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The Attempted “Rehabilitation” of the Communist Party USA

An Anarchist Perspective on the History of US
Communism

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In recent decades, there have been efforts to “rehabilitate” the U.S.
Communist Party as an historical model for the Left.
Anti-authoritarian socialists and anarchists find this troubling.
While the CP did some good things it also did some very bad
things. A brief summary of its history demonstrates that and
explains why this is.

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Recently I was at a weekend adult camp for people interested in left-wing “political music.” People had all sorts of political viewpoints. However, several times I heard versions of the statement, “We should remember the good things which the Communist Party did.” It wasn’t that they wanted to join the present day Communist Party (a thin shadow of what it once was), but they wanted us to honor the historical Communist Party. They saw it as supplying a tradition for a new radical movement. Such opinions are widespread on today’s Left. For anarchists and other anti-authoritarian socialists this is a worrying trend.

The Communists, it was said, had once played a key role in organizing unions, especially in building the industrial unions of the CIO in the ‘30s. The Communists had fought racism, in such cases as the “Scottsboro Boys.” They had opposed fascism, and many U.S. Communists had gone to Spain in the ‘30s to fight for the Republic against Franco. There is truth in all these claims, and others, although not the whole truth.

Such attitudes are reflected in a dispute among historians of “American Communism.” The “older” or more “orthodox” historians include, for example, Theodore Draper (1990), Howe & Coser (1962), and Klehr (1984). They emphasize that the U.S. Communists early on became committed to Stalin’s Soviet Union and its Communist International (or “Comintern”), and strictly followed orders from Moscow. Politically almost all of these historians were or are supporters of the capitalist “West” in the Cold War. Almost none of them seem to think that it might have been reasonable for a minority to try to build an organization dedicated to a working class, socialist, revolution—of any sort.

The “newer” historians of the CP appear, for example, in Brown et al. (1993), Isserman (1993), and Ottanelli (1991). They often come out of the “New Left” of the ‘60s and hope to find roots in the historical Communist Party. “The collapse of the apocalyptic expectations of the late 1960s created a hunger among this new generation of

left-wing activists for a tradition that could serve as both a source of political reference and an inspiration....” (Isserman 1993; ix)

Without denying the domination of the Soviet Union over the U.S. party (how could they?), they play it down and modify it, by emphasizing other influences on the way the Communists interpreted and developed the Russian-imposed “line.” They seek to be “understanding” and “sympathetic” to the party’s members, rather than “judgmental” and “critical,” as they see the “orthodox” historians being. “...The new historians...express a qualitatively different and less judgmental attitude toward the party...” (Brown et al. 1993; 19) However, they do not seem to be all that revolutionary; their interest is not much in the more “left” periods of the CP as in the more moderate, “pro-American,” periods of the Popular Front and World War II.

Both trends have made major contributions to understanding the history of U.S. Communism. I am not interested in a discussion of contrasting methods of historiography. I am concerned with issues of politics, of class orientation, and of morality—which is to say that I am indeed “judgmental” about the Communist Party, as well as all other political viewpoints. (I am not implying that all historians of Communism fit neatly into these two perspectives; see Palmer 2007 or Wald 1987.)

The Goal of the Communist Party

I could go through a list of good things the Communist Party did and then contrast it with bad things it did. For example, it played an important and valuable part in the organizing of the CIO mass unions. But it broke strikes during World War II. It supported African-American struggles, until World War II when it opposed them. It was for a student “peace” movement until it was for “collective security” in the ‘thirties and then was for “peace” again during

But this is a “false memory,” however historically researched. Whatever it accomplished, the party had a goal of a totalitarian and state-capitalist society, as existed in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Its practical activities were not truly geared to the interests of the U.S. working class. Its programs were almost entirely reformist, except for occasional ultra-leftism. Despite the idealism of its members, its leaders were cynical and fraudulent.

