Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians: Politicizing Hungarian Immigrants in Interwar Canada* (Montréal 1994), 149-55, 224-5.

⁵³*Bulletin #891*, 13 May 1938.

⁵⁴*Bulletin #900*, 15 September 1938; *Bulletin #907*, 15 December 1938. The reference was to recent direct action to prevent the shipment of scrap iron to Japan.

exhort the meeting to "get out and form picket lines, as was done in Nanaimo."⁵⁴

Centre-periphery differences were evident in the unemployed movement, which returned to national prominence as prairie drought and the deflationary policies of Ottawa and Washington sent relief numbers spiralling past the million mark.⁵⁵ After playing a dominant role in unemployed struggles between 1929-35, the party gave them much lower priority during the industrial recovery and CIO upsurge of 1936-37, attempting with a complete lack of success to persuade the Trades and Labour Congress to accept the affiliation of unemployed organizations and to lead a campaign for federal unemployment insurance and a slum-clearance and house-building programme. Nevertheless, the party remained the movement's single most influential force. The aim of the party centre in 1937 was to bring the unemployed into the popular front, "broadening" the movement — and necessarily controlling its militancy — by working through the churches and labour unions.⁵⁶ The explosive situation that developed in Vancouver in the spring and summer, when the activities of the CPC-led Relief Project Workers' Union (RPWU) culminated in a month-long occupation of the central post office and art gallery, caused Toronto some concern.

At issue in Vancouver was Premier T. Duff Pattullo's decision to close provincial forestry projects in April 1938, "six weeks earlier than in 1937. After that date the men would not be provided with relief of any kind. If they wanted to stay in the province, they would have to find work themselves. Otherwise, the government would pay their way back to their home provinces."⁵⁷ Most of the single unemployed who flooded into Vancouver in April had no desire to return to their home provinces; they wanted Pattullo to make good on his longstanding commitment to a policy of "work and wages" and they demanded to be treated not as "transients" but as citizens. The RPWU organized mass "tin-canning" expeditions with the explicit intention of filling the jails and forcing national attention on the plight of the single unemployed. Almost immediately, however, disagreements surfaced over how to dramatize the struggle. The party centre tried to exert restraint on the RPWU, but as it had often discovered, controlling the distant Vancouver comrades was no simple matter. Among the "younger" and more "irresponsible element" there

⁵⁵James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State 1914-1941* (Toronto 1983), 172-3.

⁵⁶*Bulletin #882*, 27 January 1938.

⁵⁷Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own*, 192. This contains an excellent summary of the Vancouver events, which should be supplemented with Steve Brodie's short memoir, Irene Baird's evocative contemporary novel, *Waste Heritage* (Toronto 1939) and the reports in the present volume.

was support for turning the men loose “to survive on the roving band theory” or for a second On-to-Ottawa trek. Several leaders of the original trek, an RCMP informant observed, including Ernie Cumber, John Matts, and R.W. “Doc” Campbell, “were definitely entertaining the idea.” However, it was “very doubtful whether the Communist Party has sanctioned the plan.”⁵⁸ Another 1935 veteran, Steve Brodie, returned from a period as a union organizer to take over the leadership of the RPWU. Although he too “often felt sympathetic to this adventurer spirit, ... party discipline said ‘no’ ... far from inciting the men, Party organizers [worked] against provoking confrontation.”⁵⁹ Suspecting that there was a police informer “at the leadership level of the [RPWU] and the Party fraction” (he discovered the person’s identity in 1942), Brodie improved security by reorganizing the RPWU on a “platoon system.” The RCMP were taken completely by surprise by the major demonstrations and occupations on 20 May (there was a shorter occupation of the Hotel Georgia). At all times a key objective was to maintain *public* activity and *public* support. During the month-long “sit-down,” RPWU leaders continuously exhorted “the men to refrain from any action which might alienate public sympathy.”⁶⁰

The sit-down was widely supported. When it ended on 19 June, the violence with which Police Chief W.W. Foster’s offices carried out the evictions generated an instant display of solidarity. Within hours 7000 protesters gathered at the Powell Street grounds. Joining CPC provincial leader Fergus McKean were Helena Gutteridge and Harold Winch of the CCF, Mildred Lusk of the Vancouver Women’s Council, and the Reverend R.N. Matheson of Collingwood United Church. At another meeting that evening, in the Moose Hall, the British Columbia Federation on Unemployment was formed, with delegates from the CPC (in several manifestations), CCF, trades unions, and rate payers’ associations claiming to represent 14,545 members.⁶¹ Spontaneous demonstrations of support continued into the early hours of the following morning, and hundreds of unemployed strikers and sympathizers immediately travelled to Victoria, where they set up a peaceful picket of the legislature. After heated communications between Pattullo and Mackenzie King, a compromise settlement was brokered in early July, with the federal government agreeing to “pay the cost of relief for all non-resident transients, not simply those who had left the forestry camps,” until they either returned home or

⁵⁸ *Bulletin* #888, 5 April 1938; *Bulletin* #891, 13 May 1938.

