

# The Communist International and the Construction of Factory Cells (Part 3)

In this last installment of our study of the Communist International and the construction of factory cells, we want to examine first the experience of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) with regard to the construction of shop nuclei, to be followed by a critical summary of the lessons of these experiences for party building today.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY, USA

Any student of the history of the CPUSA in the 1920's is confronted by a mass of conflicting and often contradictory material. This is in no small part due to the bitter factional struggles which dominated the Party during this decade, and out of which was produced opposing arguments and interpretations of party history. Certain facts, however, stand out above the battle. These relate first to the historical legacy which the Communist Party carried over from the old Socialist Party, and secondly to the nature of the factional struggles themselves.

By the end of 1923, at its Third National Convention, the Party had ceased being, in the words of its General Secretary C. E. Ruthenberg, an ultra-left propaganda sect, and was becoming a real communist party. In its organizational form, however, it remained a social democratic party, one organized on the basis of language federations, like the Socialist Party out of which its majority had emerged.

The structure of language federations meant that Party members in any particular district belonged to a local branch according to the language they spoke, rather than to their place of work or residence. In the early Communist Party there were seventeen language federations which carried on their own work and published their own papers. As the Communist International described it in a letter to the Central Executive Committee of the CPUSA (CEC):

The federal structure of the Workers Party\* stands in the way of...a successful conduct of its work. Each of its 17 national sections represents almost a separate and independent party within the Workers Party, enjoying a large portion of independence in relation to the leading organ, the Central Committee.

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\* In 1921, the Communist Party took the name of the Workers Party. In 1925, this was changed to the Workers (Communist) Party. In 1929, it became the Communist Party again.

This situation was especially severe given that a majority of the Party was organized in these federations, as only a minority of the members were listed as English speaking, and only 35% were members of labor unions.<sup>3</sup>

Factional problems, as well as organizational ones, presented themselves at the Third Convention, held December 30 to January 2, 1924. Two major factional groups consolidated themselves in convention debates. One, led by William Z. Foster, James P. Cannon and Earl Browder, with the support of the right wing in the language federations, won a majority in the convention. The other faction, led by C.E. Ruthenberg and Jay Lovestone, was in the minority, but retained the post of General Secretary for itself.

In line with the Comintern's reorganization drive, the Third Convention adopted a resolution calling for the reorganization of the Party on the basis of factory cells as a long term goal, but proposing that, for 1924, only a few such cells be established alongside the language branches with "no interference with the old branches."<sup>4</sup>

In spite of this resolution, the opposition to reorganization on the part of the right wing of the language federation and the alliance between it and the Foster-Cannon-Browder group resulted in this resolution remaining entirely on paper. Although in July the CEC reaffirmed its call for the establishment of a number of "experimental" factory cells, this call, too, was never put into effect.<sup>5</sup>

It was only the Fourth Convention of the Workers Party, in August, 1925, which brought about a turn in the Party's organizational transformation. The intervention of the Comintern at this convention delivered a majority of leadership positions to the Ruthenberg-Lovestone group. Ruthenberg was re-elected General Secretary and Lovestone was elected Organizational Secretary; thereby he was placed at the head of the Bolshevization campaign.

Before the convention had gathered, the Comintern had sent a letter to the Party concerning reorganization. The letter cautioned the CEC against haste in abolishing the old organizational forms, warning that they were "deep-rooted" and would require both an ideological campaign and an organizational effort. In particular, it counseled against destruction of the language federations before the new cells were consolidated: "To break, however, one organization without creating something in its place, would be extremely disastrous."<sup>6</sup>

The results of the Fourth Convention were a new resolution and plan for Party reorganization within a time period of six months. Beginning with an ideological campaign, it called for the publication in all party periodicals of materials on the cell form and its benefits, as well as a special pamphlet on the question of reorganization in the USA. It organized reorganization commissions in each of the language federations and arranged special membership meetings on the question. The old language federations were to be transformed into language fractions doing work in the foreign communities and their members enrolled in factory or street cells, as the primary and basic form of party organization.<sup>7</sup>

The speed with which reorganization was embarked upon, and the under-estimation of the problems involved, in spite of the Comintern warning, created numerous problems for the Party. Many members of the language federations refused to enroll in the new cells, and total membership declined to 7,215 from the 15,200 of two years before.<sup>8</sup> Although some of this decline reflected more accurate methods of calculating membership, it also reflected a real loss in members who refused to re-register.

