

300 DELEGATES IN A 4-DAY MEETING IN NEW YORK

What happened at the CP convention

By Elmer Bendiner

FROM SATURDAY MORNING, Feb. 9, to late Tuesday evening, Feb. 12, a corps of newsmen representing the nation's biggest dailies, wire services and television networks waited in a grimy, smoke-filled pressroom in the Chateau Gardens, a hall for meetings, dances and catered affairs on Manhattan's lower east side.

In the meeting hall the 16th convention of the U.S. Communist Party was deciding an internal conflict that reflected all the contending elements unleashed on the left since Nikita Khrushchev's "revelations" concerning Stalin. Reporters clamored for copies of every resolution and clustered about CP press representatives for briefings. Unaccustomed to the references in the debate at the Chateau Gardens, the reporters tried to piece together a blow-by-blow account of the fight based on positions taken by the delegates on philosophy and economics. As if in torture, one columnist cried out: "What on earth is the relative impoverishment of the masses?"

THE MEN IN CARS: The 300-odd delegates from 34 states had decided to bar newsmen as a security measure to protect their jobs, perhaps their liberty. Reporters repeatedly protested the "violations" of a free press and free speech; but outside the Chateau Gardens in two cars with motors running were well-dressed men commonly assumed to be from the FBI.

The CP had opened the convention to a delegation of observers from the American Civil Liberties Union, the Catholic Worker, a number of pacifist organizations, some clergymen. Among those attending were Rev. A. J. Muste, secy. emeritus of the Fellowship of Reconciliation; Dr. Stringfellow Barr, former president of St. John's College, and Rev. John Paul Jones of the Bay Ridge Protestant Church in Brooklyn. Only a few of the observers—from the A.C.L.U.—came by the pressroom to hold informal briefings.

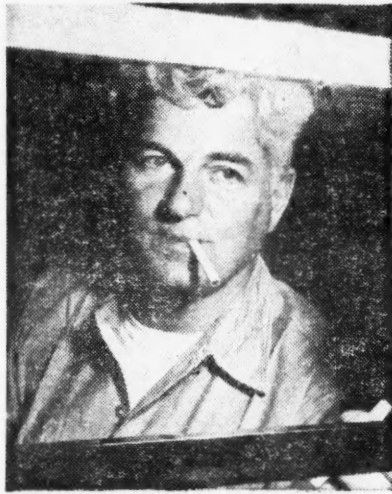
For the most part the reporters relied on the documents of the convention and the ample briefings from the CP press committee for details of the debate, the votes, the trends of delegate thinking. The press which, up to the convention had treated the Communists either as unimportant stooges or as dangerous conspirators, found themselves covering a genuinely wide open convention.

ABANDONED POSITIONS: There was no doubt that the delegates ran the convention. Committees came in after days of



WILLIAM Z. FOSTER
Beware the Rightists

wrangling with majority and minority reports. The floor debate was often angry, sometimes bitter. Venerated leaders found they had no weight to throw. Authoritative voices within the U.S. CP or from overseas were heard but not followed. Some called it a runaway convention. The question, after days and nights of debate, was: Where were the delegates



EUGENE DENNIS
The middle man

running? Where had they taken their leaders?

It was easier to see what positions the delegates had abandoned than to define their new positions. They officially discarded hallowed phrases such as "monolithic unity" and "democratic centralism," declaring that such concepts had stifled "independent and creative thinking, destroyed initiative and helped bureaucracy to flourish."

They wrote into a new constitution the right to dissent so long as a member "does not engage in factional or other activity which hinders or impedes the execution" of a policy voted by the majority. They called for room in the CP press and at meetings for the expression of dissenting views.

NO MORE VANGUARD: They asserted the right of the CP of the U.S. to interpret Marxism-Leninism for itself in the light of "American class struggle, democratic traditions and customs." A resolution offered by educational director Max Weiss, and carried overwhelmingly, called for a break with the past when "we tacitly assumed that the interpretation of the principles of Marxism-Leninism made by the CP of the Soviet Union was ipso facto valid, and all we had to do was to creatively apply their interpretations to our conditions."

Another phrase that tottered in the rebellion was "vanguard role," a role hitherto claimed by the CP. The delegates resolved: "A Marxist party which seeks to gain the confidence of its class cannot do so by arrogantly assuming that it is already the leader of the workers . . . the term 'vanguard role' has assumed connotations of unreality and arrogance with which we seek to break."

THE PARTY REMAINS: No resolution on the Soviet treatment of Jews was made public, but unofficial sources reported that the matter was fully debated and a resolution highly critical of Soviet policy and statements on the matter was passed.

The question of dissolving the CP into a Communist Political Assn. was compromised by state meetings before the national convention which resolved to maintain the CP but leave the door open for future discussion of an association.

Unopposed by any delegates were commitments to achieve socialism "by majority will and peaceful means." But left for future interpretations of Marxism were the concepts of "dictatorship of the proletariat" and whether or not the State was a means of suppression. The delegates felt they had opened their own new road to socialism, but no one at the Chateau Gardens felt up to charting that road in detail.