⁵⁹ Brodie, *Bloody Sunday*, 12.

⁶⁰ *Bulletin* #892, 25 May 1938; *Bulletin* #893, 7 June 1938; *Bulletin* #894, 21 June 1938; *Bulletin* #895, 6 July 1938.

⁶¹ *Bulletin* #895, 6 July 1938; Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in B.C.* (Vancouver 1967), 119.

received a job offer through the Employment Service of Canada.⁶² Agitation, however, resumed as the winter of 1938-39 approached. When Pattullo re-opened the forestry camps in November, the RPWU objected to the inclusion of a physical training requirement on the grounds this would lead to "military" training.⁶³

Clearly, a policy of restraint did not necessarily mean a policy of inaction. Nor was Vancouver the only major centre to experience militant unemployed action. Relief recipients in Calgary, a city with a long record of party-led unemployed agitation, stopped work on city projects between 6 April and 19 May in protest at a cut in food allocations.⁶⁴ Thirty-three strikers and sympathizers were arrested during the strike, including prominent party members Ann Lenihan and E.C. Hopper, president of the Central Council of Unemployed Unions (CCUU). Militants on the CCUU bowed reluctantly to majority opinion when a vote was taken to end the strike on the city's terms; only four of its eighteen members voted in favour.⁶⁵ There was a brief occupation of the main Regina post office in July, and only days after single men in Port Arthur formed an unemployed association, 400 members occupied the Public Utilities building and forced a rapid decision by the city council to grant them emergency meal vouchers, admit to the relief rolls all who could prove their residency, and sustain any man until his residency status was investigated.⁶⁶

In Toronto, however, organizers were more attuned to the centre's general political priorities, and the party's tactics were markedly different. As an informant reported, it "does not consider the time opportune to take a too active part ... and is more or less allowing the unemployed to chart their own course." It refused to sanction a march on Ottawa or a high profile sit-down. Instead, it wanted to make the position of the single unemployed a key issue at the forthcoming municipal elections and hoped to mobilize the Single Unemployed Men's Association (SUMA) during the campaign. As had happened elsewhere, however, the unemployed refused to be treated like a stage army.⁶⁷ The party's habit of "agitating the unemployed men to the point where they were ready to take militant action and then restraining them from doing so," produced a loss of "faith" in its leadership. The SUMA found it "increasingly

⁶² Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own*, 194.

⁶³ *Bulletin #902*, 11 October 1938; *Bulletin #906*, 30 November 1938.

⁶⁴ David Bright, "'The Lid is Tight Now': Relations Between the State, the Unemployed, and the Communist Party in Calgary, 1930-1935," paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Brock University, St. Catharines, June 1996.

⁶⁵ *Bulletin #890*, 3 May 1938; *Bulletin #892*, 25 May 1938.

⁶⁶ *Bulletin #896*, 20 July 1938; *Bulletin #905*, 10 November 1938.

⁶⁷ Bill Purvis, "Recent Experiences on the Coast Unemployed Movement," *Worker*, 2 September 1938.

difficult to recruit" new members, and few single men paid any heed when the party finally gave the green light for action and called on them to refuse to turn up for work at city relief projects. Ironically, Toronto had to import an organizer from Vancouver to keep the SUMA from falling apart.⁶⁸

Changes in labour defence tactics also brought criticism from below. The leadership's much-heralded liquidation of the Canadian Labour Defence League did not meet with universal approval.⁶⁹ Between 1935-38 the CLDL sat rather uneasily alongside a number of Citizens' Defence Committees, modelled on the original Regina Citizens' Defence Committee which had been created to give a more popular feel to the defence of the On-to-Ottawa Trekkers. In the spring of 1938, however, the party collapsed *all* defence work into the Canadian Civil Liberties Union (CCLU). Although the CCLU was formally independent, the party perceived it as an important component of the popular front, especially in Montréal where it managed to avoid the restrictions of Maurice Duplessis' 1937 Padlock Act. R.L. Calder, K.C., president of the Montréal CCLU branch and a leading non-communist popular frontier, had recently toured western Canada to publicize the horrors of the Québec legislation, and his access to influential progressives resulted in supportive editorials in virtually every major paper in the west.⁷⁰

Dissidents, on the other hand, worried about losing party control and the apparent replacement of mass action with purely legalist methods. The benefits the CCLU brought to some party members in Montréal did not mitigate the sense of grievance felt by several ethnic organizations at the CCLU's decision to defer taking action against the closing down of their halls until the federal government stated its position on the Padlock Law (which the Supreme Court finally ruled unconstitutional in 1957!).⁷¹ There were complaints in the traditional CLDL stronghold of Vancouver when Tom Ewan ordered its provincial office closed down and all its equipment sold, a decision that seemed curiously timed and shortsighted given the expectation of an eruption among the single unemployed. The CCLU did not appear to be the sort of

⁶⁸ *Bulletin #899*, 1 September 1937; *Bulletin #900*, 15 September 1938; *Bulletin #905*, 10 November 1938; *Bulletin #907*, 15 December 1938.