There is no program guaranteed to move us to a socialist, working class, revolution, this time around. But there are other, better, traditions to look toward than that of U.S. Communism. This is true of revolutionary antiauthoritarian socialism, as expressed by the historical Wobblies, the Chicago anarchists, and others who fought for the self-liberation of the working class and all oppressed humanity.

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The Political Cost

Whatever good was accomplished by the Communist Party, the U.S. working class paid a price. In the words of a radical who observed some of this history, “For generations now, as elements and sections of American workers and intellectuals became radicalized, and as they moved toward a revolutionary socialist point of view, they were drawn into the orbit of the organization that purported to represent revolutionary dissent. Pulled into the Communist party, throbbing with revolutionary ardor and idealism, they were used—for another purpose....In levies of thousands and tens of thousands, they were used up, betrayed, sold out, eviscerated, disillusioned: they were processed through the CP machine, spit-tered, and then spit out. No one really knows how many hundreds of thousands, in all, were thus turned into sterilized ‘exes’ or ‘former people’; perhaps as many as a couple million.” (Hal Draper 1984) The miseducation and wearing-out of these militants is why the radical movement of the ‘sixties had to start up virtually from scratch.

We are currently in a time of great tension. The social system, of the U.S. and the whole world, faces terrible problems: economic inequality and stagnation, wars (and the threat of nuclear war), climate change and other ecological catastrophes, and continuing racial and gender oppression. Yet so far popular upheaval and mass movement have been fairly limited. Even the lessons of the last popular radicalization—in the ‘sixties—seem inadequate for today. This is beginning to change, but developments are still slow.

So some radicals look back to the earlier radical period of the ‘thirties. Then there was a (relatively) large party calling itself “communist.” It had roots in the working class, control of significant unions, and influence in a wide range of popular life. Combined with the apparent body of Marxist theory, this makes the one-time Communist Party look impressive. It raises nostalgia.

the Hitler-Stalin pact, and then, after Germany attacked the Soviet Union, it became fanatically for the war. And so on.

Yet the key question to ask of any political party or organization (if it is more than just a gang out for power) is: what does it stand for? what is its goal? Its vision? Of course the Communist Party was AGAINST capitalism (which is why other anti-capitalists could work with it). But what was it FOR? It said it was for “socialism” (“communism” was presented as the fulfillment of socialism). But what did it mean by “socialism”? Like “Christianity” or “democracy,” “socialism” has a lot of different meanings, ranging from libertarian-democratic, proletarian, self-management, to totalitarian state-capitalism.

What the Communist Party meant by “socialism” is fairly clear. It meant the Soviet Union under the reign of Stalin. That was its model of socialism and its North Star. It wanted the U.S. (and the whole world) to become like the U.S.S.R. In its more radical periods, it saw a revolution to establish a “Soviet America” right around the corner. In its more moderate periods, it presented this as a long-range goal. Meanwhile there was one country which was like the Soviet Union, namely the Soviet Union. All Communists were supposed to be dedicated to supporting, preserving, and defending the first and only “socialist” country in the world. This was their highest priority. The rulers of the Soviet Union were seen as the wisest and most important leaders of the world-wide Communist movement. Therefore they were to be listened to, followed, and obeyed.

Most members of the CP USA (and sympathetic “fellow travelers”) had a very idealized and romanticized vision of what the Soviet Union was like. They regarded it as “socialist” because the economy was collectivized, nationalized, and extremely centralized; they were impressed by its apparent productivity (while the U.S. was sunk in the Great Depression). They were unaware of how inefficient and chaotic its supposed “planned economy” really was under state capitalism. Most Communists were not aware of the super-exploitation of the Soviet workers, of the slave

labor camps, of the war on the peasants, of the artificial famine in the Ukraine, of the millions of workers and peasants who were murdered or worked to death, of the purges and deaths of thousands of Communists, intellectuals, scientists, and military officers. They did not know of the cynical power struggles fought out within the bureaucratic ruling class and settled with blood. They could have known this—information was available—but they shut their eyes because they wanted to believe. Their own idealism led them to become dupes and victims of Stalinism. (Even now there are Maoists and others who deny that Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot killed tens of millions of workers and peasants. This is the left-wing equivalent of Holocaust denial.)