All were seemingly agreed that third-party talk and action right after World War II had been "leftist" and had isolated progressives in the labor movement. The labor resolution said: "Our inflexible in-

sistence on the adoption of a third party perspective and a condemnation of the Marshall Plan facilitated the objectives of the cold war splitters."

ATTITUDE ON LABOR: The resolution blamed such "left-sectarian errors" for making possible the expulsion of left-led unions from the CIO in 1949. The self-criticism continued: "We Communists failed to pursue policies after the expulsions that could have led in the least possible time to re-unification." The resolution did not spell out what those policies might be or how flexible the approach should be now, but it unreservedly acclaimed the AFL-CIO merger and called for "all-embracing unity."

The all-embracing quality of that unity was the one aspect that stirred debate. There were some who balked at a paragraph demanding freedom from the "frozen political geography of 'left,' 'right' and 'center'" in evaluating labor leaders and trends. The resolution called for a "fluid" view of leaders, supporting or opposing each one on specific issues without attaching a stigma to any. It was a break, one delegate said, with the past practice of picket-line chants about "a no-good union, a company union." It was part of a new approach not only to labor leaders but to "social democrats," summed up in a phrase: "cooperation not liquidation."

ON NEGRO FREEDOM: A resolution for "full economic, political and social equality for the Negro people" termed Negro freedom "the crucial domestic issue of the day." It criticized the party's past work for "doctrinaire concepts . . . hangovers . . . outmoded practices . . . sectarian method and style . . . abstentionism." It called for a "reassessment . . . of our previously asserted theoretical position."

Though the resolution did not closely describe past failings, it was reliably reported that the debate centered around the old concept of nationhood for Negroes in certain Southern areas. The champions of that theory were overwhelmed. "Reassessment" carried the day on that score as on most others in the convention.

FOSTER'S POSITION: The debate was generally bitter, although the main contending camps began by supporting in general the draft resolution and constitution before the convention. William Z. Foster, national chairman up to convention time, called on the delegates in a keynote address to "cleanse . . . convention documents of the various revisionist conceptions." He charged that the *Daily Worker* staff, under editor John Gates, and the N.Y. State committee of the CP had become "Rights" or people who "ran political interference for the Right" which threatened "the life of the Party."

He called the "Rightists" the "political descendants of Lovestone opportunism." In a sense Foster, aging and suffering from an ailing heart, after a lifetime of service to the CP, was defending his record. He admitted to errors but said that the "Right" was wrong in blaming the decline in the CP's membership (now officially given as 25,000) on the leadership. "Objective conditions" were mainly responsible. He saw himself and his embattled colleagues defending "our basic Marxist theory and the very existence of our party."

VOICES FROM ABROAD: If that was so, then Foster lost far more than prestige in the battle of resolutions, for in almost every case he was voted down by close to a 2-1 majority. He had with him many of the party stalwarts. His opening speech was read by former N.Y. City Councilman and Smith Act victim Benjamin Davis Jr., who acted as Foster's lieutenant throughout. Foster himself rarely spoke. In most cases he was listened to but not followed.

Foster also had support for his position from overseas. *Sovietska Rossiya* of Moscow, before the convention opened,

supported Foster's point of view and criticized the trend headed by the *Daily Worker* and Gates as "national communism," threatening to "divide and conquer" the Communist movement. Jacques Duclos of the French CP, remembered for an earlier letter that signaled Earl Browder's fall, greeted the convention in terms heavily favoring the Foster view.

A NEW COMMITTEE: But many delegates, eager to demonstrate their independence, apparently felt impelled to defy the Russians and French as well as Foster. They took the road outlined by the veteran California Communist William Schneiderman who said the CP would have to take the free-wheeling approach of the *Daily Worker* editors "if it is to continue as more than a mere sect."

Delegates took the floor to condemn past failures to criticize the Soviet Union though "other Socialists did and we did-



JOHN GATES
Beware the Leftists

n't listen to them." In vain leaders warned that the convention was in "danger of making the Soviet Union the main target of attack," that the convention was guilty of "isolationism of the worst kind" in telling other parties not to "butt into our business."

In the end the convention decided to elect no new officers. They balloted for 20 members-at-large of a new National Committee. It was a "unity" slate, with Foster placing seventh in order of votes received, Eugene Dennis (who had taken a position somewhere in the middle of the controversy) sixth and Gates 16th.

SHIFT IN HEADQUARTERS: By the end of March state conventions are to elect 40 more delegates to the National Committee, which will then name seven of their number to direct the party until another convention next year. In the meantime the committee members in New York were to act as a steering committee, though the full committee is to be consulted on major policy decisions.

The convention voted to shift its headquarters from New York to Chicago by way of getting closer to the heartland of the nation's workers.

That was perhaps the least of the shifts decided upon. In its 36th year the American CP had embarked on a brand new road. Foster and the older leaders who rallied around him had held to a neatly-described philosophy, a view of history and a predictable tactical approach. But membership and influence under that leadership had unmistakably fallen to a new low.

The rebels who won had the vigor of sharp dissent and the heady air of a new perspective. But when the convention ended they had done no more than decide to hit the road. What they had left behind was plain to see. It was still too soon to be sure where they were going.