⁶⁹ John Manley, "From United Front to Popular Front: The CPC in 1936," introduction to Kealey and Whitaker, *Depression Years, Part III*, 4-6.

⁷⁰ UT, J.S. Woodsworth Memorial Collection, Box 10B, Jean Laing, circular letter re: "Citizens' Defence Movement of Toronto and District," 27 April 1936; John Manley, "'Communists Are Acting As Representatives of the Canadian People': The Communist Party of Canada in 1937," introduction to Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part IV, 1937* (St. John's 1997); *Bulletin #889*, 20 April 1938; Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream*, 69-73.

⁷¹ *Bulletin #884*, 7 February 1938; John A. Dickinson and Brian Young, *A Short History of Quebec* (Toronto 1993), 281.

defence organization that would be able to respond rapidly to the arrest of unemployed activists.⁷²

Steve Brodie's experience lent weight to that suspicion. While recovering in hospital from injuries received during the eviction of the post office sit-downers, he was persuaded by three CCLU members to appeal for a writ against the crown, only to discover on release that, with his case *sub judice*, he was unable to speak about it in public. To make matters worse, it was then held up for over a year. Finally, with Canada at war, the lawyer the CCLU had assigned to it withdrew it without consulting either Brodie or the CCLU. "He somehow felt embarrassed," Brodie remarked, "about reminding the Canadian people that jackboot justice can be used on both sides of the Atlantic."⁷³ A few months after this individual blow, the party experienced collective disillusionment when R.L. Calder not only refused to become its "standard bearer" in Verdun during the Québec provincial election, but instead stood for the CCF.⁷⁴

Perhaps the most unexpected criticism was directed at the party's trade union work. For the most part, the 1938 *Bulletins* record one success after another. The very first *Bulletin* contained news of a virtual party sweep in elections to all the key offices in the seven Toronto locals of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union (ACWU).⁷⁵ Thereafter, the litany included: the consolidation of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and the Canadian Seamen's Union (CSU) as party strongholds; continuing communist influence in the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee (SWOC) and Mine-Mill; the increasing respectability of communist trade union leaders, such as Harry Hunter, Dick Steele, Alex Welch, Fred Collins, Harold Pritchett, and Bruce Magnusson; tremendous advances in the trades and labour councils; the successful projection by the *Daily Clarion* of a "unity psychology"; and the party's triumphant domination of the TLC's Niagara Falls convention. With between 100 and 150 of the 550 delegates at Niagara Falls, communists made up at least one-third of a "progressive" bloc of around 315. TLC Vice President Dan Willie Morrison worked hand-in-glove with J.B. Salsberg, and even President Paddy Draper, who "in former years displayed a pronounced anti-communist attitude, ... favoured the communists and the progressive element

⁷²*Bulletin #888*, 5 April 1938.

⁷³Brodie, *Bloody Sunday*, 17-8.

⁷⁴"R.L. Calder Snubs Communists," War Series Bulletin, 13 November 1939, in Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The War Series, 1939-1941* (St. John's 1989), 50.

⁷⁵By consulting its files the RCMP could have underlined the historical significance of the party's ACWU sweep. In Toronto and Montréal a decade earlier, this union had been in the vanguard of the movement to *expel* communists. See Sidney Hillman, "The Liquidation of 'Leftism' in the Amalgamated," *The Advance*, 27 October 1927.