But they did know that the Soviet Union was a one-party state, “led” by one man, Joseph Stalin. They knew that all other parties (even socialist ones) were outlawed, all opposition caucuses within the one legal party were outlawed, and all independent, non-Communist, organizations (including unions and cooperatives) also outlawed. They knew it was a dictatorship but thought that it was a good dictatorship—a benevolent dictatorship—a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

As much as they could, many working class Communists shut their eyes to the reality of the Soviet Union. But many middle class Communists and non-Communist fellow-travelers saw what it was fairly clearly—and liked it. These supporters of the Russian system “...were utterly impervious to criticisms directed against the Communists from a democratic liberal or revolutionary socialist standpoint. Impervious, however, not because of any lack of knowledge about the totalitarian nature of Stalin’s regime, but precisely because they consciously believed in the necessity and desirability of a ‘socialism’ from above that extirpated all institutions of democratic self-rule and enslaved the working class.” Such people were “...capable of rising in times of crisis to a veritable passion for a plan.” (Lipow 1982; 166)

unions as a whole, and on every progressive movement. Therefore it needed to be fought. Unfortunately most of the union leadership and many liberals did not accept this and joined in the anti-communist repression. Also unfortunately, the Communists themselves did not understand this logic; they had supported the government when it threw the leaders of the Trotskyists in prison (using the anti-communist Smith Act) and when it denied veteran’s benefits to a Trotskyist veteran.

The CP leaders announced that the country was about to go “fascist” and sent many of its members “underground” while organizing its own hysterical internal purges which drove thousands out of the party. But while very repressive, the period was not fascist, in part because of the post-war prosperity—which also undermined the Left. During the Popular Front and World War II years, the CP had done its part in pumping up what C. Wright Mills was to call the “American celebration.” Now the “celebration” of “Americanism” went on without (and against) the Communists.

(7) Even when the hysteria and legal persecution began to die down in the mid-fifties, the party faced the 1956 speech of Krushchev, successor to Joseph Stalin. He announced that Stalin had been a cruel and bloody tyrant, paranoid and irrational, who had even persecuted his fellow Communists. (Who would have thought it?!) This was followed by the Hungarian revolution, in which workers, peasants, students, and rank-and-file Communists overthrew the bureaucratic dictatorship and set up workers’ councils. It was crushed by tanks from the Soviet Union. These two events of 1956 resulted in an upheaval in the U.S. party and a mass exodus of members.

The party continued to exist—a truncated version exists even now, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union. It played a role in the radicalization of the ‘sixties, but only as one of a number of Left groupings, along with Trotskyists, pacifists, Maoists, Yippies, etc. It was never again to dominate the Left.

iting with Stalin, published an article denouncing the policies of the U.S. CP. In particular, he attacked Earl Browder. Everyone in the party rightly took this as a message from Moscow. Browder, who had long been a little Stalin in the U.S., was suddenly rejected, denounced, and expelled from his own party. Again there was a change in line, as the party swung to the left (although never back to the Third Period ultra-left).

In 1948, the CP made a last-ditch attempt to significantly influence U.S. politics. It organized an attempt to build a liberal third-capitalist-party, the Progressive Party. This ran Henry Wallace, previously a vice president under FDR, for president. While opposing segregation, it had an overall liberal, “peace with the Soviet Union,” platform (proposing to divide up the world between the U.S. and the USSR). The big unions stuck with the Democrats as did almost all the liberals, leaving the Communists to capture themselves. Wallace denounced them when he supported the Korean war.

