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Reuther the Red?

Nelson Lichtenstein

VICTOR G. DEVINATZ, author of "Reassessing the Historical UAW," has a good grasp of the historiography, such as it is, on the perennial question: "When, if, and why was Walter Reuther a Communist?"[1] There is indeed much evidence, both direct and circumstantial, which might lead a historian to assert that this key figure in labour history and midcentury political liberalism held membership in the US Communist Party (CPUSA) during the months that followed his return from the Soviet Union late in 1935. This would put him in the CPUSA from November or December 1935 until sometime in the second half of 1936, or even the early months of 1937 when Reuther played important roles in the effort to organize General Motors, Ford, and the Detroit West Side shops.

My own research leads me to believe that Reuther worked very closely with the Communists during this period, but he did not actually join the party. In building the Detroit auto locals he was friendly, even intimate, with key Communists like Bill McKie, Maurice Sugar, and Wyndham Mortimer. He attended Communist-sponsored events, made a point of listening to Earl Browder on the radio, and spoke for Communist groups like Friends of the Soviet Union. In 1973 the late Martin Glaberman first published the crucial evidence linking Reuther to "at large"

[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.

Nelson Lichtenstein, "Reuther the Red?" *Labour/Le Travail*, 51 (Spring 2003), 165-9.

membership in the CPUSA in 1935 and 1936. Bill McKie may well have collected the dues, because the two spent hundreds of hours together trying to recruit Ford workers into the fledgling UAW. But weighing against these memories — and according to Glaberman, an actual CPUSA membership card — was Reuther's long-standing connection to the world of Detroit socialism, including political and social comradeship with men and women of intense anti-Stalinist conviction.[2]

But this is not the subject of this corrective note. Few historians would be surprised to find new evidence indicating that in 1935, 1936, or 1937, Reuther was one of those Depression Era socialists who paid dues to two organizations, and for a brief moment, gave their primary loyalty to the Communists. Reuther quarreled with brothers Victor and Roy in 1936 over his endorsement of CPUSA electoral strategy; and in 1937 internal Socialist Party (SP) memoranda repeatedly criticized Reuther for his "opportunism" toward both the Communists and the Democrats.[3]

The problem is that virtually all the evidence indicates that by early 1939 Reuther was an increasingly public and an increasingly bitter rival of the Communists within the UAW. If, as Devinatz asserts, Reuther was indeed in the CPUSA as late as February 1939 — and perhaps as late as September 1939 — then we have to make a considerable revision not only to our understanding of this important union figure, but to the very meaning of political commitment and organizational membership in the Popular Front era. Devinatz has only one document — and that of unknown origin and authorship — to substantiate his much larger claim that Walter Reuther was a member of the CPUSA during 1938 and 1939.

During my research for the biography I wrote of Walter Reuther, I came across the eleven-page document, a February 1939 account of a Detroit meeting of the "Political Buro" of the National Committee of the CPUSA that is the focus of the author's article. I 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 Communist members — was explosive. As Devinatz notes, the author of the document was probably a follower of Jay Lovestone "spying" for the anti-Communist, anti-CIO Homer Martin faction of the UAW. This seems reasonable and important to the problematic veracity of the charge — and the conclusions Devinatz draws from it — because Jay Lovestone and his followers tended to lump within the Communist fold a remarkably large proportion of the active leadership of the CIO.[4]

[2]Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York 1995), 47-61.

[3]Kevin Boyle, "Building the Vanguard: Walter Reuther and Radical Politics in 1936," *Labor History,* 30 (Summer 1989), 433-48; and for Socialist Party criticism of Reuther see Ben Fischer's "Auto Bulletins, November 1937-August 1938," in Box 10, Daniel Bell Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University.

[4]See for example Benjamin Stolberg, *The Story of the CIO* (New York 1938).

This Lovestonite authorship therefore weakens our confidence in the capacity of the anonymous 1939 author to understand precisely what kind of meeting he was attending and what kind of people were there. Whether it was a full meeting of the "Political Buro of the National Committee of the Communist Party," or an expanded meeting of the CPUSA auto fraction, or one last get together of the tension-ridden "Unity Caucus," or a combination of all three, is not entirely clear. For example, the document's author mentions the presence of "six or seven members and officials of the United Automobile Workers' union, whose identities were not learned."[5] Whatever the character of the meeting, Communist Political Buro, or otherwise, it would not be unusual for a non-Communist like Walter Reuther to make an appearance, if only to indicate, as the document asserts, that he was interested in making a run for the UAW presidency at the forthcoming convention in March 1939. One indication that the anonymous author of the document is somewhat unsophisticated is that he lists Richard Frankensteen as a CPUSA member, which is absurd in 1939 or any other year. Frankensteen allied himself with the Communists at various times, mainly in World War II, but no one, and certainly no Communist, ever claimed he was a member, or even particularly left-wing. Thus, UAW editor Henry Kraus, who was friendly with Frankensteen, recounts a strained and acrimonious encounter, probably over the same weekend as the meeting in question, in which Communist officials Roy Hudson and Bill Gilbert tried and failed to get Frankensteen to support for UAW president R. J. Thomas, the choice of top CIO officials.[6]

Walter Reuther is listed as a Communist in the document, but the overwhelming bulk of the public, overt political activities of the UAW vice-president during 1938 and 1939 make it virtually certain that Walter Reuther was neither a member of the CPUSA or even allied with that formation inside the UAW. First, Reuther abandoned the SP and its electoral strategy in August 1938 not because he was following a Communist Popular Front policy (to support Frank Murphy and the Democrats), but because he was getting ready to fight the CPUSA within UAW Local 174, his key base of support. He did not want an unpopular anti-Democratic Party/New Deal albatross around his neck. Reuther may have been an opportunist, but he was an increasingly anti-Communist one in 1938.[7]

Second, Reuther and the Unity Caucus Communists were in a bitter conflict as early as the summer of 1938 over how to fight Homer Martin. Richard Frankensteen, George Addes, and Maurice Sugar wanted to declare a dues strike against Martin; Reuther favoured calling in top CIO officials to impose a new lead-

[5]Devinatz, "Reassessing the Historical UAW," 239.