on every occasion." At every turn the right-wing was comfortably outvoted. With barely suppressed triumphalism progressive and communist delegates presented their pet resolutions — on TLC-CIO unity, unemployment, repeal of the Padlock Law, the right to organize, aid to Spain and China, "quarantining the aggressors," and the immediate recall of parliament "to decide Canada's policy in the event of a European war" — for the rubber stamp. Compared with the timidity the left had shown at the 1936 and 1937 conventions, its aggression and boldness were remarkable. The whole event produced "considerable rejoicing" in the communist camp.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, despite all these positive indicators of the party's forward march into the labour movement, organized labour itself had moved *backwards* in 1938, and it seemed to some that the party was partly responsible. Notwithstanding communist statements to the contrary, the drive for industrial unionism had slowed towards the end of 1937 and in 1938 was stuttering to a dead halt.⁷⁷ The primary reason for this reversal was the changed balance of class forces brought about by the long recession that had started in late 1937. As unemployment soared, employers grasped the opportunity to weed out the militants who had surfaced in 1936-37. The level of strike activity plummeted; rank-and-file workers became hard to organize, and many promising new unions foundered.⁷⁸ Displaying old-fashioned voluntarism, some rank-and-file communists awarded the party a portion of the blame. The most bitter criticism was heard in Montréal, where the party seemed in danger of frittering away much of its pioneering organizational work. Late in 1937 the Hospital Workers' Union had 700 members, half of them fully dues-paying; by June 1938 only 40 paid-up members remained. An even worse situation prevailed in the steel industry. Delegates to the Montreal Trade Union Commission in February learned that workers at the Peck Rolling Mills were "completely disillusioned and have lost confidence in [SWOC]." Three months later the same forum was informed that the steel union, which only months earlier had 1000 members in Montréal, had "completely fallen to pieces." The reporting

⁷⁶The RCMP estimated that at least 102 delegates were party members. A report to the Edmonton party section gave a figure of 140-plus. See *Bulletin #901*, 29 September 1938; *Bulletin #902*, 11 October 1938.

⁷⁷See the comments of Dick Steele and Harry Hunter at SWOC's Ontario conference, *Bulletin #894*, 21 June 1938, and compare them with reports from Montréal in note 79.

⁷⁸Irving Martin Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1973), 29-30; Robert Storey, "Unionism Versus Corporate Welfare: The 'Dofasco Way'," *Labour/Le Travail*, 12 (Fall 1983), 7-42; Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto 1995), 180; Myrtle Bergren, *Tough Timber: the loggers of British Columbia — their story* (Toronto 1967), 116-35.

delegate “blamed the CP for allowing [this to happen] in so short a time” and recommended that the way back lay through building party shop groups at Peck’s and other “concentration” plants.⁷⁹

In June J.B. Salsberg visited Montréal for a special trade union conference of communist trade union officials and section organizers. He began his address by telling his audience that “with all its faults” the Montreal Trade Union Commission was the best in the party. He then stressed that the ongoing fight for labour unity was “our most important political task at the present time” and had to be achieved “at all costs.” To this end, he offered advice on how communists should conduct themselves in the Montreal Trades and Labour Council and the Quebec Federation of Labour and in their daily relations with ordinary workers. Winning the support of the two bodies for labour political action was crucial. If they worked “carefully,” Québec would give a vital lead “to the rest of the country in the formation of the democratic front.” He called on every comrade, “particularly those active in the trade unions ... [to] mix more freely with the rank and file.” The way to win them over to the progressive camp was to become more open. Communists should “not be afraid to admit” their political affiliations and should be prepared to bring in issues “from the floor ... and not from behind as many are prone to do.” The centre would do its part by abandoning trade union fractions and replacing them with “industrial units.”⁸⁰

What Salsberg meant by “careful” was revealed in the party’s continued deference towards the “progressive” labour bureaucracy. At one high-level meeting, Buck for no apparent reason raised the issue of the French CP’s policy of restraining the demands of “the radical working masses” and justified it on the grounds that any other course of action might “divide the radical forces” of the centre-left.⁸¹ This criterion also seemed to apply under different circumstances in Canada. The party’s boldness at Niagara Falls was only possible because of the caution it had displayed during the run-up to the convention.⁸² At the same time as the anonymous Montréal comrade was

⁷⁹*Bulletin #884*, 17 February 1938; *Bulletin #893*, 7 June 1938.

⁸⁰*Bulletin #896*, 20 July 1938.

⁸¹Manley, “Communists Are Acting as Representatives”; *Bulletin #890*, 3 May 1938.

⁸²UT, RKP, Box 13, folder 1, “Resolution on Trade Union Problems,” in *The Tasks of the Communist Party of Ontario in the Struggle for Jobs, Recovery, Democracy and Peace*, Proceedings of the Second Ontario Convention of the Communist Party, 8-10 October 1938. The *Bulletins* note that the party responded to redbaiting of the CSU by suspending recruitment of CSU militants into the party; Bruce Magnusson, in his capacity as secretary of the Port Arthur Trades and Labour Council, wrote (no doubt with gritted teeth) to the local *Times-Journal* to correct the erroneous impression that the council would be supporting May Day celebrations; and communist caucuses in the Toronto District Labour Council and Montreal Trades and Labour Council reduced

berating SWOC and the party's part in its demise, Harry Hunter and Dick Steele were boasting of the steel union's achievements in Ontario and thanking Pittsburgh for its support.⁸³ When rank-and-file Cape Breton miners and steelworkers aired sharp criticisms of SWOC and UMWA officials (like Dan Willie Morrison), the party executive "clung to the unity policy, refused to openly criticize union leaders, and even defended them from the criticism of militants."⁸⁴ The party literally took up the cudgels on the bureaucracy's behalf by expelling M.A. Mackenzie, editor of the *Steelworker*, as a "Trotskyite" and founding the rival *Union News* under George MacEachern's editorship.⁸⁵