The Party faced a grisly post-war ordeal. The U.S. ruling class made sure that there was popular knowledge of what the Soviet Union really was like. The Korean war stirred blind patriotism. It was a time of anti-communist hysteria, congressional witch-hunts, loyalty oaths, CP leaders sent to prison, firings from schools and universities, blacklisting in Hollywood, and expulsions from union positions and the breaking of Communist-led unions. Writing of the government witch hunters attacking the Communists while also interacting with members of the corrupt film industry, the anarchist Paul Goodman referred to “...the brutal comedy of McCarthy and the FBI investigating the Communists, in Hollywood, so we had on one stage the three most cynical tribes in the country.” (1960; 103)

The anti-communist witch hunters had state power, while—at least in the U.S.— the Communists did not (thank goodness!). This made it necessary to defend the civil liberties of the Communists—in order to defend everyone’s civil liberties. The attack on the Communists was the spearpoint of an attack on the entire Left, on the

These and similar views may be “judged” from the perspective of those whose goal is freedom, the end of classes and exploitation, the end of the state and all forms of oppression, and whose vision of socialism is (in the words of *The Communist Manifesto*), “...an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx & Engels 1955; 32). From the perspective of all varieties of anti-authoritarian socialism and anarchism: even what the Communist members “knew”—that the Soviet Union was a one-party, one-man, monolithic, dictatorship—was a monstrous vision. It was an ugly goal, an authoritarian “socialism” which had to be oppressive and exploitative, as well as inefficient and crisis-ridden.

U.S. Communist members were genuinely idealistic and self-sacrificing. Their sincere hatred of capitalism was channeled into a state-capitalist direction. Whatever the Communist ranks thought they were doing, their vision reflected a class-goal of bringing to power a layer of managerial personnel and intellectuals, either within the existing capitalist system or by replacing the existing ruling class with itself as a new (collective bureaucratic) ruling class. As in the Soviet Union, the workers would still be taking orders and selling their labor power to live, while the bureaucracy would serve as the agent of capital accumulation.

This means that even when the U.S. Communists did something good (such as union organizing), its ultimate ends were evil (building its centralized party, in order to eventually create a society like Stalinist Russia). Having such a goal had to distort even its best activities (the unions were built in a bureaucratic, centralized, and undemocratic fashion, which was eventually used by the conservative bureaucrats after they threw out the Communists).

Historical Periods of US Communism—A Thumbnail Sketch

(1) The Communist Party was founded in 1919. It came from the left wing of the Socialist Party, and also many workers came from the IWW. Inspired by the 1917 Russian revolution, its founding members were subjectively revolutionary and idealistic. The young party was torn by internal conflicts and factionalism. Such disputes were often settled by appeals to the leaders of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow. Over time, as the Comintern became more bureaucratized, its leaders intervened in the U.S. CP to build a loyal base of support for the ruling Comintern clique which was being built around Stalin (as they did in all other Communist Parties). At the end of the first ten years, the Trotskyists (on the Left) were expelled and then Jay Lovestone and his followers (on the Right) were expelled. Earl Browder was appointed the top dog.

William Z. Foster was another of the highest leaders of the CP for many years. He explained, "I am for the Comintern from start to finish...and if the Comintern finds itself criss-cross with my opinions, there is only one thing to do and that is to change my opinions to fit the policy of the Comintern." (quoted in Howe & Coser 1962; 154) That became the attitude of the whole party.

(2) In 1929, the rulers of the Comintern declared that world capitalism was in its "Third Period." Supposedly, collapse would soon occur, to be very soon followed by revolution in every country. Communists must break off any cooperation with other working class trends which were not for immediate revolution under the leadership of the CPs. In fact, every political group outside of the Communists was to be considered "fascist". Socialists (social democrats) were called "social fascists." Anarchists were "anarcho-fascists."

made money hand over fist), even outside of the defense industries. They denounced John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers for leading a strike; they called the coal miners agents of Hitler. They advocated forms of labor speed-up. When their leader, Earl Browder, was called a "strikebreaker," he responded, "As regards the fomenting of the strike movement that threatens America at this present time, I consider it the greatest honor to be a breaker of this movement." (quoted in Isserman 1993; 185)

