

The Role of the Trotskyists in the United Auto Workers, 1939-1949

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Willie Thompson has acknowledged in his survey of the history of the world-wide left, *The Left in History: Revolution and Reform in Twentieth-Century Politics*, that the Trotskyists “occasionally achieved some marginal industrial influence” in the US trade unions.¹ However, outside of the Trotskyists’ role in the Teamsters Union in Minneapolis and unlike the role of the Communist Party (CP) in the US labor movement that has been well-documented in numerous books and articles, little of a systematic nature has been written about Trotskyist activity in the US trade union movement.² This article’s goal is to begin to bridge a gap in the historical record left by other historians of labor and radical movements, by examining the role of the two wings of US Trotskyism, represented by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Workers Party (WP), in the United Auto Workers (UAW) from 1939 to 1949.

In spite of these two groups’ relatively small numbers within the auto workers’ union and although neither the SWP nor the WP was particularly successful in recruiting auto workers to their organizations, the Trotskyists played an active role in the UAW as leading individuals and activists, and as an organized left presence in opposition to the larger and more powerful CP. In addition, these Trotskyists were able to exert an influence that was significant at times, beyond their small membership with respect to vital issues confronting the UAW. At various times throughout the 1940s, for example, these trade unionists were skillful in mobilizing auto unionists in opposition to both the no-strike pledge during World War II, and the Taft-Hartley bill in the postwar period. They also organized UAW members in fighting for the inclusion of the escalator clause in 1947-1948 while constructing a non-CP left-wing presence within the union. This activity was based largely on how these two organizations came to conceive of left-wing politics in the post-World War II era, both within the UAW and the nation as a whole.

Since the SWP and the WP each viewed itself as *the* vanguard party that would lead the US working class in revolution, both parties were in favor of organizing an independent left-wing opposition to the UAW bureaucracy during World War II in order to keep a revolutionary political program alive within the union. However, by the late 1940s, while the SWP clung to this position, the WP abandoned its goal of establishing such a movement, eventually coming to see the Reuther Caucus — the dominant political faction within the UAW after 1947 upon the election of Walter Reuther to the union presidency for the

second time — as the embodiment of a left-wing, militant, and democratic UAW. The paper will conclude with a comparison between the program of the CP circa 1939 to 1949 to that of the SWP and the WP within the auto union during the same era. This will provide a context to understand and critique the two Trotskyist groups' participation within the UAW and their attempt to promote a revolutionary politics during this tumultuous decade.

The Prewar and the World War II Era

On the eve of World War II, the UAW had situated itself to play an important role in the political economy of the United States. At this time, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) had resumed its upward trajectory and in the forefront of the young industrial federation was the UAW. The auto union doubled its membership in 1941 and by December 1942 had enrolled more than one million members and had become, according to Nelson Lichtenstein, “the largest independent organization of workers in the world.”³

With the UAW organizing the defense plants where uninterrupted production was crucial to the success of the war effort, the auto union was in a unique position to expand its influence among the New Deal policy makers in the nation's capital. Since the warfare state required industrial cooperation from the UAW and its members, the union and its leaders played a pivotal role in forging “a new political-administrative framework for wartime industrial relations” while simultaneously increasing the influence of the labor-liberal alliance throughout the country.⁴ Thus, events and issues which confronted the auto workers' union during World War II, such as the “equality of sacrifice” program resulting in the conceding of premium pay, the wave of wildcat strikes in 1943 and 1944, and the debates over incentive pay and the no-strike pledge, reverberated far beyond the hallways of power in Washington DC.

Prior to its emergence as the vanguard of the industrial union movement, by the middle of 1940, the UAW-CIO had grown to approximately 250 000 members within three years, and had already undergone a significant amount of factional struggle. Throughout 1938, Homer Martin, then UAW president, had steadily lost the support of large segments of the union's membership. By early 1939, Martin had broken with the CIO and was making plans to affiliate his “rump” union with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Two separate UAW conventions were organized in 1939: the CIO supporters convened one in Cleveland, while Martin held his in Detroit. In response to this internal turmoil within the auto workers' union, General Motors and Chrysler stated that collective bargaining would be suspended at plants where two competing unions existed.⁵

Because of their opposition to the CP, the leaders of the Trotskyists had initially aligned with Martin and his Progressive Caucus, arguing that Martin and

his supporters were more left wing than the Unity Caucus, which included communists and socialists. However, the auto cadre in the party did not agree with this characterization, arguing that the rank-and-file activists within the Unity Caucus were “much more progressive” than Martin’s followers. When the split in the UAW came in 1939, the Trotskyists opposed Martin and participated in the UAW-CIO convention in Cleveland where 90 000 workers were represented as opposed to the 17 000 workers allegedly allied with Martin at the UAW-AFL convention in Detroit.⁶

The Trotskyists broke with Martin because they believed his organizing of an “anti-CIO convention,” which he announced on 21 January 1939, was a blatant attempt to form a “reactionary alliance with the AF of L Executive Council,” in order to make “deals with the automobile manufacturers.” In the 14 February 1939 issue of the SWP’s *Socialist Appeal*, the Trotskyists outlined a “Union Building” program and called for the formation of an independent progressive group within the UAW. Their position was that the UAW was in a “disastrous state” because of the current leadership of the union, consisting “of a combination of Lewis men and Stalinist supporters” and that contributions by “Martin and his crowd” had led to “an unbroken record of incompetence, laziness and reactionary politics” within the UAW.⁷

Dubbed the “auto crisis” within the Party, the initial Trotskyist support for Martin emerged while James Cannon, the SWP National Secretary from 1938 to 1953, was out of the country after the Fourth International’s founding conference in the fall of 1938. With Max Shachtman and James Burnham, the other two members of the Party’s secretariat in 1938, directing the SWP Political Committee in Cannon’s absence, these two leaders’ fear of the CP dominating the Unity Caucus resulted in their forcing the auto fraction to accept the disastrous policy of backing Martin. When the vast majority of the auto union abandoned Martin, the Party embarked on a sudden and awkward reversal requiring two issues of the *Socialist Appeal*, one first supporting Martin and a second withdrawing Party backing, without Shachtman and Burnham accepting responsibility for the debacle within the auto fraction.⁸

Although the late 1930s were tumultuous ones for the UAW, the years of 1939 and 1940 were equally as turbulent for US Trotskyists who were heading into an organizational split just as they were beginning to obtain a modicum of influence in three primary areas of the US trade union movement: the Teamsters union in Minneapolis, the maritime unions, and the nascent UAW. For example, the Trotskyists’ Union Building program for the UAW in 1939 was officially adopted by five small UAW locals, largely due to the significant influence wielded by two Trotskyists active in the UAW, Bert Cochran in three Cleveland locals and John Anderson in two Detroit locals. Bert Cochran was involved in the Cleveland locals of Willard Storage Battery Local 88, Weatherhead Local 463, and Baker Raulang Local 451, while John Anderson was active in McCord

Radiator Local 210 and Fleetwood Local 15. The Trotskyists also made contacts or established “sympathetic groups” in five additional locals: Dodge Local 3 (Detroit), Hudson Local 154 (Detroit), Dill Local 263 (Cleveland), Chevrolet Local 156 (Flint), and Chevrolet Local 467 (Saginaw).⁹

At a union conference attended by delegates of the ten local unions mentioned above, held on 4 March 1939 in Detroit, the Trotskyists’ Union Building program was adopted, as well as a resolution calling for the formation of a Labor Party in the United States. In addition, a steering committee was elected to guide the work of this independent third group at the upcoming UAW-CIO convention. At this gathering, the Trotskyists’ caucus was comprised of fifteen delegates who presented their Union Building program, a dramatic increase from the two delegates they had at the union’s previous convention. With many sections of their program adopted at this meeting, the Trotskyists had made their presence felt within the union.¹⁰