Salsberg's Montréal intervention may have had nothing to do with earlier criticisms of the party's role in industry, but it was nevertheless striking that these were not openly addressed — rather contradicting the trade union commissar's laudable encouragement of openness with ordinary workers. Was Salsberg's underlying message that rank-and-file comrades — even in this new, open mode — should present a strictly authorized version of the creed? One should not assume that, when party leaders criticized the lower ranks for submerging themselves in their unions, that their criticism always came from the left or was perceived that way. Party members who observed strict discipline must sometimes have found themselves standing uneasily to the right of the very militants who were most likely to be attracted to left-wing politics.⁸⁶

The European Crisis: What Shall Canada Do?

It was axiomatic to the popular front project that every advance towards "true democracy" was endangered by the looming prospect of world war. Wide discussion of the question of what Canadians should do in the event of war in Europe was largely the result of CPC prompting. Mackenzie King, having struck a private deal at the 1937 Commonwealth Conference to support Britain's position unconditionally, made it his "supreme endeavour" to "let no hasty or premature threat or pronouncement create mistrust and divisions"

the intensity of their campaigns for independent labour political action in the face of a "reactionary" counter-attack. See *Bulletin #889*, 20 April 1938; *Bulletin #891*, 13 May 1938; *Bulletin #896*, 20 July 1938.

⁸³ *Bulletin #894*, 21 June 1938.

⁸⁴ M. Earle and H. Gamberg, "The United Mine Workers and the Coming of the CCF to Cape Breton," in David J. Bercuson and David Bright, eds., *Canadian Labour History: Selected Readings* (Toronto 1994), 281-2.

⁸⁵ *Bulletin #890*, 3 May 1938.

⁸⁶ Stewart Smith, "The Party Recruiting Drive in Southern Ontario," and J.B. Salsberg, "Maintain and Extend Trade Union Unity," in *A Democratic Front for Canada*, 61-75, 76-93.

between Canada's disparate social elements and actively discouraged public debate.⁸⁷ In the country at large, however, it was widely assumed that Canada would follow Britain. Thus, the CPC's main objective was to exert pressure on Mackenzie King to persuade Neville Chamberlain to abandon appeasement in favour of the USSR's "positive peace" policy. Only collective security, it argued, would "quarantine the aggressors" and remove the danger of war. Although the party was less clear about what Canada should do if diplomacy failed (a fuzziness that helped keep "several thousand" principled pacifists in the party and many more in the democratic front), the Anti-Comintern Pact had strengthened the universal assumption that the USSR would be the main target in any war started by Germany.⁸⁸ Moreover, the very strong implication of all CPC propaganda was that fascism — and especially Nazism — was so bestial that any Leninist reservations about imperialist war would have to set aside. The entire logic of the party's position pointed towards the CPC's original decision in September 1939: "this is our war."⁸⁹

Throughout 1938 the party strived to persuade the "democratic masses" that the Canadian people and the Soviet Union were natural allies. Provided that fascism could be contained at home and abroad, Canadian democracy would naturally evolve towards the superior form of Soviet socialist democracy.⁹⁰ If fascism could not be contained, party propaganda strongly implied that the same democratic alliance could defeat it. As the USSR's active combat role in Spain (used, of course, by the bourgeois press to attack the legitimacy of the popular struggle) proved, "peace-loving" did not mean pacifist. All the party's campaigns against the "fascist aggressors" played heavily on a sense of outrage at, and absolute moral superiority over, fascist barbarism. Hitherto focused on Spain ("the cause of democratic Spain is the cause of humanity," *Clarté* insisted), these sentiments were sustained by hostility to appeasement. Especially after Munich, the party expressed its fury at the "Chamberlain betrayal" of Czechoslovakia in print and from numerous public platforms.

In Winnipeg, the Young Communist League outraged the authorities by burning Hitler in effigy during a picket of the German consular offices. A popular front meeting in the same city a few days later expressed its indignation more augustly: from a platform that included local party leader Leslie Morris, Mayor John Queen, former-Judge Lawrence St. George Stubbs, R.C.

⁸⁷James Eayrs, "'A Low Dishonest Decade': Aspects of Canadian External Policy, 1931-1939," in R. Douglas Francis and Donald B. Smith, *Readings in Canadian History: Post-Confederation* (Toronto 1994), 393-410; Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto 1959), 303-4.