Towards African-Americans, they opposed the March on Washington (denouncing Randolph as a traitor), the popular "Double V for Victory" slogan (Victory over Fascism Abroad and Victory over Racism at Home), and any independent mass struggle. They closed their locals in the South. They denounced any pressure on Britain to promise independence for India. As Isserman (a "new" historian) puts it, "The story of American Communists in the Second World War is not the stuff of which revolutionary legends are made." (1993; 17)

Yet overall the CP grew. Partly this was due to the general movement of the US working class to the left at the time. Partly it gained from its association with the Soviet Union which was widely admired as an ally in the war. And partly it gained from being protected by the government and top union officials who saw the CP as allies—for the time being.

(6) But all good things must come to an end. Led by Earl Browder, the U.S. party had premised its strategy on a post-war alliance between U.S. imperialism and the Soviet Union. It assumed that this would include class peace inside the U.S. In 1944, Browder led the party to declare itself officially disbanded, and replaced with a "Communist Political Association." He announced that the "no-strike" pledge of the unions should continue after the war.

However, with the victory over the Axis, the wartime alliance was coming apart. The Cold War was beginning. The U.S. CP's leadership failed to see the signs in time. In 1945, the second in command of the French Communist Party, Jacques Duclos, after vis-

rades of Lenin were declared to be really spies for Germany, Japan, and/or Britain, who worked with Trotsky to sabotage the country and return it to capitalism, fascism, and Czarism. They were sent to their deaths, along with many other people, in a monstrous frame-up. Most liberals refused to make any criticisms, lest they offend Stalin and interfere with “unity against fascism.”

(4) All this ground to a halt in 1939, with the “Hitler-Stalin Pact,” a “non-aggression” agreement between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The two totalitarian states used their armies to divide up Poland. This set off the Second World War, with Germany being guaranteed peace on its eastern border for as long as it wanted.

Like all other Communist Parties, the CP USA officially supported the pact. It abandoned its efforts for “collective security.” It denounced the European war as “imperialist” and put the main blame on....Britain. Molotov, the Russian Foreign Commissar, remarked, “Fascism is a matter of taste.” (Isserman 1993; 16) The CP abandoned its support for FDR and the New Deal. Efforts were made to organize workers in the growing armaments industry. A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement (of African-Americans to protest discrimination in the armaments industry and the military) was criticized as too mild. The Communists campaigned against U.S. preparation for the war. Although the party had turned to the left, it did not return to the crazed sectarianism of the Third Period. Rather it acted like a left-reformist party. It tried to make alliances with pacifists and conservative isolationists.

The Party lost most of its support from liberal allies, who were shocked at its dumping of its “anti-fascist” politics. Interestingly, it kept almost all its members. They were more committed to the Party, and to the Soviet Union than to any specific program.

(5) In 1941, the Germans attacked Russia. The Comintern’s parties leapt back to supporting the Allies. The U.S. Communists became among the most super-patriotic, jingoistic, forces—not out of love for the U.S. but out of loyalty to the Soviet Union. They opposed all strikes, no matter the provocation by the bosses (who

Stalin announced, “Fascism is a fighting organization of the bourgeoisie.... Social Democracy is objectively the moderate wing of fascism.... These organizations do not contradict each other, they complete each other. They are not antipodes [opposites—WP] but twins.” (quoted in Howe & Coser 1962; 183)

In the USA, this meant that Communists stopped working inside the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions and tried to build “revolutionary” unions, committed to the Communists’ program. While the Communists gained a lot of experience in union work, they had little success in building lasting Communist-controlled unions.

Meanwhile, the CP raised a slogan of “Self-Determination for the Negro in the Black Belt.” This program was first raised by a Comintern theorist from Finland who had never been in the US. If African-American people wanted to break their own country out of the U.S., then revolutionaries should support their right to do it. But the Communists used the slogan to mean that US Black people MUST have a separate country—without asking them what they wanted! In any case, the slogan got little support among Black people.