Nonetheless, at this time, the leadership claimed the campaign was succeeding. At the First Organizational Conference of the CPUSA in December, it was said that there were 207 factory cells in the New York District, 28 in Chicago, and 15 in Detroit. Ruthenberg told the Second Organizational Conference of the Comintern in Moscow in April, 1926, that the Party had by January of that year organized 500 factory and street cells encompassing 70% of the membership.<sup>9</sup>

By December, 1926, it was becoming clear that the predicted "complete reorganization" would not be an immediate reality. Ruthenberg admitted that Bolshevization had resulted in a loss of membership and a weak organizational situation. The street cells, he complained, continued to function just like the old branches and there were only forty factory cells which were "effectively functioning" in the entire party.<sup>10</sup>

The situation for 1927 was only a little better. By August membership had climbed to 10,538; organized into 166 factory nuclei and 394 street cells.<sup>11</sup> The factory cells enrolled 1,646 members, or a little over 15% of the membership. Repeatedly, complaints were heard about the weakness of the cells, their lack of activity and other problems, for the cells were plagued by more than just organizational problems. The general paralysis of the Party, which resulted from the incessant factional struggles, affected the cells as well. Often more time was spent in cell meetings on inner party disputes than on developing a plan of work in the plants.

In 1928, the situation in regard to factory cells not only did not improve, but in fact worsened. Jack Stachel, who became Organizational Secretary after the Fifth Convention (August to September, 1927), told an Organizational Conference in May, 1928, how the early factory cells had been formed: "Where ever we had two comrades in a shop, we added a third one and we had a shop nucleus. According to that, we had 200 shop nuclei in New York alone, which were not really shop nuclei." And, Stachel added, the problems from this period continued to have their effects. At the time of the conference, he stated that there were only 100 real shop nuclei throughout the country, with an approximate membership of 1500.<sup>12</sup>

In December of 1928, the motion of the World Communist Movement to the left necessitated a sharp self-criticism of the past practice of reorganization. In the CEC's theses for the Sixth Convention, it was admitted that the organizational situation was unsatisfactory, that there remained resistance to factory cell formation and that "the question of improving the Party organization is one of the most vital questions facing the Party today."<sup>13</sup>

By the time the Sixth Convention itself met, in May 1929, the left turn led the Comintern to intervene to depose the Lovestone leadership and to install the Foster-Browder group in its place. The combined effect of this move, the depression, and the general left line of the period 1929-34, produced a decline in party membership,

initially, and a decline in the percentage of members enrolled in factory cells, first to 10% in 1929, and then to 4% in 1933.<sup>14</sup>

The leftism of this period manifested itself in a dual unionism which was oriented toward the formation of "revolutionary unions" and a sectarianism resulting from the theory of the "social fascist" character of the non-Party left. The factory cells were bound to carry out these policies in the shops, and although they were not responsible for their formulation, as an organizational form they were later to be held responsible for much of the ultra-leftism of this period.

More detailed figures on this period are provided by the Party Organizer, published by the CP's organizational department. In January 1930, less than 10% of the membership were in factory cells, and in the key New York district the number was less than 2%. In the same year membership fell to 7,500 and the number of factory cells to 64 with only 571 members.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the all-time low was reached in 1932, when Earl Browder was compelled to tell a Central Committee Plenum that out of a membership of 9,000, there were only 94 members working in large factories.<sup>16</sup> The seriousness of this situation forced the Party to call an extraordinary National Conference in July, 1933, which issued a widely publicized Open Letter to All Party Members. The letter demanded a new Bolshevikization campaign and the renewed effort to form factory cells where ever possible.

By 1934, in the aftermath of concerted efforts, the Party was again claiming successes in factory cell organization. Some 9% of the membership was said to be registered in 338 factory cells. The reliability of these figures is questionable, however, as the nuclei were highly unstable. The Pittsburg District, for example, "reported 125 mine nuclei in 1931, all of which disappeared within a few months."<sup>17</sup>

Such fluctuations were typical for the Party, particularly in the ultra-left period, 1929-34. In the first six months of 1932, the Party recruited 11,498 members but retained only 1,539. In the last six months of that year it recruited 7,322, but membership increased by only 2,339. In the first six months of 1933, 8,065 members were recruited but membership only increased by 2,351.<sup>18</sup>

Paradoxically, it was precisely at the time when membership was increasing, along with the number of factory cells, that an event occurred which was to signal the end of the entire concept of factory cell organization. This event was the end of the ultra-left period and the inauguration of the period of the united front against fascism. The leadership of the CPUSA had the opportunity to rectify the ultra-left line, while at the same time retaining the factory cell form which had been the instrument of its dissemination into the shops. Instead, the reaction against left errors took the form of a reaction against the cell form, to the favor of concentrating all work in the trade unions.

This tendency was so pronounced that in April, 1936, the Party Organizer felt it necessary to publish an article under the provocative title: "Have Shop Papers 'Out-lived Their Usefulness'?" The writer, Bill Lawrence, insisted that Party members were distorting the line of the Seventh Comintern Congress to liquidate shop papers

(and nuclei) and that their issuance was on the decline. Instead, he complained that members were concentrating on trade union work and contraposing it to Party work. A common argument, he reported, was that shop papers could "only hurt and prevent us from building our rank and file movement in the shop."<sup>19</sup>

Although Lawrence opposed this view, all too quickly the CPUSA succumbed to economism and the liquidation of Party work on behalf of an exclusively trade unionist approach. The inevitable accompaniment of this development was the liquidation of the nuclei form of organization and the return to party branches.