Shachtman and Burnham’s Stalinophobia — that is the losing of one’s political bearings because of the belief that the crimes of Stalinism overwhelm everything else — that was revealed in the “auto crisis” during the latter months of 1938 and the early part of 1939, reached fruition in the spring of 1940 when their faction refused to unconditionally defend the Soviet Union arguing that it was no longer a workers’ state. Beginning in mid-1939 until the SWP special convention in April 1940, the nature of the political and economic system in the Soviet Union, or “the Russian Question,” had taken precedence as the major issue of debate among US Trotskyists. When the split had occurred, the SWP, led by Cannon, remained the “orthodox Trotskyist” organization, maintaining that the Soviet Union was a bureaucratically “degenerated workers state” still worthy of unconditional defense from imperialist aggression. The “unorthodox Trotskyists,” led by Max Shachtman, formed a new revolutionary organization, the Workers Party (WP) which, a short time later, defined the Soviet Union as being a regime based on “bureaucratic collectivism” and denied that the CP was “a tendency within the workers movement.”¹¹

Of the 1095 members¹² in the organization before the division, Myers estimates that the SWP split “right down the middle, fifty-fifty,” with 40 percent of the membership adhering to the minority faction (the Shachtmanites). Due to the loss of a certain percentage of members who did not affiliate with either group, the newly organized WP had 400 members at its inception in the spring of 1940, according to Peter Drucker.¹³

Besides being a dispute over political program, the Cannonites argued that the split had occurred along class lines with the “genuine proletarians” remaining with the SWP, and with the “petty bourgeois” members affiliating with the WP.¹⁴ Gordon Haskell, who went with the WP in the split, admits that in 1940, the Shachtmanites “had practically no trade unionists” and that the WP “was really mostly a Youth organization.”¹⁵ Thus, the break-up did not damage the

preliminary inroads that the SWP trade unionists had made in the US labor movement as a whole, and the UAW in particular at that time.

Surveying the current state of the auto union in May 1940 only one month after the organizational split, the orthodox Trotskyists of the SWP believed that the UAW had “made no progress” in the last two years. In order to revitalize the union, the SWP auto unionists believed that it was necessary to build a leadership that would “launch the drive for the 30 hour week with 40 hour pay” in the auto industry, thus “creat[ing] the necessary precondition for a successful drive at Fords [*sic*].”¹⁶

With respect to its own effectiveness within the UAW, the SWP realized that its recently formed national auto fraction was not functioning “in a nationally cohesive manner,” with the Party trade unionists in California and Michigan, for example, adopting different positions on questions within the union. Although the SWP had 55 auto cadres as of May 1940, approximately half were unemployed at the time. The strongest concentrations of Party trade unionists in auto were in Detroit and Flint, and the SWP had fractions or at least the “beginnings of fractions” in Detroit, Flint, Cleveland, Allentown (Pennsylvania), Los Angeles, and “non-Party contacts in Saginaw and Pontiac.”¹⁷

The auto fraction secretary, Jules Geller, stated that it was necessary that all fractions consult with the National Center in Flint before making any local decisions because “[b]y coordination our forces, small as they are, will obtain the maximum possible weight in the unions.” Geller optimistically concluded, “if we keep our heads, we can emerge in the auto industry with a large membership and become an important section of the Auto Union.”¹⁸

Although the WP had literally no trade unionists at its formation in May 1940, this organization wasted little time in placing its young members, or “student youth,” in unionized plants.¹⁹ At the peak of production during World War II, approximately 80 percent of WP members were working at industrial jobs with many of the Party’s trade unionists, active in the industrial unions, elected to positions ranging from shop steward and grievance committee chairman to local president in some cases.²⁰

Of the unions in which the WP had penetrated during the wartime era, the group achieved its greatest success in the UAW even though the Party had not decided to concentrate on the auto industry at its formation in 1940. Beginning in March 1941, Party members were moved to Detroit and by the summer of 1942, there were still only half a dozen party activists in auto work. However, by 1943, the WP had a “central concentration” of 50 cadres in the Detroit auto industry with a strong presence and influence in Willow Run Local 50 (Detroit), Brewster Local 365 (New York), and Bell Aircraft Local 501 (Buffalo).²¹

During the height of World War II, the two wings of US Trotskyism numbered approximately 200 UAW members with the SWP having 110 working in

auto while the WP possessed about 90. There were 840 SWP members in 1944, which meant that thirteen percent of the party was in the UAW with the largest SWP fractions being in Buick Local 6 (Chicago) with nineteen auto unionists, and Briggs Local 212 (Detroit) which had eighteen to twenty auto cadres in 1945. With respect to the WP, the percentage was even higher with eighteen percent of the 500-member organization in auto.²²

Based on the two parties' analyses of the objective conditions facing the US working class during the World War II era, the SWP and the WP adopted divergent tactical orientations for their trade union work in the UAW. Because the SWP believed that the "relationship of forces" was not acting in the Party's favor due to "war patriotism, the subservience of the trade union bureaucracy, the absence of significant mass opposition, and our own isolation and weakness," from the start of the war until May 1945, the SWP carried out a "policy of caution" in its industrial work. In practice, this meant that the Party would seek "limited aims in the trade union movement" in which group members would attempt neither to obtain "big union posts" nor "to organize power caucuses," but to engage in intense educational work, penetration, and "solidification of our cadre in the unions, and party recruitment."²³

In a directive to the auto fraction members in the Detroit branch in June 1942, SWP Labor Secretary Farrell Dobbs clarified what the "policy of caution" meant through his discussion of an error made by a cadre working in a small UAW shop of approximately 150 employees in Chicago. At a local union meeting, Comrade Rice, an executive board member, "introduced a resolution" which called on "the government to take over the plant" and to "turn it over to the workers to operate." Although the local's Executive Board passed the resolution, the company discharged Rice for allegedly fomenting a work slowdown. Even though the local union voted to fight for Rice's reinstatement, and in favor of his resolution, the UAW International threatened to bring in replacement workers if a strike was called over the termination. The local filed an unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) but with the board slow to react, Rice remained out of work.²⁴

According to Dobbs, there were a number of lessons to be learned from this incident in which the Party's position was compromised in the labor movement. Trade union cadre should not necessarily introduce resolutions at union meetings or oppose "every incorrect proposal" that is put forward by union officials but should prepare, through propaganda work, to "exert effective and growing influence when the next wave of mass action begins." In addition, in order to protect the SWP's standing within the unions, Dobbs stated that it was imperative that all resolutions to be introduced by Party members within the unions be approved beforehand by the National Trade Union Department.²⁵

On the other hand, the WP believed that wartime patriotism was not interfering with, what it perceived to be, burgeoning worker militancy in the indus-

trial plants. As opposed to the SWP, the WP encouraged the active participation of its trade union cadre in seeking union posts, and adopted a syndicalist orientation in the organization of wartime strikes, believing that the mass of US workers were on the move.²⁶ The WP considered the SWP's wartime trade union strategy to be one of "tail-endism," arguing in a 1942 resolution:

We reject the false and essentially tail-endist and opportunist theory that the American workers are not in motion, are in a state of apathy, and will not move in defense of their rights and standards in the coming period. The contrary is the case.... Whoever argues that the American workers are today at rest ... and cannot be made to move by militant leadership and guidance ... deserves a position as a benevolent trade union bureaucrat, but does not deserve the name of revolutionary socialist.²⁷