The hostility between the CP and U.S. Socialists became quite bitter. It reached its apogee in 1934, when the Socialists held a memorial in New York’s Madison Square Garden for the Austrian Socialist workers who had been massacred when fighting the fascists. The Communists broke up the gathering in a bloody brawl.

The worst effects of the Third Period/Social Fascism approach did not come in the U.S., but in Germany, where the Comintern had its largest party outside of Russia. Instead of trying to work with the Social Democratic Party to fight the Nazis, the German CP focused on fighting the Social Democrats, while denying that the Nazis were a special threat. In 1933, the Nazis came to power, smashing all workers’ parties and unions, and all other parties and organizations. The Comintern’s program had failed disastrously.

(3) In 1935, the Comintern announced a new international strategy. Without ever admitting that it had been wrong for over a decade, it declared that there was a need for unity to fight against fascism! For a brief while, this meant the “United Front,” an alliance of Communists and Socialists and any other workers’ organizations. But soon the Communists expanded their appeal to anyone at all who would be “anti-fascist.” This included capitalist parties, liberal and even conservative, in a “Popular Front.” An alliance with capitalist parties, even one very liberal, means that the workers’ parties cannot push beyond capitalism towards socialism, since the capitalists could not accept that. So the Popular Front was a commitment to reformism. From the Third Period to the Popular Front, the Communists had jumped from the ultra-left to the right of the workers’ movement.

The Popular Front period lasted for only four years. In that period, the U.S. Communists grew in size, to its all-time maximum of about 75 thousand in 1938, with many times that number in fellow travelers. It grew in influence and respectability among liberals, Democratic politicians, and union officials. CPers became enthusiastic supporters of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal. They were active participants in the (capitalist, imperialist, and racist) Democratic Party. They also worked closely with the leading unionists, such as John L. Lewis, in organizing the CIO industrial unions—despite Lewis’ anti-communism and bureaucracy. As such they did valuable organizing, if still within the limitations of business unionism. They also made important anti-racist campaigns (quietly shelving compulsory “Negro Self-determination”).

Meanwhile they participated in the student anti-war movement, turning it from being against another imperialist war, to support for “collective security”—an alliance of the U.S. with the Soviet Union, as well as Britain and France, to supposedly deter Nazi aggression.

The CP declared itself as part and parcel of the U.S. experience. There was nothing wrong with showing the roots of U.S. radicalism in aspects of the U.S. revolution or of abolitionism. But the Communists became cheerleaders for U.S. nationalism. They used the slogan, “Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism!” (Meanwhile they continued to take orders from Moscow.)

In 1936 in Spain, fascists and the military rebelled against the elected government of the Republic. Many U.S. CP members and supporters volunteered to go to Spain and fight against General Franco’s fascist army. They joined the U.S. section of the International Brigades, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Many bravely gave their lives to fight against fascism.

Yet there were limits to what the Communists did in Spain. From the start Soviet agents fought against the Spanish workers and peasants who wanted to expand the civil war into a revolution. The workers—especially those influenced by anarchists—in several areas seized factories and workplaces and managed them democratically. Peasants voluntarily collectivized their farms. The Spanish Communist party and Russian representatives fought against all these developments, using the Republican army. This is why the U.S. volunteers were called the “Lincoln” brigade, instead of, say, the “Debs” brigade; it was to show that they were keeping the struggle within the limits of capitalist democracy. They did not want a socialist revolution.

At the same time, the Russian forces and the Spanish Communists set up a network of secret police and prisons, outside of the control even of the Republican state. They imprisoned, tortured, and murdered militants who were to their left—particularly anarchists and dissident Communists (the POUM).

Many U.S. liberals, artists, and intellectuals became sympathizers with the CP, seeing it—and the Soviet Union—as an important ally against fascism. This caused them to shut their eyes to the reality of Stalinist Russia. When the Moscow Trials (the Great Terror) began in the late thirties, almost all of the surviving leading com-