#### CONCLUSION

This three part series on factory cells was published to draw the historical lessons of previous communist experience with regard to the specific organizational practice of factory nuclei. Having laid out the historical dimensions of this practice, in the Communist International, in several European Parties, and in the Communist Party of the USA, it is necessary to address directly the lessons of this experience for communist work today and for the construction of a genuine communist party in the United States.

Our study has only attempted to begin the discussion of the history of communist organizational practice in the factories. Much more work is required to both evaluate the past lessons of this practice and to begin to construct an accurate picture of the factory cell form appropriate to the future communist party we will construct.

Much of the new communist movement, in particular the dogmatist sects, have made a fetish of the factory cell form, attempting to implement their own shallow and uncritical understanding of it. The poverty of their analysis has been equalled only by the impotence of their mass work and the bureaucratic character of their organizational practice.

Any discussion of communist organizational practice in the factories must have as its initial premise an accurate definition of the character of a communist party. A communist party, if it is a genuine proletarian revolutionary party, is the organizational embodiment of the unity of Marxist-Leninist theory with the workers' movement; the workers' movement which is the product of the class struggle under capitalism and Marxist-Leninist theory which is the result of the scientific production of revolutionary intellectuals. This unity is only possible, only revolutionary, when the dominant aspect in it is Marxist-Leninist theory. The unity of the workers' movement with Marxist-Leninist theory, under the domination of such theory, guarantees the revolutionary proletarian character of the communist party. Without the workers' movement the party loses its proletarian character; without the domination of Marxist-Leninist theory it loses its scientific revolutionary character.

With this definition as our basis, let us examine the theory and practice of the communist factory nucleus.

In the resolutions of the second Organizational Conference of the Comintern (1926) it states that factory nuclei "must proceed to organize a systematic Party training and educational work" for their members. The resolutions further note: "Without

this it is impossible to bring under way any good and correct work for any length of time." Yet, as we have seen, not much "good and correct work" resulted where nuclei were established, and in the majority of cases even the establishment of such nuclei proved impossible.

What picture is presented of the meeting of a typical factory cell in Europe or the United States in the 1920's and 1930's? First of all, it is a meeting of perhaps ten comrades with only a portion actually working in the factory itself. A certain portion of the meeting is concerned with strictly administrative matters, dues payment, attendance, etc. Most of the meeting is spent reading lengthy resolutions and statements from the Party leadership. Time is then given over to discussing events in the plant, its problems, the complaints of the workers, the sale of papers at the plant gate, recruitment possibilities, etc. The current campaign of the Party is presented by the cell leadership and the membership discusses, not the correctness or incorrectness of the campaign, not its timeliness or its inappropriate character, but solely the mechanics of carrying it out in the plant. Assignments are given and the meeting comes to an end.

The question which then concerns us here is: if the presence of the factory cell within the working class in the factory guaranteed the "worker's movement" aspect of the unity of the Communist Party, what presence in the structure of the factory nucleus guaranteed the "theory of Marxism-Leninism" aspect?

The answer both in theory and in actuality was - very little. The question of internal education in the nuclei was given such slight consideration that the resolutions of the Comintern's Second Organization Conference did not even provide for an educational director on the nucleus executive. And even when this demand was later incorporated into the work of the cells, such internal education all too often ended up as the mechanical presentation of the decisions of the Central Committee, rather than genuine education of the members in the theory of Marxism-Leninism itself.

Consequently, the structure of the factory nuclei only guaranteed one aspect of the Communist Party, and the absence of the other was filled with the technical details of the implementation of a theoretical and strategic/tactical line decided outside of, and in isolation from, the factory cells.

Herein lies the essential truth of the criticism directed against the factory cells by Bordiga and Loriot and their followers. They had argued that the factory cells, as constituted, could function to carry out the line of the party in the factories, but could not actively participate in the democratic centralist formulation of that policy.

Rather than guaranteeing the unity of Marxist-Leninist theory with the workers' movement at the point of production, the factory cells as an organizational form, in fact, guaranteed the dichotomy between them. They served to restrict the membership in the plants to technical tasks while production and discussion of theory, and the strategy and tactics following from it, were increasingly restricted to either the national leadership or to those non-proletarian elements in the party organized into larger residential branches which were free of the difficulties which communist activity in the factories entailed.