Under the SWP's policy of caution, the progress made was slow and steady in the two major auto centers. For example, in Flint, an active group of Party members had been assembled through the Trotskyists' raid on the Socialist Party in 1937, in which they won over a number of UAW activists, including Kermit and Genora Johnson and the Johnsons' small band of followers. By November 1941, the Flint branch of fifteen members, with five being auto workers, engaged in a substantial amount of educational and organizational work in the auto industry. By April 1942, two SWP auto unionists had been successful in getting the first five African American workers employed at the Chevrolet plant in Flint. Because Kermit Johnson stood up for these workers, he was able to recruit all five of them to the Party.²⁸

The Flint members' fight on behalf of African American workers in the auto plants was representative of the SWP's national strategy in auto during the World War II era. SWP members were encouraged to battle for the rights of both African American and women workers at the point of production, wherever the Party exerted some influence. For example, in Buick Local 6, the SWP fraction was instrumental in the struggle for obtaining African American workers jobs as semi-skilled machine operators and for gaining women workers equal pay for equal work.²⁹

In the Detroit branch during 1942, the primary focus was the rooting of the organization "into industry and into the trade unions." The local group felt that it had accomplished this goal with 81 percent of its membership "employed in industry and members of their respective trade unions" with 70 percent working in the auto industry and enrolled as UAW members. The auto unionists were concentrated "in a few of the more important local unions," such as Briggs Local 212, Budd Wheel Local 306, and Fleetwood Local 15, as opposed to having "isolated comrades in many locals." Five auto fractions were functioning in the city in 1942 and four workers (two auto workers and two sailors) had

been recruited to the Detroit organization over the previous year.³⁰

Even though the two Trotskyist parties' tactical orientations were vastly different during World War II, their analyses of the events and political developments occurring within the UAW were strikingly similar. For the SWP, both factions of the auto union's leadership were too intimately connected with promoting Roosevelt's war program within the union, at the expense of the workers' best interests on and off of the shop floor. This included political support for the war, having UAW members forgo their right to strike during World War II, and approval by the union leadership of the War Labor Board (WLB) as the final arbiter of all industrial disputes during this period.³¹

While acknowledging that the UAW was a very militant union "in the key war industry," the WP criticized the UAW leadership for "[t]heir pro-imperialist war, class-collaborationist politics" which led them to "to represent Roosevelt and his class in the ranks of the proletariat." The Party was opposed to the introduction of "incentive pay schemes" and the no-strike pledge as well as tying the union to the Roosevelt regime.³²

In addition, the WP critiqued the UAW's two major factions, specifically the Addes grouping, the faction led by George Addes who was elected Secretary-Treasurer of the UAW in 1946, for being dominated by the Communists and the Reuther-Leonard faction for being "a bureaucratic group of officials at the top." Concerning the Addes group, the WP argued that it promoted "the interests of the reactionary Russian bureaucracy" within the union and that "[t]he most conscious, best-organized and most dangerous right wing in the labor movement today is the Stalinist wing." While the Reuther Caucus was considered to be a centrist group within the context of the US trade union movement, its major problem was that it encouraged policies of "class collaboration with the 'democratic' capitalists," and with respect to the key issues confronting the union, it compromised and capitulated before these capitalists.³³

At the national level, both the SWP and the WP auto cadre took a leading role in the struggle within the UAW against the no-strike pledge. As well, in 1944, both groups were instrumental in the establishment of the Rank and File Caucus (RFC), the political vehicle of this oppositional movement. The two sections of US Trotskyism viewed World War II as an "imperialist rivalry" between the capitalist nations and "counterposed the fight for socialism and the interests of the working class to the victory of either side in the conflict." Since the pledge interfered with the workers' ability to effectively press for their demands on and off the shop floor, the Trotskyists vehemently contested its existence.

The no-strike pledge only became important as a matter of concern at the Ninth Annual UAW Convention in September 1944. However, because of the Trotskyists' activity in a number of locals, there was opposition to this policy at the 1943 convention. For example, because of the leadership role adopted by

the SWP fraction in Buick Local 6 over this issue, it became the first Chicago-area UAW local to pass a resolution calling for the rescinding of the pledge in September 1943. Although it was solidly reaffirmed at the 1943 convention, the delegates from three locals unanimously voted against the continuation of this policy: Buick Local 599 (Flint) and Chevrolet Local 659 (Flint), which had significant SWP fractions, as well as Olds Local 652 (Lansing). Five additional locals, including Buick Local 6, gave the vast majority of their votes to the pledge's revocation.³⁴

The fight over the no-strike pledge at the 1944 UAW convention was bitter, with three different resolutions, two minority and one majority, presented on the convention floor. The first minority report, referred to as the super-minority motion, which was backed by both wings of US Trotskyism and their allies within the UAW, proposed that this policy be immediately rescinded and called for a referendum vote to be held 60 days after the convention's adjournment. The second minority resolution, labeled the minority report, requested that the pledge be continued but exempted from coverage all factories reverting to civilian production upon the military defeat of Germany. Finally, the majority report advocated that the pledge be continued with a "review" to take place upon Germany's downfall.³⁵

A vigorous debate occurred at the gathering with at least some workers viewing patriotism and opposition to the no-strike policy as being consistent positions for UAW members to adopt.³⁶ When the final votes were cast, the delegates rejected all three resolutions. This led to the approval of a reworked report that reaffirmed the pledge while calling for a membership referendum on the issue.³⁷

In addition to the leadership role adopted by the Trotskyist auto unionists, other RFC organizers included "the veteran secondary leaders in Michigan" from major urban locals who fought this policy based on their own wartime experience. Although most of the leaders and members of the caucus did not share the Trotskyists' views on the imperialist nature of World War II, these trade unionists, however, felt that there was no contradiction in both supporting the war and in revoking the no-strike pledge. To them, it was an essential trade union tactic that had to be put in place because they felt that the current policy hampered and divided their local unions.³⁸

The caucus' organizers came primarily from Buick Local 6 (Chicago), Chrysler Local 7 (Detroit), Fleetwood Local 15 (Detroit), Willow Run Local 50 (Detroit), Briggs Local 212 (Detroit), Brewster Local 365 (New York), and Buick Local 599 (Flint). With the possible exception of Chrysler Local 7, all of these locals contained active SWP and/or WP fractions operating during World War II.³⁹

According to Jack Conway, an unaffiliated socialist who worked closely with the SWP trade unionists in Buick Local 6, the RFC played an integral role

at the 1944 UAW Convention:

[T]he third caucus tied the convention up for about two days. We forced the thing [the issue of the no-strike pledge] to a roll call vote and eventually to a referendum of the membership. We refused to associate ourselves with either political group in the international union until this and other questions were settled.⁴⁰

After the meeting, Local 6 with its large SWP fraction took the lead in preparing for the important mail poll on the no-strike pledge. A full two-page advertisement ran in the November 1944 edition of the local's newspaper under the title, "REVOKE THE NO STRIKE PLEDGE." In order to build support for its elimination, Buick Local 6 sent 25 000 copies of this ad to other UAW locals throughout the nation.⁴¹

When the ballots were tallied in March 1945, fewer than 300 000 workers, or about 30 percent of the UAW membership, had actually voted. By a two-to-one margin, the no-strike pledge was reaffirmed although in Detroit and Flint, the contest was considerably closer. In these two cities, where the SWP and the WP had concentrated its fractional work within the auto union, opponents of the policy obtained approximately 45 percent of the vote.⁴²

Post-World War II: The Struggle for Control of the UAW

During World War II, the CIO unions grew dramatically and had become stabilized largely through the dues check-off and the maintenance of membership clauses granted by the WLB in exchange for unions agreeing to the no-strike pledge. And by the war's end, of the industrial federation's affiliates, the UAW had definitively established itself as the premier union in what could be legitimately defined as an increasingly laborite nation. However, with auto workers temporarily laid off upon conversion of defense plants from wartime to domestic production, it became clear that the major problem confronting the United States was not production but rather consumption.

