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See table of contents

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Nelson Lichtenstein and the Politics of Reuther Scholarship

Victor G. Devinatz

IN THE SUMMER OF 2001, while conducting research in the George Meany Memorial Archives, I came across a curious document. Thorough and meticulous, it detailed a 1939 meeting held in Detroit that identified Walter Reuther as a member of the United States Communist Party (CPUSA). In a subsequent Notes and Documents contribution, "Reassessing the Historical UAW," I situated this piece of evidence historically and historiographically and suggested the possibility of revising our understanding of Walter Reuther's politics and rethinking the role of Communists in the early United Automobile Workers (UAW).[1]

Nelson Lichtenstein, author of a landmark biography of Reuther, strongly disputes the document's implication that as late as 1939, the UAW leader and subsequent pivotal player in the construction of trade union liberalism was a Communist. I am flattered by Lichtenstein's attention. Although the relevant historical evidence is complex and, in some cases, open to multiple interpretations, I am unconvinced by Lichtenstein's largely negative arguments.

Lichtenstein agrees with my assessment of the document's likely source — an adherent of Jay Lovestone "spying" for Homer Martin's anti-Communist, anti-CIO faction of the autoworkers' union.[2] He asserts that the gathering recorded in the crucial document could not have been a meeting of the "Political Buro" of the CPUSA's National Committee. Lichtenstein instead claims that it was a meeting of the CPUSA auto fraction, the UAW's pro-CIO Unity Caucus, or an amalgamation of all three

[1]Victor G. Devinatz, "Reassessing The Historical UAW: Walter Reuther's Affiliation with the Communist Party and Something of Its Meaning — A Document of Party Involvement, 1939," *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 223-45.
[2]Nelson Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" *Labour/Le Travail*, 51 (Spring 2003), 166.

Victor G. Devinatz, "Nelson Lichtenstein and the Politics of Reuther Scholarship," *Labour/Le Travail*, 51 (Spring 2003), 171-6.

bodies.[3] Unfortunately, he fails to provide any evidence to support such a conclusion. Moreover, the document itself contains information, including details that Lichtenstein does not dispute, entirely at odds with such an interpretation.

The composition of the meeting undermines the possibility that it was a gathering of the CPUSA auto fraction or the Unity Caucus. With the six or seven UAW members and officials attending this meeting, along with Walter Reuther as well as CPUSA National Committee members Bill Gebert and Wyndham Mortimer, *only* ten people at most (out of at least 41) attending this meeting worked directly in the auto sector.[4] Because of the small percentage of UAW activists present, it is difficult to conceive of this meeting being any kind of CPUSA auto fraction or Unity Caucus meeting. In fact, as the document indicates, the meeting adjourned on 12 February 1939 after CPUSA National Chairman William Z. Foster's comments so that the "Political Buro" members could hold meetings on the morning of 13 February with the CPUSA fractions in the Packard, Buick, and Briggs Locals of the UAW.[5]

Lichtenstein's speculations about the nature of the meeting are likewise undermined by the topics that the attendees addressed. The meeting's first and major topic was indeed the presidential election at the upcoming 1939 UAW-CIO convention. Other topics addressed in considerable detail, however, included the CPUSA's work in the American Federation of Labor's Non-Partisan League, the party's substantial work in the Democratic Party for the upcoming 1940 national elections, and the conflict brewing in radical circles between the CPUSA and the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota.[6] It is implausible that such topics, all of intense interest to the party's national leadership, would be discussed at any type of meeting involving either the CPUSA auto fraction or the Unity Caucus.

Reuther's party membership can also be adduced from the meeting's recorded discussion surrounding the upcoming UAW-CIO presidential election. According to the document, a "four-way battle among Thomas, Frankenstein (sic), Mortimer and Reuther" for the union's presidency was underway within the union. The party leadership expressed concern that this tussle could lead to the UAW's destruction. Agreeing with this sentiment, CPUSA National Chairman William Z. Foster "commented that such a fight among the four UAWU leaders, three of whom are Communists and one a close friend of the Party would utterly discredit the Communist Party and be a shameful exhibition of incapacity on its part."[7]

It is beyond dispute that the "close friend of the Party" refers to R.J. Thomas, the UAW presidential candidate that the CIO leadership supported. Therefore, based on Foster's statement, the remaining three candidates, who were CPUSA members, would necessarily have to be Mortimer, Reuther, and Frankensteen.

[3]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 166.
[4]Devinatz, "Reassessing The Historical UAW," 237-9.
[5]Devinatz, "Reassessing The Historical UAW," 239-40.
[6]Devinatz, "Reassessing The Historical UAW," 243-5.
[7]Devinatz, "Reassessing The Historical UAW," 241-2.