⁸⁸William Beeching and Phyllis Clarke, eds., *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck* (Toronto 1977), 285.

⁸⁹Palmer, *A Communist Life*, 54.

⁹⁰Buck, "General Secretary's Report," in *A Democratic Front for Canada*, 40.

McCuthchan of the trades and labour council, and several representatives of the party's German and Czechoslovak language groups, came an expression of "full sympathy" with the Czech people and a demand for the immediate recall of parliament. Similar meetings were held across Canada.⁹¹ BC provincial secretary Malcolm Bruce wrote that the "situation today is different from that of 1914 and [makes] it possible to resist fascism and remove it from the face of the earth."⁹²

Munich, however, was a clear defeat for Soviet diplomacy and, from Moscow's perspective, the popular front strategy.⁹³ Over the following winter Moscow began to drop hints of its waning support for the popular front. These were promptly picked up by party leaders in the west. In October, for example, Buck, who had left for Europe with Earl Browder shortly after Munich, joined other CP leaders in Paris and issued an anti-appeasement manifesto, calling again for a pact of the "peace forces" (Britain, France, the United States, and the USSR) and issuing a last appeal for solidarity with the dying Spanish republic (the International Brigades were already homeward bound). A remarkable feature of the manifesto was a sharp attack on social democracy (late in 1937 Dimitrov had dropped a hint that this might be on the way). In terms somewhat reminiscent of the Third Period, the Labour and Socialist International and the International Federation of Trade Unions were declared specially culpable for Munich. The party heads invited the "proletarians of all lands" to force the leaders of social democracy to support an international conference to reorganize the anti-fascist struggle. In November the ECCI issued another manifesto, emphasizing the need for "*working class unity*" as the "foundations of Unity of the Peoples Against Fascist Aggression."⁹⁴ While these declarations did not dispose of the popular front, it appeared likely that the scene was already being set for the Nazi-Soviet Pact and an imperialist interpretation of the war.⁹⁵

In April 1938 Buck had rather mysteriously told members of the central committee not to be surprised by *any* development on the international front.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, there was no indication a year later that the man whose interna-

⁹¹ *Bulletin #901*, 29 September 1938; *Bulletin #902*, 11 October 1938; *Clarke*, quoted in Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream*, 63-4.

⁹² *Daily Clarion*, 3 October 1938; *People's Advocate*, 7 October 1938; Malcolm Bruce, *War and the Chamberlain Betrayal* (Vancouver 1938).

⁹³ Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (Harmondsworth 1975), 294-5.

⁹⁴ *Bulletin #903*, 21 October 1938; *Bulletin #906*, 30 November 1938.

⁹⁵ On the debate over this possibility, see Kevin MacDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism From Lenin to Stalin* (London 1996), 155-6.

⁹⁶ *Bulletin #890*, 3 May 1938.

tional contacts were the best in the party knew what was being hatched in the Kremlin. Indeed, as appeasement crumbled in the wake of Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia, Buck stated in a radio broadcast that the party had concretely studied the international situation and — on a Leninist basis — decided that a war between “fascist aggression” and “democracy” would be a just war, even though the “two camps” of peace (implicitly excluding the USSR) and war were “imperialist.” Come the day, the party would “participate loyally” and bring the war to a “speedy and victorious conclusion.”⁹⁷ For the next four months the party had little to add.⁹⁸ And then came the first bombshell. The comrades who wrote the *Clarion's* first editorial on the Nazi-Soviet Pact were obviously in the dark about the Moscow line but their first instinct was to defend the Soviet Union. Over the next few weeks they constructed an increasingly detailed apologia, their main arguments being that: the Soviet Union had been forced into the Pact because of Britain's reluctance to support collective security; the Pact was *not* a surprise, since Britain had known about German-Soviet negotiations for six months; it was the most limited of agreements; and it was a triumph for the struggle against fascism, for not only would it free the Soviet Union to lend more assistance to China, but the dispelling of the myth that the USSR was a threat to Germany would inspire the *German* people to launch their own struggle for “peace, freedom and democracy.”⁹⁹

As disgust followed confusion, many communists, particularly Jewish comrades, left the party. Nevertheless, as the RCMP reported, party discipline and the bottom line argument that the Soviet Union (a) knew what it was doing and (b) had no alternative, held the ranks together.¹⁰⁰ What helped even more was that the party line on the nature of the war itself did not change. When Hitler blitzed western Poland, Buck wrote to Mackenzie King promising “full support to the Polish people in their resistance to Nazi aggression” and the party's Spanish Civil War commissars, Ed Cecil-Smith and William Kardash, offered to place the expertise of the MacPap veterans at the disposal of the

⁹⁷Tim Buck, “Two Camps: Peace Front and the Warmongers,” *Daily Clarion*, 21 April 1939.