To this end, in the postwar period, the UAW assumed the vanguard role in the trade union movement in developing a privatized welfare state for auto workers by fighting for increased wages and an array of benefits which would help protect its membership from the vagaries of the capitalist economy's business cycles. This focus of the auto union fit nicely with the emerging Keynesian position that it was necessary to maintain aggregate demand and to redistribute income to prevent an economic slump.⁴³ The UAW's 1945-1946 strike at GM was the opening salvo in the battle to achieve these objectives. Other unions in a variety of industries, including steel, electrical, and railroad, followed the autoworkers' lead when they struck their employers during the 1946 strike wave, which has been the largest in the United States up to the pres-

ent time.

With the end of both World War II and the no-strike pledge, the RFC disappeared as a militant force in the UAW. This caucus' collapse did not lead to the demoralization of the SWP cadre, who maintained their auto union fractions during the industrial plants' postwar conversion to domestic production. In fact, the number of SWP members in the UAW increased by nearly 35 percent from 110 during World War II to 148 by October 1946 with the Party's major auto concentrations surviving and expanding in Detroit, Flint, Toledo, and Buffalo. Numerically speaking, the UAW was the SWP's largest trade union fraction, with maritime ranked second, and steel third. Of the 646 trade unionists in the Party in the fall of 1946, almost one out of four (22.9 percent) were in the auto workers' union.⁴⁴

Having developed stable groups in the auto, steel, and maritime industries among others, in the 1946 strike wave, the SWP became caught up in what the veteran Trotskyist labor writer Art Preis termed "American labor's greatest upsurge." With 44 percent of the Party's membership in unions, the Cannonites were exhilarated with the success of these worker struggles and believed that these events offered opportunities for the spread and penetration of Trotskyism in the United States. Achieving 1470 members by 1946, a figure almost three times as large as that after the Shachtmanite split in April 1940, the SWP believed that it was poised for real growth in the post-war period.⁴⁵

In the flood of militancy at the war's end, the UAW played a leading role in channeling worker discontent into concrete demands to advance the labor movement. In making a sharp turn to the left, Reuther launched a strike against General Motors (GM) in November 1945 that lasted 113 days. In this walkout, Reuther put forward a "GM Program" which called for a 30 percent increase in workers' wages, a freeze on car prices, and included the Trotskyist slogan of opening the company's books to the union,⁴⁶ demands which fired the imagination of the SWP auto unionists.

In connection with the commencement of the strike late in 1945, the SWP inaugurated a Party drive in Flint and Detroit which involved "an intense propaganda campaign" combined with "direct intervention in the union" through the auto cadre and sympathizing workers. Besides covering the developments of the work stoppage in detail in *The Militant*, Party members launched "a more wide-spread distribution" of the SWP's press in major strike areas. The Party also conducted a series of meetings in which the organization presented its analysis of the strike "with particularly good results in Flint." Finally, the Detroit branch organizer delivered three speeches concerning the walkout over a radio station that had been used in the past by the CIO. With respect to "direct intervention in the union," the Flint and Detroit auto unionists were able to "pass various propositions" at local union meetings which helped the SWP to solidify its strength in two UAW locals in Flint and "to form a bloc with sever-

al other GM locals” in Detroit.⁴⁷

The Party was heartened by the walkout, feeling that, on a technical level, it was extremely well conducted, incorporating “all the old ideas of strike organization which radicals have fought for over many years ... as a matter of course — picketing, flying squadrons, kitchens, strike meetings, etc.” The SWP also applauded the attitude of the union leadership, claiming “they have on the fundamental demand of the strike been adamant.”⁴⁸

Although the Cannonites believed that the union had emerged victorious upon the work stoppage’s conclusion and that the working class had obtained some real gains, they tempered their enthusiasm for the settlement with some sober criticism. The SWP argued, however, that more could have been achieved in this strike “had the strategy of the leadership been better, had there been greater unity and willingness on the part of the leadership to struggle in a united fashion.”⁴⁹

At a mid-February 1946 conference held for the Detroit trade union cadre to discuss and analyze recent developments within the auto union, the participants concluded that Reuther’s leftward turn was “so impressive” that “all the leading and most active union militants ... consider themselves as Reuther supporters.” Because of this, the SWP trade unionists decided to work within “the broad Reuther caucus” if one was established at the upcoming UAW convention. Expecting to have “a larger party delegation” at this gathering and with the ultimate goal being to build a substantial and active left wing in the UAW, the auto unionists would push for, within the caucus and on the convention floor, three programmatic points which included “a fight against the company security clause, a fight against any kind of cooperation with the fact-finding committees and for a labor party.”⁵⁰

While the SWP had made organizational gains within a number of Flint and Detroit UAW locals during the 1945-1946 GM strike, the WP faced the major problem of retaining its industrial base upon the conclusion of World War II. When the war ended, a number of Shachtmanites lost their jobs with the return of prewar workers from the army. However, in Detroit, many members with secure jobs in auto left voluntarily to return to school or to take professional jobs. Thus, by May 1946, the Party’s trade union work was considered to be “all but disestablished.”⁵¹

Statistics from the WP’s first trade union census, reported at the end of July 1946, and membership figures from 1946, reveal the severity of the problem. From an industrial penetration rate of approximately 80 percent during the war period, a little over 43 percent of Party members were working at industrial jobs with approximately 28 percent laboring in unionized shops. Although the census and the union affiliation breakdown indicated that Shachtmanites were enrolled in fifteen CIO unions, 21 AFL unions and three independent unions, the UAW with 48 WP members, contained, by far, the largest concentration of

unionists and was still the major focus of the Party's trade union work.⁵²

At the center of the Detroit auto industry, the WP initiated a serious attempt in 1946 to reestablish itself as a key force. The Shachtmanites believed that the route for carrying this out was "to become the active left-wing of the Reuther caucus" through their vigorous promotion of the GM program combined with advocacy of creating a Labor Party. Initially, the Party experienced difficulty in establishing fractions in the Detroit UAW shops due to the layoffs and shifts of activists. This made organizational work in the factories "diffuse, sporadic and individualistic" in nature. By early 1947, the WP had created two fractions in Detroit UAW local unions — one of five party members in a major UAW local, as well as a second smaller fraction in another auto union local — with the remaining cadre in the industry in Detroit functioning essentially "as isolated individuals" in UAW shops. The auto unionists in the Party's largest fraction became known as "ardent advocates" of both the GM program and the creation of a Labor Party. In addition to these activities, they participated in grievance struggles and the brief walkouts that occurred in the plant, were invited to attend and join the Reuther Caucus, and became leaders of the faction's veterans committee. They also wrote the seven point program for the caucus which called for wage raises without price increases, escalator and anti-discrimination clauses, and the directing of the CIO's Political Action Committee towards independent political action.⁵³

Shachtman appeared to be even more enthusiastic about the success of the strike and what it meant for the future of the US trade union movement as a whole than the SWP. In a letter addressed to all Party members, Shachtman argued that "the auto workers may be considered as the most advanced section of the American working class" and that "[w]hat they think and say and do today the rest of the working class will think and say and do in due time." Because of this, Shachtman claimed that WP members "must become the most consistent and radical champions of the GM program" by "mobiliz[ing] support for Reuther but on the basis of our program, our interpretation of the GM program, of our critical attitude towards Reuther himself."⁵⁴