Relatedly, Lichtenstein provides only weak evidence that Frankensteen was not a CPUSA member. He recounts a meeting between UAW editor Henry Kraus, and CPUSA Political Buro members Roy Hudson and Bill Gebert (not Bill Gilbert as Lichtenstein erroneously states in "Reuther The Red?") with Frankensteen, most likely over the same weekend as the meeting described in the document. At the meeting attended by Kraus, Hudson and Gebert attempted but failed to obtain Frankensteen's support for Thomas as the next UAW-CIO president.[8] The implication of this statement is that if Frankensteen was actually a CPUSA member, Hudson and Gebert would have been able to convince Frankensteen to go along with the party's support for Thomas's candidacy for the UAW-CIO presidency.

As Lichtenstein admits in his article, CPUSA members and UAW leaders "Wyndham Mortimer and Robert Travis resisted the CIO imposition of R.J. Thomas as the next UAW president."[9] Why, then, is he so surprised that another CPUSA member, Richard Frankensteen, would also initially oppose Thomas's candidacy in the middle of February 1939? The following month, by the time of the UAW-CIO convention, Mortimer, Travis, as well as Frankensteen had come around and supported Thomas for the UAW-CIO presidency, the choice of the CPUSA national leadership.[10]

In summary, Lichtenstein provides no compelling evidence to support his conjecture about the nature of the 1939 meeting and its meaning vis-à-vis Reuther's and Frankensteen's memberships in the CPUSA. To the contrary, the internal evidence of the document itself points to the conclusion that it is a record of exactly what it claims: a meeting of the Political Buro of the CPUSA National Committee. In the end, Lichtenstein seems unwilling to accept this conclusion, apparently because he disapproves of the politics of the Lovestoneites.

In the second part of his argument, Lichtenstein insists that Reuther's political actions in 1938 and 1939 were inconsistent with CPUSA membership. But I would argue, as does Lichtenstein, that the CPUSA leadership "gave considerable autonomy to trade union 'submarines' like Harry Bridges, Mike Quill, and maybe Walter Reuther."[11] In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that the party was willing to grant Reuther considerable flexibility in trade union affairs. According to comments written by Nat Ganley, a leading CPUSA activist in the UAW, "Reuther agreed to remain in Socialist Party and bore from within in agreement with us ...."[12] If Ganley's statements are true, Reuther was both a CPUSA member and a member of the Socialist Party (SP). Given such circumstances, the party could have easily al-

[8]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 167.
[9]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 169.
[10]Martin Halpern, "The 1939 UAW Convention: Turning Point for Communist Power in the Auto Union?" *Labor History*, 33 (Spring 1992), 203, 207, and 212.
[11]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 169.
[12]Martin Glaberman, "A Note on Walter Reuther," *Radical America*, 7 (November-December 1973), 114.

lowed Reuther more autonomy that other trade union "submarines" such as Bridges and Quill.

Reuther's likely dual memberships in the CPUSA and in the SP (through August 1938) also help to explain his seemingly inconsistent behavior within the UAW, including his adaptation of the Norman Thomas-initiated tactics to fight Homer Martin in the summer of 1938.[13] Further, as Lichtenstein's biography documents, even after Reuther formally left the SP in August 1938, he still remained close to the SP activists within the UAW.[14] Reuther's membership in the CPUSA while working intimately with SP auto unionists makes understandable the Reuther group's actions in fighting to send labour representatives to a Washington Anti-War Congress supported by the Socialist-Martin forces in the autumn of 1938.[15]

Lichtenstein also argues that Reuther's hiring of Edward Levinson, an anti-Communist socialist, as his publicist and strategist in early 1939 is inconsistent with Reuther being a CPUSA member. But given Reuther's likely dual loyalties, hiring Levinson is not that surprising. Moreover, as Lichtenstein writes, Levinson immediately commenced "to draft speeches and position papers" that placed him in "the non-Communist, and after August 1939, the anti-Communist camp," an observation that is entirely consistent with the position of my article.[16] Because Reuther's speeches did not become anti-Communist until after August 1939, I suggested that he may have left the CPUSA at that time not because of domestic concerns, but over a critical foreign policy issue: the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact.[17]

In order to understand Reuther's politics in 1938 and 1939, Lichtenstein argues for an interpretation of his actions that is rooted in an understanding of "the larger political and ideological currents at play in and outside the UAW."[18] One such salient fact is that "secret" CPUSA members such as Reuther often took positions contradictory to the party over a number of issues during the Popular Front period, producing some admittedly byzantine political imbroglios. Further, it appears that there were different levels of "secret" members within the party. For example, even though Wyndham Mortimer was a member of the CPUSA's National Committee, he was not a public member of the party, unlike others within the auto union such as Local 155 President John Anderson. Thus even when Mortimer held the position of UAW vice-president in the late 1930s, the CPUSA lacked having a public voice within the union's highest echelons.[19] The point is that the political behavior expressed by "secret" CPUSA members, at any point in time during the Popular Front

[13]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 168.
[14]Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York 1995), 127.
[15]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 168.
[16]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 168.
[17]Devinatz, "Reassessing The Historical UAW," 234.
[18]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 169.
[19]Halpern, "The 1939 UAW Convention," 209.

era, may or may not have been consistent with the party's positions. All of this has direct bearing on assessing Reuther's seemingly contradictory political behavior within the autoworkers' union throughout 1938 and 1939 and explains why he had "political and social comradeship with men and women of intense anti-Stalinist conviction."[20] Moreover, this is not inconsistent with what was undoubtedly Reuther's shifting political allegiances, which could well have been in motion away from communism, but in which a decisive break from the CPUSA was not effected until a precipitating event, such as the Hitler-Stalin pact.