⁹⁸Alice Cooke asked “Can Canada Care for British Children?” *Daily Clarion*, 12 August 1939 and answered in the affirmative, confident that Canada would handle evacuation more efficiently and in a more egalitarian manner than in Britain. She urged the federal government to launch immediately the construction of camps to house British evacuees, which, in the event of a peaceful resolution of the European conflict, could then be used as holiday camps for needy Canadian children.

⁹⁹*Clarion*, 26 August and 2, 16 September 1939.

¹⁰⁰Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream*, 100-1; Palmer, *A Communist Life*, 54.

Department of National Defence.¹⁰¹ Although the political bureau adopted a position of “unequivocal opposition” to Canada’s involvement in the war as early as 9 September, for a variety of reasons it took until 14 October to issue a clear statement of that fact.¹⁰² Meanwhile, with Canada in the war, many party members remained in the dark about the leadership’s change of heart and “conducted their political activities according to their own interpretation of events.” One seventeen year-old comrade, “unemployed and full of anti-fascist fire,” immediately went to join the army and found himself in a line-up with veterans, unemployed men, and “a whole bunch of bloody communists.”¹⁰³ The party’s decision to oppose the war — so obviously at the behest of the Soviet Union and so dramatically at odds with five years of anti-fascist propaganda — was the more devastating bombshell.

Conclusion

In important respects the RCMP’s analysis of popular frontism was profoundly accurate. When the party showed that its ultimate loyalty was *not* to Canada and democracy but to an anti-democratic, foreign power, who could deny that CPC leaders saw the strategy essentially as “a temporary expedient?”¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the popular front amounted to much more than the RCMP’s limited analysis could comprehend. Here the concept of “two parties” makes particular sense. There “was,” as Bryan Palmer stresses, “a Party ruled by the bureaucratic sycophants of Stalin ... [and also] a party that people joined the better to intervene in the class struggles of the twentieth century.”¹⁰⁵ The vast majority of the tens of thousands of men, women, and children who, whether in the party or in the movement, were mobilized by the popular front had not the slightest inkling that events unfolding in central Europe would discredit their participation in a movement that appeared to be bringing “true democracy” to Canada. Many party members were caught up in the thrill of being the vital spark of this mass struggle to deepen and extend Canadian democracy, not least within the party. Their experience of this more consultative, respon-

¹⁰¹ *Clarion*, 9 September 1939; Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988), 162.

¹⁰² Beeching and Clarke, *Yours In the Struggle*, 288-9.

¹⁰³ Hunter, *Which Side Are You On, Boys*, 119; Palmer, *A Communist Life*, 55; Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream*, 99.

¹⁰⁴ Mark Naison, “Remaking America: Communists and Liberals in the Popular Front,” in Michael E. Brown, *et al.*, *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (New York 1993), 45-73.

¹⁰⁵ Bryan D. Palmer, editor’s introduction to *A Communist Life*, 6-7. It has to be pointed out, however, that the two parties were also a single party whose leading “caste” was not unfamiliar with the meaning of struggle.

sive, and apparently accountable party made the events of August and September 1939 all the more unbearable and their sense of betrayal that much greater. Would they have been so dazed and horrified by the Hitler-Stalin Pact had their anti-fascist and democratic convictions been only skin-deep?¹⁰⁶

Continuous activism had helped conceal the many tensions and ambiguities in the popular front. Many rank-and-file members must have wondered how to reconcile the party's claims to be democratic, committed to peaceful change, and revolutionary. They may also have wondered why, if becoming Canadian was so vital, the party continued to sing the praises of the Soviet Union so fulsomely and so often. Both contradictions were highlighted in the summer of 1939 when the state banned the sale of the recently published *History of the CPSU (B) Short Course* on the grounds that the public had to be protected from a text that preached "force and violence and is therefore seditious."¹⁰⁷ This book, in essence a recasting of Stalin's version of Leninism in grand narrative form, culminated in a panegyric to Stalin and a defence of the show trials. Since the latter had dented the Soviet halo, the *Short Course* had to be defended.¹⁰⁸ Norman Freed, one of the party's foremost dialecticians agreed that the party (which had imported 25,000 copies for internal educational work) was offering it as a viable model of the Canadian road to socialism. He disputed, however, the state's gloss on its message. What the *Short Course* really showed was the usually peaceful, democratic nature of the Bolshevik revolution. Why, "the very transfer of power ... to the workers and peasants was carried through in the most democratic manner," while the blood spilt during the Civil War was not the fault of the bolsheviks but of a "dying capitalist class." Thus, the *Short Course* deserved a place in the pantheon of literary democracy stretching from Thomas More's *Utopia* to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.¹⁰⁹ Every such apologetic came back to haunt the

¹⁰⁶Hunter, *Which Side Are You On, Boys*, 116.