Both the WP and the SWP supported Reuther in the 1946 UAW elections, although the SWP's support was more decisive because the group had many more delegates at the convention than the WP. Reuther won the presidency of the UAW International over R. J. Thomas by a razor thin margin of 114 votes out of 8761 votes cast at the union's tenth convention in March 1946.⁵⁵ According to Sol Dollinger, an SWP auto trade unionist in 1946, the Party was crucial in electing Reuther because it "had something like 25 to 35, maybe even more party delegates" at the 1946 UAW Convention with each delegate carrying "an average of 4, 5, 6 or 7 votes," providing Reuther with his margin of victory.⁵⁶ The WP's fraction at this convention of nearly 2000 delegates, included

three delegates and one alternate as well as “three or four militants and sympathizers.”⁵⁷

While the Shachtmanites backed and actively worked for the victory of the Reuther Caucus in its fight with the Addes-Communist faction in the 1946 contest “as the lesser of two evils,” after the election the Party felt that it was necessary to try to build an independent force within the union in opposition to Reuther. The WP called for its auto cadre to organize fairly broad progressive groups within the UAW that would not only include the Party members and sympathizers but left-wing Reutherites, as well as non-CP supporters of the Addes-Communist faction. Only after a period of intense educational work and experience with the class-collaborationist character of the Reuther leadership, according to the WP, would these groups be able to assume independence and exert decisive influence within the union.⁵⁸

Although the Reuther Caucus did not consolidate control of the UAW until the 1947 convention, the SWP and the WP realized that the November 1947 convention would be vital in determining the union’s future. Thus, as opposed to both parties uniting behind Reuther in 1946, the two organizations provided elaborate reasons for backing different caucuses at the 1947 convention.

Considering the reality of the situation in the UAW, the Shachtmanite position in 1947 was that the Reuther Caucus should be supported because “the great bulk of the most advanced and progressive militants,” that is “*the left wing of the UAW,*” are located in this faction. The WP argued that the activists in this grouping (not Reuther himself) were primarily responsible for carrying on the fight against the no-strike pledge and incentive pay, and were crucial in the struggles against the unions’ participation on the WLB and for promoting the idea of an independent Labor Party during World War II. In the immediate postwar era, these militants also advocated the, “in its implications, revolutionary” GM program while the Addes faction was “vehemently opposed” to it. Because of this, the Party stated that it was necessary to support the Reuther Caucus, adopting the following formula, “We are not Reutherites, but we support Reuther.”⁵⁹

While the WP auto cadre opposed the implementation of the Taft-Hartley Act, the SWP auto trade unionists *actively* organized against the bill’s implementation in the spring of 1947. Two SWP members in Detroit, Ernest Mazey of Briggs Local 212 and John Anderson, president of Fleetwood Local 15, were instrumental in coordinating the 24 April 1947 Cadillac Square demonstration in opposition to the Taft-Hartley bill. In this protest, which may have been the largest labor rally ever held in US history, a total of 500 000 workers left their factories with 250 000 of them assembling in Detroit’s Cadillac Square.⁶⁰

Concerning the factional struggle within the UAW, early in the spring of 1947, the SWP auto activists argued that the fight between the Reuther Caucus and the Thomas-Addes bloc constituted “struggles over posts and appoint-

ments” and that both factions should cease “their shameful bickering.” With respect to the Reuther grouping, the Party argued that it was “bereft of any program to meet the present employer-government offensive” and that it was using red-baiting tactics against the Thomas-Addes faction. The SWP expressed concern that the Reuther Caucus was solidifying its support around two conservative forces, the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and the union’s skilled trades division.⁶¹

In terms of the Thomas-Addes faction, the Cannonites claimed that it was led “by narrow-minded machine politicians,” which were backed by the Communists, whose program in the face of the employer offensive was no better than that of the Reuther Caucus. However, on a positive note, the SWP claimed that it did have “a far better position and record” on the issue of red-baiting within the union.⁶²

At this time, the Party’s position was to favor neither caucus at the national level. The SWP argued that it would not make such a decision at this time about which faction to support at the next convention but would “cross that bridge when we come to it.” Although the SWP’s goal was to organize independent groups in as many local unions as possible, the Party recognized that it lacked sufficient forces to build a third independent progressive group except in “a few isolated instances.” Therefore, the Cannonites’ strategy in the local unions was to “work in or cooperate with that grouping whose overall character is most progressive.” This meant that in some locals the SWP would collaborate with the Reuther Caucus; in other locals, it would form an alliance with the Thomas-Addes faction, while in local unions where the Party’s influence was more substantial, the SWP auto cadre would work with a third independent group.⁶³

In practice, this policy was somewhat problematic. As pointed out in an SWP Internal Bulletin, such an approach often led “to conflicting actions of not only branches, but also of comrades within a branch.” For example, the Chicago branch, which at the time was supporting the Reuther Caucus, opposed the proposed entry of the Farm Equipment Workers Union into the UAW, while the Detroit branch, which backed the Thomas-Addes faction, favored the merger.⁶⁴

As the convention neared, the SWP changed its position believing that “[g]reat and important things for labor are at stake in this fight” between the two major factions. Specifically, the Party argued that the Reuther Caucus was organized on an “outright reactionary basis” which rested on “the most conservative and even reactionary layers of the union,” employing “red-baiting” as a major tactic. In defense of the characterization of this grouping, the SWP noted that “the most influential single bloc” in the caucus was “the sinister priest-ridden Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.”⁶⁵

In supporting the opposition Thomas-Addes-Leonard faction, the

Cannonites claimed that it had an “over-all more progressive character,” and a higher percentage of union militants in its ranks, most notably in Michigan, than the Reuther Caucus. As opposed to the one-man, dictatorial control of the Reuther grouping, the Thomas-Addes-Leonard Caucus exhibited “a greater degree of democracy” composed of “a coalition of independent leaders,” which was “more tolerant of left-wingers and willing to cooperate with them.”⁶⁶

Furthermore, the SWP argued that the faction had taken a “militant stand against the Taft-Hartley Act,” unlike that of the Reuther Caucus that was willing to comply with the signing of the non-Communist affidavits required by the law. In addition, another major reason to back the faction was that the Communists were on the decline in the grouping and no longer exerted a major influence in the bloc.⁶⁷

Reuther’s victory in 1947 had severe consequences for the future of the SWP auto unionists. In a speech to his caucus following his election victory, Reuther stated that he intended to actively “attack members of left-wing political groups who disagreed with his policies.” When asked directly by a delegate which groups in the UAW he was referring to, the charismatic leader made it clear that he wanted to eliminate two radical left parties, the large CP group within the union and the SWP activists who were influential in a number of major UAW locals.⁶⁸

Even after the Reuther Caucus secured its control of the union in the fall of 1947, the SWP trade unionists still attempted to help build an independent and progressive rank-and-file caucus within the auto union. In August 1948, at the national level, the SWP auto cadre participated in the formation of the “Committee for a Militant and Democratic UAW” (CMD) that developed “a militant program of action for union security, against the high cost of living and speed-up, for independent labor political action and for union militancy and democracy.” The group, whose chairman was Richard T. Leonard, a former UAW vice-president and president of DeSoto Local 227 (Detroit) at the time, organized a conference in Michigan of 350 UAW members from major locals in Detroit such as Ford 600, Dodge 3, Hudson 154, Briggs 212, Budd 306, Tool & Die 155 and 157, and two leading Flint locals, Buick 599 and Chevrolet 659.⁶⁹

In locals that the SWP retained significant influence in, it was still organizing independent groups against the Reutherite caucuses in 1947 and 1948. One of these was Chevrolet Local 659 (Flint), which had seventeen SWP members from 1946 through 1951, largely due to Sol Dollinger’s successful recruiting work. In addition, the local contained a group of “militant class-conscious workers” with syndicalistic tendencies that supported the Trotskyists in union affairs. After Reuther consolidated control of the UAW in 1947, the Trotskyists and their supporters joined the local’s Thomas-Addes Caucus and took over its leadership, even though the group still contained a number of CP members. In