[6]Henry Kraus, *Heroes of Unwritten Story: the UAW, 1934-1939* (Urbana 1993), 402-03.

[7]Tucker Smith to "Comrades," 11 August 1938, Reel 35, Socialist Party of America Collection, Library of Congress; Ben Fischer to Norman Thomas, 16 August 1938, Box 10, Daniel Bell Collection; and "Joint Council Minutes," 3 December 1938, "Local 174" File, Box 31, Joe Brown Collection, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

ership. And he toyed with the idea of a rapprochement with Homer Martin and the UAW right, a program strongly advocated by Norman Thomas and other Socialists. To this end, Reuther even held a meeting with David Dubinsky, who sponsored the activities of Martin and Lovestone, to push for the kind of CIO intervention that would not generate a civil war within the UAW between Martin and his Communist-backed opponents. Moreover, this was not just backroom infighting: at a huge Unity Caucus meeting in August 1938 — a mini-convention really — Reuther and his group unsuccessfully fought for their program.[8]

Third, in the fall of 1938 Reuther does "purge" from his Local 174 staff and electoral slate all the key CPUSA members who had helped him build that large UAW unit in 1936 and 1937. These included Stanley Nowak and Bill McKie, true CPUSA stalwarts, as well as Irene Young Marinovich, Frank Manfried, and Carl Haessler, who were in or close to the party. The Reuther group gave to the purge some ideological weight when it fought to send labour delegates to a Washington Anti-War Congress backed by the Socialist-Martin group inside the UAW and bitterly opposed by the Communists.[9]

Fourth, at the very moment when the anonymous author is making of Reuther a CPUSA member, the Local 174 president is hiring as his publicist and strategist Edward Levinson, one of the most experienced, politically astute anti-Communists to come out of the New York factional wars. Levinson was a Socialist, but not of the Popular Front variety. He immediately began to draft speeches and position papers for Reuther that put him in the non-Communist, and after August 1939, the anti-Communist, camp. The Communists were understandably "inflamed and enraged" by his selection.[10]

And finally, Reuther and Communist-oriented leaders of the UAW were indeed thrown together one last time in February 1939, just before the crucial anti-Martin, pro-CIO convention that would be held in March. But all evidence, from both the Lovestone document and from other sources, indicates that the purpose of this meeting was to come up with a UAW president that everyone, Hillman, Murray, the Communists, and the Reutherites, could agree upon. The CIO wanted R. J. Thomas, a relatively non-fractional figure, and the UAW Communists went along, which is why Reuther might well have been in attendance at their Detroit meeting in February 1939.[11]

[8]Christopher Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912-1950* (Detroit 1988), 230-34; Ben Fischer, "Auto Bulletin," 23 July 1938, Box 10, Bell Collection; and Kraus, *Heroes of Unwritten Story*, 391.

[9]Margaret Collingwood Nowak, *Two Who Were There: A Biography of Stanley Nowak* (Detroit 129-41; and Kraus, *Heroes of Unwritten Story*, 388-89.

[10]Ben Fischer to Art McDowell, 26 January 1939, Reel 36, Socialist Party of America Collection.

[11]Martin Halpern, "The 1939 UAW Convention: Turning Point for Communist Power in the Auto Union?" *Labor History*, 33 (Spring 1992), 191-216.

One could argue that the CPUSA was such a loose, decentralized organization — at least when it came to trade union affairs — that Union Square gave considerable autonomy to trade union "submarines" like Harry Bridges, Mike Quill, and maybe Walter Reuther. Certainly this view of the CPUSA has a lot more to commend it than that of a machine-like apparatus, directed entirely from New York, if not Moscow. There is in fact much evidence that several key UAW Communists, including Wyndham Mortimer and Robert Travis resisted the CIO imposition of R. J. Thomas as the next UAW president. Indeed, Mortimer, who was close to Reuther in 1937, may well have been happy to see the West Side leader at the meeting, because both Mortimer and Reuther were interested in exploring alternatives to Thomas. But Devinatz plunks for the machine-like interpretation, arguing that Reuther did not fight for the UAW presidency in 1939 because he was honouring Communist Party discipline. Far more reasonable, and less sinister, would be the judgement to which so many UAW radicals came: in order to rebuild the UAW in the conservative months after the 1938 recession and election, the logic of a non-factional, middle-of-the-road candidate like R. J. Thomas impressed itself on Reuther and his sometime sponsor, Sidney Hillman, as much as it did on the Communists, both in New York and Detroit.[12]

Indeed, Devinatz's brand of secret document fetishism does a disservice to the serious understanding of politics and political consciousness during the years when the Communists — and other radicals — played a large role in American trade union and public life. By privileging a questionable document above the larger political and ideological currents at play in and outside the UAW, Devinatz puts himself in a camp with those — like 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. Reuther filled that bill from late 1939 onwards, but his autonomous politics, his detachment from the UAW Communists, should also be evident from 1935 forward, regardless of his affiliation or non-affiliation with the CPUSA *per se*. If historians of labour and the left indulge in the sort of pseudo-historical spycraft that neo-conservatives use to devalue the dynamic politics of a social movement in formation, then we might as well take the History Channel as our guide to a secret narrative that ratifies the most retrograde understanding of the century past.

[12]Halpern, "The 1939 UAW Convention," 196-99; Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: the Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton 1977), 133-43.