¹⁰⁷Norman Freed, "What the Ban Against the Party History Book Means to Canadians," *Clarion*, 5 August 1939.

¹⁰⁸Beeching and Clarke, *Yours in the Struggle*, 387-90. Buck attended Bukharin's trial and was convinced of his guilt. Nevertheless, he felt that Bukharin could only have become engaged in plotting against the Soviet state if he had convinced himself that there was something "quite evil" about it. Buck dealt with his misgivings by refusing to write a pamphlet on the Bukharin trial for the party, a decision that led to his being "accused for several years of straddling the fence, of evading the full issue."

¹⁰⁹"Study the New History," *Party Builder*, May 1939; Sam Carr, "An History-Making Volume for Canadians," *Party Builder*, May 1939; "Studying History," *Party Builder*, July 1939; "Break the Ban," *Clarion*, 19 August 1939. Carr stated that, while the Russian model could not simply be "transplanted" to Canada, the *Short Course's* demonstration of the Soviet struggle for democratic rights, peace, and socialist construction were all directly relevant to the Canadian experience.

party later in the year, when Moscow's exposure as a practitioner of business as usual rather than the guardian of humanity removed one of the strongest reasons for being a communist.

Whether the popular front was leading the working class away from rather than towards socialism is impossible to answer. There is no way of knowing how it might have evolved — although it is worth speculating that the potential was there for the CPC to become the sort of "Labour-Progressive Party" that the CCF, the beneficiary of its failures (not to mention the Cold War), never truly became — a mass social reformist party on the model of the post-Liberation French or Italian CPs. What we can say is that the party's fetishization of unity led to tactical decisions that were inappropriate to the revolutionary workers' party the CPC still claimed to be. Trade-offs may have been incapable, but the CPC voluntarily surrendered the Leninist right to criticize its allies when they veered too far from the path of class struggle. We still lack a full account of the party's relations with the progressive middle class, but the moral of its handover of labour defence to the CCLU may be that, while middle-class allies could be useful, it was unwise to depend on them; some progressives managed to hold on to *their* agenda while wearing communist pyjamas.¹¹⁰ As in other countries, "militancy at the base clashed with the circumspection of the leadership."¹¹¹

In its contribution to labour struggles, the party comfortably out-performed its rivals while standing "with the workers" less consistently than one might have expected. The official CPC history, not a text given to revisionist critique, acknowledges that the party's "intense preoccupation" with keeping the TLC and CIO united "contributed to a temporary decline in union membership during the 1938-40 period."¹¹² Placating the progressive labour bureaucracy may also have contributed to restricting the number of union militants who became or remained communists.

¹¹⁰ Referring to the coterie of middle-class Left-Liberal-Progressives he discovered on returning from graduate studies in England to wartime Ottawa, Harry Ferns noted that "the Marxist intellectual ferment of the 1930s in Canada produced people who were radical but not mindlessly radical. If one judges this ferment exclusively in terms of those who became apparatchiks of the Communist party, one can come to one conclusion; if one judges the outcome in terms of those who did not, one comes to another and more positive conclusion." See H.S. Ferns, *Reading from Left to Right: One Man's Political History* (Toronto 1983), 189-93. The pyjama reference comes from this source.

¹¹¹ MacDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 133.

¹¹² Communist Party of Canada, *Canada's Party of Socialism: History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1921-1976* (Toronto 1982), 108, 111; Weisbord, *The Strangest Dream*, 91-5.

As the events of August through October 1939 established, the CPC's ultimate betrayal of Leninism lay in allowing the broad lines of its policy to be determined not by an examination of objective possibilities but by the "erratic directives of the distant heads of world Communism who could not have cared less" about the fate of Canada, Canadian workers, or the Canadian Communist Party.¹¹³ Arguably, the CPC never recovered from performing like a circus dog in fall 1939.¹¹⁴ Undoubtedly, in the last analysis, the Comintern was the RCMP's best friend.

¹¹³Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941* (Manchester 1989), 51.

¹¹⁴Apart from the moral damage it did to the CPC, the anti-war line was a tactical disaster. In the "imperialist war" period — October 1939 to June 1941 — far from fomenting strikes and other forms of industrial unrest, communist cadres were under orders to keep their heads down and go along with the rank and file. Social democrats "and others," Jack Scott observed, "had an easier time of it" on the shopfloor. It was precisely at this moment that the CCF grabbed its chance to emerge as a serious industrial presence. See Palmer, *A Communist Life*, 44-8, 57; Edwards, "The Mill," 291-5.