1948, for the local union elections, the Trotskyists were instrumental in establishing a new caucus, United Independents (U&I), with the CP trade unionists in which U&I won. After this vote, the SWP trade unionists continued to fight for obtaining the escalator clause, also referred to as either the sliding scale of wages or cost of living increases, in the 1948 contract.⁷⁰

The success of the campaign for the escalator clause in UAW contracts was largely due to the role of the Flint SWP auto unionists, especially Jack Palmer, who was elected president of Chevrolet Local 659 in 1947, and Sol Dollinger, who developed a plan for promoting the sliding scale of wages shortly after Palmer assumed the local union's presidency. Because of eroding wages due to inflation, a number of UAW locals in 1947, especially those that had active SWP fractions, had been pushing for linking wages to the rising cost of living. The major concern of the Trotskyist auto cadre was that with a predicted surge in inflation, any new wage gains achieved in the 1948 contract could also be easily eradicated.⁷¹

After the Palmer-Dollinger proposal of a \$0.25 per hour wage increase, combined with a cost-of-living adjustment based on changes in the inflation rate for the 1948 contract was approved at a Chevrolet Local 659 meeting, the plan also was enthusiastically accepted at a meeting of the five Flint UAW local union presidents, two of whom were SWP supporters (Bill Connolly of Fisher Body 2 and Bob Carter of AC Sparkplug). Since the five auto locals in Flint represented 40 000 GM workers, this wage proposal was significant. When it made the headlines of the three Detroit newspapers, other UAW locals, which represented 250 000 workers, passed similar resolutions believing, as the Detroit papers did, that Reuther was actually behind the program coming out of Flint.⁷²

In spite of Reuther's vigorous efforts to kill the plan, the escalator clause became a reality in UAW contracts. While Reuther was recovering in the hospital from an assassin's attempt on his life at the end of April 1948, GM proposed a clause containing the sliding scale of wages, similar to the resolution put forward by the five Flint local presidents, to the UAW bargaining committee. After a few modifications, this became the cost-of-living clause that is still present in auto union contracts to this day.⁷³

Within several years after the Reuther Caucus consolidated its control, the two groups' strategies of building a militant rank-and-file movement in the auto union was dashed on the rocks of political reality for different reasons. In the SWP, the atmosphere resulting from the expulsion of the eleven CP-led unions from the CIO in 1949-1950 narrowed the Party's possibilities within the UAW. Beginning in 1948, the strategic and tactical differences between the Midwestern trade unionists (the Cochranites) and the Party leadership surfaced over the group's desire to orient the organization around the CP trade union ranks and its periphery in order to recruit new members. Although this policy

was denounced as being “soft on Stalinism,” the SWP subsequently allowed the auto cadre to work with the R. J. Thomas CP fraction in opposition to Reuther’s efforts to eliminate them from union leadership positions. This schism eventually led to the Cochranites’ expulsion from the Party in August 1953, which decimated the major trade union fractions in the auto, rubber, and steel industries.⁷⁴

In 1949, the WP renamed itself the Independent Socialist League (ISL) and in the next few years it moved away, in both a theoretical and practical sense, from a brand of “unorthodox” Trotskyism to a Marxism that was more representative of a variant of left-wing social democracy. By the late summer of 1949, the ISL’s orientation towards building a militant rank-and-file group in the UAW had virtually disintegrated. At this time, Shachtman abandoned the idea of constructing an independent movement in opposition to Reuther, no longer believing that there was an “inherent conflict of interest” between union officialdom and rank-and-file workers on the shop floor.⁷⁵

While in the immediate postwar period, the WP auto cadre considered themselves to be “critical Reutherites,” by 1949, the ISL auto trade unionists had been fully integrated into the Reuther Caucus and had been clearly transformed into both loyal and “uncritical Reutherites.” In a policy statement prepared by Herman Benson in August 1949, he referred to Reuther as the “unchallengeable single leader” who had turned the UAW into the “vanguard of the American labor movement.” When provided with a choice of potential leaders, ISL trade unionists would back “more progressive Reutherites” as opposed to conservative ones, but the organization of an independent challenge to Reuther was discarded as a foolish policy.⁷⁶

This political direction of the ISL was confirmed by the auto cadre at the organization’s UAW conference in Cleveland, held in early September 1949. Attended by approximately 50 people (ISL members, visitors, and contacts from the auto union) including 27 UAW members from fifteen different locals and nine cities, the ISL activists overwhelmingly endorsed the general line to be carried out in the union, presented in Ben Hall’s (a pseudonym for Herman Benson) document, “Situation in the UAW.” Upon discussion of the organization’s orientation to the CIO’s Political Action Committee, for the first time in WP/ISL history, consideration was given to supporting “bourgeois,” that is Democratic Party, candidates in electoral politics, believing that the road to the Labor Party in the United States may lie in supporting such nominees at times.⁷⁷

Hall’s written statement argued that the Reuther group could no longer be considered a faction because it included approximately 95 percent of the activists within the union, encompassing both officials and rank-and-file militants. However, within the caucus there were two competing wings — an amorphous progressive grouping and a conservative one dominated by business unionism — which Hall saw coming into conflict with each other. Since any

progressive group in the UAW, in the immediate period, was unlikely to arise in opposition to Reuther, he argued that such a movement was likely to emerge from the more militant section of the Reuther Caucus. Therefore, it was the duty of the ISL auto unionists to function within the left wing of this bloc:

We do not favor the formation of splinter grouplets without any real mass following such as the Silver Committee. Such a policy can only divorce the socialists from the real left wing within the existing Reuther group. To stimulate its rise as a genuinely independent factor, we function as part of the Reuther group as presently constituted, considering ourselves a critical tendency within it supporting those proposals and those individuals which best represent the militant and democratic vanguard traditions of the union.⁷⁸

Thus, the document concluded, “where on a local scale, as has already occurred in some cases, two opposing Reuther caucuses are formed, separating the more militant from the more conservative, we, of course, support the former and favor its continued independent existence as a left wing stimulus in the whole Reuther group.”⁷⁹

Consistent with this policy orientation, the Shachtmanite trade unionists harshly criticized the behavior of the CMD at the Twelfth UAW Convention in 1949. While the ISL recognized that the caucus “enrolls genuinely progressive anti-Stalinists who were part of the Addes-Thomas-Stalinist bloc,” the organization referred to it as “an infinitesimal grouplet at the convention” which had literally no influence in the union. The Party stated that faction members, including the SWP, had fooled themselves into thinking that the CMD “was genuinely progressive and militant,” in addition to falsely believing that the union was controlled by a conservative and bureaucratic caucus. Furthermore, the ISL argued that “[t]he vast majority of militants in the UAW are now behind Reuther” and that “it is impossible at this time to distinguish clearly between a militant program and Reuther’s program,” claiming that “[t]he delegates have rallied to Reuther precisely to achieve a militant and democratic program.”⁸⁰

Analyzing the Role of the Trotskyists in the UAW, 1939-1949

In order to better analyze the operation of the SWP and the WP within the UAW, it is important to compare their programs to that of the CP, the major left-wing force, within the union from 1939 to 1949. During this decade the Communists never sought to organize an independent left-wing opposition movement to the trade union bureaucracy, but participated in “left-center coalitions,” which the Party first developed as a strategy within the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) for “boring from within” the AFL unions, that is working within the federation’s affiliates to win members over to the League’s positions, during the

late 1920s. Aligning with the Socialists in the Unity Caucus, the CP was the dominant force in the UAW's leading faction, which the Trotskyists later joined, when the union split in early 1939.⁸¹