If, as the Fifth Comintern Plenum warned: "No organizational form will be of any avail without a correct Bolshevik policy," then what can be the result of the restriction of theoretical production to a handful of Party leaders while the rank and file members are merely followers? The example of the turn of the CPUSA to revisionism and then outright liquidationism under Browder immediately comes to mind, because in this instance the turn was made with virtually no resistance from the membership, even worker militants. In fact, it was these very proletarian cadre in the Party who, through their association with the trade union movement and their lack of theory, were most susceptible to bourgeois ideology in its economist form and receptive to the liquidation of factory cells on behalf of trade unionism.

This does not mean that we have to reject the idea of factory nuclei as a failure, or that as an organizational form they are structurally incapable of embodying the unity of communist theory with the workers' movement. What it does mean is that unless the structures ensuring that unity are developed, unless party members in the factories (and factory cells) are consistently raising their theoretical level and participating in the development of the line of the party, we will be bound to repeat the failures which we have observed in this series of articles.

As the Ann Arbor Collective put it in their paper "Toward A Genuine Communist Party", The restriction of the membership to discussion only of the implementation of policies, not their formulation, is alien to a genuine communist party. The organization of real ongoing discussion, without turning the party into a debating club, is not possible unless the membership is both highly conscious and highly disciplined at the same time, factors which are guarantees of both the most thorough going democracy and the highest level of active implementation of decisions.

Certainly the character and function of factory cells would be different in different conjunctures. Our discussion here pertains mainly to their character in a relatively stable conjuncture, like the present. For this reason we emphasize theoretical study and organizational consolidation. In a crisis conjuncture, or in a revolutionary period, of course, their priority tasks would be different.

While we do not want to predict the future form of factory cells, we think that certain necessary factors are nonetheless clear. Most importantly, that democratic centralism can work only when the structures and mechanisms of it are built into the party at all levels and are constantly utilized in practice instead of remaining only on paper.

These structures include ones which systematize education and theoretical training of all party members as a key priority. By theoretical training we are not speaking of the memorization of central committee resolutions or articles from the party press. Rather, we mean the study by the membership of the classics, of works of general theoretical value, and of the work of the party itself. Only a membership so theoretically grounded can actively make use of other mechanisms of equal importance.

These mechanisms function to directly tie the membership into the process of decision making and policy formulation. They serve to link the central committee to the members in the plants, the members with direct and daily ties to the working class with those in leadership. They are mechanisms, such as the function of middle level

cadre, the purpose of which is to link these two groups together while communicating the work of each to the other. Or the structures which insure that party policy and line are not imposed upon the membership, but are determined by them through organized discussion and debate as an integral part of the life of a nucleus, or any other party organization.

Clearly the development of these mechanisms will have to proceed apace with the development of the contemporary communist movement toward the party, and even after its formation, as an incessant struggle to prevent the replication within the party of organizational forms appropriate to bourgeois organizational practice. The forms these mechanisms will take in the future cannot be predicted in advance. Yet, without beginning now to discuss these questions and to master the lessons of history from an advanced theoretical perspective, we will be doomed to repeat the failures which have been touched upon in this series.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 C.E. Ruthenberg, From the Third Through the Fourth Convention of the Workers (Communist) Party of America (Chicago, n.d.).
- 2 Daily Worker, August 18-19, 1925; also in The Party Organization (Chicago, n.d.), pages 10-20.
- 3 The Worker, January 12, 1924.
- 4 Daily Worker, January 13, 1924.
- 5 Ibid., July 19, 1924.
- 6 Ibid., August 19, 1925.
- 7 See the new Party Constitution and reorganization plan in The Party Organization.
- 8 For the membership figures for 1923 see The Worker, January 12, 1924. For the figures for 1925 see The Communist International Between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses (London, 1928), page 351.
- 9 Daily Worker, January 5, 1926; International Press Correspondence VI, April 16, 1926. Ruthenberg spoke under the pseudonym of Sanborn.
- 10 Daily Worker, December 4, 1926.
- 11 Party Organizer, vol. I, no.2, December, 1927.
- 12 Ibid., vol. II, no. 5-6, May-June, 1928.
- 13 Daily Worker, December 26, 1928.

14 The percentage for 1929 is from The Communist, vol. IX, no. 6, June, 1930; for 1933 it is from the Daily Worker, July 13, 1933.

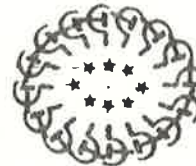
15 Party Organizer, vol. VII, no. 5-6, May-June, 1934. The situation in the few nuclei which existed can be seen in a report by John Williamson in The Communist, vol. IX, no. 6, June, 1930. He stated that attendance in the average nucleus was 50-75%; that meetings started an hour late, and were characterized by the "unending discussion of details of no importance."

16 Party Organizer, vol. V, no. 5-6, May-June 1932.

17 Ibid., vol. VII, no. 5-6, May-June, 1934.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., vol. IX, no. 4, April, 1936.



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