Having failed to present any clear evidence to disprove the possibility of Reuther's CPUSA membership in the late 1930s, Lichtenstein instead ridicules me as a practitioner of "secret document fetishism" and "pseudo-historical spycraft."[21] He places me in the same right-wing anti-Communist camp with those such as "George Will, Ronald Radosh, and David Horowitz — who argue that membership in the CPUSA was of such consequence and such strange attractiveness that it left an indelible stain on one's political and moral character, expunged only by public repudiation and a life of anti-Communist activism."[22] These types of personalized caricature are unfortunate and undermine constructive dialogue. Further, showing contempt for a scholar who uses documentary evidence in conjunction with critical secondary literature to make sense of important aspects of the past seems a rather odd position for any historian to take. After locating this document, what would Lichtenstein have had me do? Was I supposed to ignore, bury, or suppress this report?

In fact, the suppression of potentially significant evidence is precisely what Lichtenstein himself seems to have done. He claims to have come across the eleven-page document while researching his Reuther biography. According to Lichtenstein, he "puzzled over it at that time because the detail was impressive and the implicit charge — that both Walter Reuther and his rival, Richard Frankensteen were CPUSA members — was explosive."[23] Lichtenstein admits that Reuther could very well have been a CPUSA member from 1935 to 1937 even acknowledging the existence of "much evidence, both direct and circumstantial."[24] He incorrectly asserts that Bill McKie may have collected his dues: in actuality, it was Nat Ganley.[25] Apparently, by putting Reuther in the party in 1938 and 1939 — as the document I published does — places the UAW leader beyond the pale in Lichtenstein's eyes. For Reuther's biographer, the auto union leader's CPUSA membership circa 1938 to 1939 shatters the myth of Reuther's social democratic origins, supposedly tarnishing one of political liberalism's major exponents among middle 20th century la-

[20]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 166.
[21]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 169.
[22]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 169.
[23]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 166.
[24]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 165.
[25]Glaberman, "A Note on Walter Reuther," 114.

bour leaders. Astonishingly, then, in a work of 550 pages that includes 1,371 endnotes, Reuther's biographer fails to make a simple reference to the document I uncovered and he supposedly saw. That Lichtenstein has been arguing against the possibility of Reuther's affiliation with the CPUSA for some time is, of course, a matter of public record.[26]

In the final analysis, Lichtenstein does not really care what the documentary evidence has to say about Reuther's CPUSA membership. What Lichtenstein is in effect arguing is that in spite of the empirical evidence, Reuther *was* not truly a party member "regardless of his affiliation or non-affiliation with the CPUSA per se."[27] In this penultimate sentence of his conclusion, he is asserting an interpretation of Reuther that transcends all historical evidence concerning Reuther's actual political affiliations in the historical past. Lichtenstein opts instead for a trans-historical argument, in which evidence is not really much of an issue and established conceptions and conventional wisdoms override documentation.

Lichtenstein suggests that if Reuther was indeed a CPUSA member "as late as February 1939 — and perhaps as late as September 1939 — then we have to make a considerable revision ... to the very meaning of political commitment and organizational membership in the Popular Front era."[28] This is, of course, sheer nonsense. But both Reuther's and Frankensteen's CPUSA memberships do provide us with additional insight into the relationship between trade union leaders and the party during the Popular Front period, a time when "domestic radicals active in the trade unions not only worked closely with the CPUSA but often joined the party."[29] The relationship between such trade union leaders, who retained "secret" party memberships and the CPUSA, may be much more extensive, intricate, and complicated than we originally had imagined, more than five decades after the CPUSA-led unions' expulsion from the CIO.

The author thanks Richard Soderlund (Illinois State University) for his extensive comments, discussions and critical readings of earlier drafts of this article.

[26]For Lichtenstein's position concerning Reuther's relationship to the CPUSA, see Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 55-6. In addition, this issue also is discussed in Lichtenstein's exchanges with Martin Glaberman. See Martin Glaberman, "Walter Reuther, 'Social Unionist,'" review of Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor, Monthly Review*, 48 (November 1996), 52-7; "Response to Martin Glaberman," 48 (March 1997), 58-60; and "Reply to Nelson Lichtenstein," 48 (March 1997), 60-2.

[27]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 169.

[28]Lichtenstein, "Reuther The Red?" 166.

[29]Devinatz, "Reassessing The Historical UAW," 236.