However, shortly after the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact, this left-center coalition collapsed. Due to the Communists' sudden change in foreign policy and the Party's refusal to go along with the UAW leadership's programmatic shift concerning the desirability of strikes in defense-related industries, this alliance was disrupted with the attack on the Party at the 1940 and 1941 UAW conventions. In early 1942, however, with the commencement of US involvement in World War II, the CP reestablished its left-center coalition within the CIO's industrial unions as well as the UAW. Capitalizing on the patriotic sentiment of the workers, the Party pushed for the implementation of incentive pay and the no-strike pledge in order to aid the allied war effort of the United States and the Soviet Union.⁸²

Similar to the Cannonites, the Communists fought for the rights of African American workers and pay equality for women in the auto plants during the war years. However, unlike the SWP, in the CP's case, these struggles were often subordinated to the Party's objective of vigorously supporting an allied victory in World War II. In the post-war period, the Communists attempted to keep its left-center coalition intact through its participation in the Thomas-Addes group. But the beginning of the Cold War and Reuther's vigorous attacks on the Party led to Communists being purged from the international staff and from leadership positions in UAW locals.⁸³

It is apparent that the two wings of US Trotskyism in the UAW from 1939 to 1949 adopted a different political program and tactics compared to that of the CP during this era. Although considerably less powerful and influential than the Communists, from the evidence presented in this article, the SWP and the WP were clearly the most successful when they acted in broader progressive movements which attracted the participation of an extensive segment of militant UAW members. During the World War II period, this became evident through the building of the independent RFC in which both the SWP and WP auto trade union cadre participated.

However, when the two organizations acted as *vanguard parties* of the revolution, they experienced considerably less success in the auto union during the war and the immediate postwar periods. For example, in spite of their success in mobilizing UAW members around a number of important issues such as Reuther's militant GM program, opposition to the Taft-Hartley bill, and promotion of the escalator clause, in addition to distributing hundreds, if not thousands, of copies of *The Militant* and *Labor Action* each week among auto workers in major industrial centers, the SWP and the WP were able to recruit only a handful of new auto workers to their organizations and party programs.

Once the Reuther Caucus secured its control of the UAW in 1947, the task

to organize auto workers around a militant program within the union became more difficult for the two parties. In supporting the Thomas-Adde-Leonard group within the union at the 1947 convention, the SWP correctly perceived that the victory of the Reuther Caucus would eventually lead to the elimination of the UAW's left wing, not only the CP trade union cadre but the opposition Trotskyist trade unionists as well. In spite of Reuther's triumph, the SWP still attempted to construct an independent and militant movement among auto workers at both the national and local levels in the late 1940s. However, by 1949, with the increasing bureaucratization of the UAW and the CIO, the opportunity for left-wing activity in the industrial unions declined with the purge of the CP-led CIO unions. In response, the Cochranites proposed that they unite with the CP trade unionists and its periphery in keeping a broad left tradition alive in both the UAW and the labor movement as a whole.

However, if the SWP and the WP had adopted different tactics within the UAW in attempting to organize an autonomous radical movement in opposition to the union's bureaucracy, these two groups might have had more success acting as vanguard parties. Had the Cannonites and the Shachtmanites established independent caucuses, rather than forming blocs or alliances based on immediate issues, no matter how principled they were, the two Trotskyist groups may have been able to distinguish themselves from their coalition partners and may have been more successful in attracting workers to their left-wing programs and organizations. Elucidation of this point will be made through an examination of the evolution of Trotskyist trade union policy with regards to the SWP.

Basing its trade union program on the Transitional Program as created by Trotsky in 1938 and the first four congresses of the Communist International through 1923, the Trotskyist auto unionists did not always follow these prescriptions. For example, the SWP supported the work of the CP's trade union arm, the TUEL "boring from within" the AFL during the 1922-23 period. At this time, the League, as a "membership organization of Communist trade unionists," was established to inject "the Communist program into the trade unions." As such, it organized broad campaigns around major demands of the TUEL's program in forming "united fronts" with sections of the trade-union bureaucracy for mobilizing workers against the majority of the officialdom. However, by the late 1920s, with the Stalinization of the Communist International, the CP had turned the TUEL into an organization which would form blocs with other progressives, characterized as the "left-center coalition," basically abandoning the Party's political program within the unions. What this meant for the Communist trade unionists was to attempt to obtain the best alliance that could be achieved, but, in practice, to attain a bloc "at any price."⁸⁴

Although the Trotskyists supported the formation of dual unions in certain industries in the late 1920s, where the CP could no longer effectively work within the AFL unions due to bureaucratic opposition, it was highly critical of

the party's transformation of the TUEL into the dual unionist Trade Union Unity League (TUUL). The Trotskyists argued that the formation of the TUUL unions was a betrayal of authentic Communist policy in the AFL unions because it allowed the conservative bureaucratic leadership to remain in control without being sufficiently challenged from the left.⁸⁵

As the Trotskyists became active in some of the newly formed industrial unions during the mid to late 1930s, their trade union work began to exhibit similar problems that would become apparent within the UAW from 1939 to 1949. The SWP trade unionists formed blocs with "progressives" at the top levels of the industrial unions, rather than steering an independent course where the Party would present its political program to rank-and-file workers. While establishing temporary alliances and united fronts over pressing issues within the CIO unions, the Trotskyists had engaged in a principled struggle over its program and had not created unprincipled blocs. However, the major predicament that the SWP confronted was that it had become virtually indistinguishable from its coalition partners rather than viewed as an independent left-wing force by establishing its own caucuses within the unions.⁸⁶

Although the SWP's "policy of caution" led to inaction during the early years of the World War II period, this lack of activity had a positive side in that it prevented the Trotskyists from forming inappropriate alliances with any section of the UAW's trade union officialdom, all of which supported the war, Roosevelt, and the no-strike pledge. However, with growing opposition to the pledge in the auto plants, the Party became active organizers of the RFC. Although this grouping was based on politically independent secondary-level leaders, and represented only a limited break with reformism, it was "qualitatively to the left of the bureaucracy as a whole" and represented the peak of Trotskyist trade-union activity within the auto union.⁸⁷

The SWP's orientation to post-World War II trade union work was revealed in a response to the formation of a departing internal faction, the Goldman-Morrow group, who shared the Shachtmanites' Stalinophobia and wanted to reunite with the WP. When one of this faction's members criticized the Party's "policy of caution" for not providing leadership to workers engaged in struggle, the Party majority stated that "third group" caucuses similar to the RFC would not be used as a universal standard in the post-war period. It argued that a left wing in the industrial unions could not be mechanically produced by handing the workers an already established program but could emerge only by participating within the existing major caucuses.⁸⁸

Within the context of the UAW after World War II, this meant that the SWP auto unionists would work within either the Reuther Caucus or the Thomas-Addes faction. Thus, in 1946, the Party supported and oriented itself towards "the more progressive bureaucratic reformists" of the Reuther Caucus due to the combative strike led by Reuther against GM and because most of the mili-

tant workers were found in that faction. However, after Reuther's 1946 election victory, the SWP switched its support to that of the Thomas-Addes Caucus because of Reuther's increasing anti-Communism, the activist workers' disgust with the charismatic leader, and his drive to attain one-man tyrannical rule within the union. It was only after the complete rout of the Thomas-Addes faction in the 1947 elections that the SWP attempted to establish a third, independent left-wing caucus.⁸⁹

On the other hand, the WP viewed Reuther as being the most progressive of the CIO union leaders as well as the conqueror over the CP in the UAW. The Shachtmanites' Stalinophobia made Reuther an attractive leader who they sincerely believed was interested in promoting a militant, yet non-CP, left-wing politics within the union. However, as the WP/ISL auto cadre became more deeply embedded within the Reuther Caucus, these trade unionists moved from being critical supporters of Reuther, still willing to attempt to build an independent radical movement in the UAW, to uncritical Reutherites with no intention of constructing such a rank-and-file group. As Reuther's politics moved farther to the right with the jettisoning of his earlier radical ideas, the ISL auto trade unionists made that journey along with him.

So what can be concluded about the role of the CP, SWP, and WP as left-wing parties organizing in the UAW during the 1940s? From 1939 to 1949, the Communists never promoted a strategy of constructing an independent left-wing movement within the auto union; its preferred policy was forming left-center coalitions within the UAW. Inherent in this strategy was the Party's acceptance of the constraints imposed on the trade unions by the New Deal state and the modern labor leaderships, although the CP did attempt to push both the New Deal and the trade union leaders to the left. With the commencement of the Cold War, the implementation of the Taft-Hartley Act, Reuther's along with the other CIO union leaders' attacks on the Communists, and without the presence of an independent base of support, the CP had virtually no chance of surviving within the trade unions.

In contrast to the CP's subordination of worker militancy to the achievement of an allied victory during World War II, both the SWP's and the WP's auto trade unionists made a real contribution to the development of a militant and progressive autonomous left wing within the UAW. Although they adopted different strategies, both the Cannonites and Shachtmanites hoped that such activity would continue to thrive in the postwar era, especially after the generally successful GM strike of 1945-1946.

In the immediate postwar period, the SWP auto cadre maneuvered among the two major caucuses in an attempt to carve out such an opposition to Reuther nationally, and attempted to establish such groups in UAW locals where they retained significant influence such as Chevrolet Local 659 in Flint. At this time, the blocs and the alliances that they established in this era around immediate

issues within the union were based on a principled politics, while their objective remained the cultivating of an autonomous left wing for the purpose of establishing an opposition movement within the UAW. In addition, because the Cannonites never succumbed to a virulent Stalinophobia and were unwilling to go along with Reuther's purge of the CP and its supporters, they did not capitulate to the Reuther bureaucracy and were able to retain a more critical orientation and vision in building such a movement within the UAW. In the final analysis, the Cannonites strongly resisted the waves of historical change crashing on the trade union left.

This was not the case, however, for the WP/ISL auto unionists who, after World War II, consumed by a venomous Stalinophobia, were attracted to an initially militant, yet increasingly anti-Communist Reuther. As the auto union leader tightened his control and pushed the union farther to the right, the WP/ISL auto cadre came to see Reuther as the best that the US trade union movement could offer in hopes of retaining what they believed to be a left-wing, militant, and democratic regime within the UAW. By 1949, with the CP and its sympathizers purged from the auto union, the Shachtmanites held that the most progressive elements within the UAW were found in the Reuther Caucus. Thus, the WP/ISL auto unionists abandoned the organizing of an autonomous left-wing opposition within the union, believing that it would be fruitless to oppose the dominant Reuther faction.

Although following a different course, the Cannonites, nonetheless, can be criticized for not pursuing a more aggressive strategy in building an independent radical opposition to the UAW's two major caucuses in 1946-1947. When the SWP auto unionists did organize such a caucus in 1948, because the union's political climate had substantially shifted to the right with Reuther's consolidation of power, it was too late.

Nevertheless, the WP/ISL's Stalinophobia and support of Reuther's purge of the CP and its supporters, ultimately led to the Shachtmanites' capitulation before the Reuther bureaucracy believing that this was the best and only "realistic" possibility at the time. And as the ISL auto union activists became completely embedded in the Reuther Caucus, many of them abandoned the Shachtmanites for UAW staff positions. This became evident for Michael Harrington, an organizer for the Shachtmanite Young Socialist League, who ran into many former WP/ISL members while visiting Detroit in the mid-1950s. Quipped Harrington, "By that point there was a joke going around the UAW staff that the best way to become a union bureaucrat was to join the Shachtmanites. Reuther made a point of coopting his opposition as fast as he possibly could, so with a couple of articles to your credit in *Labor Action* you were a likely candidate to be appointed to UAW staff."⁹⁰ Unfortunately, the Shachtmanites' (and ex-Shachtmanites') program and actions encouraged the increasing ossification and bureaucratization of the UAW throughout the 1950s.

Many of the citations in this paper contain archival sources that can be found in one of the three following research libraries whose locations follow — the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI; Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY; and the Prometheus Research Library, New York, NY. The author thanks the archivists and the staff at these libraries for their help during the author's research visits.

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Notes

¹ Willie Thompson, *The Left in History: Revolution and Reform in Twentieth-Century Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 169.

² For a discussion of Trotskyist activity in the US labor movement from the early to the late 1930s, see Constance Ashton Myers, *The Prophet's Army: Trotskyists in America, 1928-1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 59-82. In this book, Myers covers the Trotskyist-led hotel workers' strike, conducted by the Amalgamated Food Workers, in New York City in early 1934. She also discusses the Trotskyists' leadership role in the two Minneapolis Teamsters' strikes held in 1934 and how the Trotskyists developed a base of support in this important union. A brief discussion of the Trotskyists' activity in the Sailors Union of the Pacific and the Teamsters Union in the 1930s and 1940s can be found in Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 817-820. For an account of the Trotskyists' extensive role in the Teamsters Union, written by one of the political tendency's leading trade union cadre in the union in the 1930s and early 1940s, who later became a SWP leader, see Farrell Dobbs, *Teamsters Rebellion* (New York: Monad Press, 1972); Dobbs, *Teamsters Power* (New York: Monad Press, 1973); Dobbs, *Teamsters Politics* (New York: Monad Press, 1975); and Dobbs, *Teamsters Bureaucracy* (New York: Monad Press, 1977). There has been much written about the CP and its role in the US labor movement in the last thirty years. For a critical assessment of the Communists' activities and tactics within the US trade unions over three decades from the viewpoint of a former Trotskyist who had been active in the UAW, see Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Struggle that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). Three books were published in the 1980s that took different ideological positions on the Party's role in the trade unions. For a largely sympathetic and uncritical treatment of the CP's activities in the UAW, see Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). For the perspective that the

Party's policies in the trade unions during the 1930s were ultimately formulated in Moscow, see Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). For a balanced account of the Communists' position within the CIO unions, see Harvey A. Levenstein, *Communism, Anti-Communism and the CIO* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981). An excellent anthology of essays that deals with various aspects of the CP-led CIO unions is Steve Rosswurm, ed., *The CIO's Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992). Besides the above-mentioned works, there have been several scholarly studies concerning the activities and ideologies of William Z. Foster, the leading US trade union Communist. See Edward P. Johanningsmeier, "William Z. Foster and the Syndicalist League of North America," *Labor History* 30 (1989): 329-353; Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Victor G. Devinatz, "The Labor Philosophy of William Z. Foster: From the IWW to the TUEL," *International Social Science Review* 71 (1996): 3-13; James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); and Barrett, "Revolution and Personal Crisis: William Z. Foster, Personal Narrative, and the Subjective in the History of American Communism," *Labor History* 43 (2002): 465-482.

³ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man In Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 176.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵ Jules Geller, interview by Robert Alexander, New York, 13 May 1982; Martin Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 23-24.

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⁸ Chris Knox, "Trotskyist Work in the Trade Unions, Part 3: The Primacy of Politics," in *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, ed. International Bolshevik Tendency (London: Bolshevik Publications, 1998), 112.

⁹ Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man In Detroit*, 129.

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¹¹ Paul LeBlanc, "Trotskyism in the United States: The First Fifty Years," in *Trotskyism in the United States: The First Fifty Years*, eds. George Breitman, Paul LeBlanc, and Alan Wald (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 72; Knox, "Trotskyist Work in the Trade Unions, Part 3," 112.

¹² LeBlanc, "Trotskyism in the United States," 72; Meyers, *The Prophet's Army*, 165.

¹³ Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 805; Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey through the "American Century"* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 145.

¹⁴ Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 799.

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