

# A Communist in the Council Chambers

## Communist Municipal Politics, Ethnicity, and the Career of William Kolisnyk

Stefan Epp

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### Résumé de l'article

L'élection de William Kolisnyk comme conseiller municipal pour la troisième circonscription de Winnipeg en automne 1926 a été célébrée comme l'une des premières occasions qu'un candidat en Amérique du Nord se présentant sous la bannière d'un parti communiste a été élu à un poste de fonctionnaire. Bien qu'il soit conseiller pour seulement quatre ans, une étude de la vie politique de Kolisnyk contribue à l'étude de l'histoire communiste dans plusieurs façons. Son mandat a été à peu près divisé en deux parties par l'introduction de l'idéologie de la troisième période. En tant que le seul représentant élu du parti communiste à ce moment-là, l'activité politique de Kolisnyk démontre les implications pratiques de ce changement de politique dramatique. Bien que la troisième période ait changé de façon radicale les politiques de Kolisnyk, plusieurs questions locales ont influencé ses politiques de façon remarquable. L'appartenance ethnique dans le parti et dans la circonscription de Kolisnyk a profondément touché à sa carrière. Cet article examine également les questions politiques poursuivies par les communistes au niveau municipal et la communauté communiste qui a favorisé l'entrée en fonction de Kolisnyk. En conséquence, cet examen de la carrière de William Kolisnyk en tant que conseiller municipal révèle l'importance des influences internationales ainsi que les réalités politiques de la communauté communiste de Winnipeg, les deux ayant contribué aux activités politiques de l'un des premiers communistes élus au Canada.

## ARTICLE

# A Communist in the Council Chambers: Communist Municipal Politics, Ethnicity, and the Career of William Kolisnyk

**Stefan Epp**

IN NOVEMBER 1926, WINNIPEG'S annual municipal election produced an unprecedented result. For one of the first times in North America, a candidate running on the ticket of the Communist Party was elected to public office. As far away as New York, communist newspapers reported the victory of William Kolisnyk, the communist candidate for alderman in Ward Three.<sup>1</sup> Although his aldermanic career would last only four years, Kolisnyk's life in public office illuminates several intriguing aspects of communist history. First, since his term was split by the introduction of Third Period ideology to the Communist Party, his career demonstrates practical shifts that resulted from the change in party line. Meanwhile, Kolisnyk's career also reveals pragmatic political decision making and an attention to grassroots issues not always associated with Third Period communism. Secondly, the seemingly conflict-prone Kolisnyk highlights ethnic divisions within the Party and the role of ethnicity in the relationship between communists and other parties on the left. Finally, Kolisnyk's election (and his re-election in 1928) demonstrates the tremendous effort that communists in Winnipeg put into municipal politics. For these reasons, this brief, yet fascinating, career is worthy of historical study.

The historical study of communist parties around the world, particularly during the Third Period, has focused on the relationship between national

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1. *Obu Bulletin*, 9 December 1926. The newspaper cited was *Freiheit*. The claim was repeated at the time and later. See Leslie Morris, *Look on Canada Now: Selected Writings of Leslie Morris, 1923–1964* (Toronto 1970), 7; "Bill Kolisnyk Honored: A Staunch Fighter," *Pacific Tribune* found in William Kolisnyk RCMP File 117-89-39, 236. See also Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto 1975), 136.

parties and the Soviet Union. Historians have largely divided into two schools: traditionalists who stress centralized, Soviet domination or influence over party structures around the world and revisionists who emphasize grassroots control or local autonomy from higher levels of the party hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> This paper will demonstrate, as traditionalists argue, that radical political shifts dictated by the Comintern were carefully followed by local communists in Winnipeg. William Kolisnyk accepted and implemented the political philosophy of an international communist movement. Yet, while the paper proposes that decisions made internationally had a tremendous impact on local communist politics, it also suggests that communism was played out in local settings and adjusted to the peculiarities of local dynamics. Issues of ethnic relations, personality conflicts, and local political concerns played important roles in shaping William Kolisnyk's career and should not be dismissed as unimportant components in the historical study of communism.

This paper is set during a period of profound change within the Communist Party. In 1929, communists around the world accepted a radical shift in their political outlook known as the Third Period. Party discipline, revolutionary zeal, and the rejection of non-communist allies were all features of Third Period thought. Communists expected that capitalism was going to experience an imminent catastrophic collapse because the ability of capitalist nations to produce goods was growing, while their markets were not. This, it was suggested, would lead to wars, unemployment, and an increasingly restless proletariat resulting in the eventual overthrow of the capitalist system by the working-class under the leadership of a Communist Party.<sup>3</sup>

2. The "traditionalist" school is exemplified by such works as Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia, The Formative Years* (New York: Viking Press, 1960); William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919–1929* (Toronto 1968); John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "Nina Ponomareva's Hats: The New Revisionism, the Communist International, and the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–1930," *Labour/Le Travail* 49 (Spring 2002), 147–87. "Revisionist" historiography includes works such as Paul Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists, 1936–1956* (Philadelphia 1982); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Chicago 1983); and Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots* (Chicago 2007). Other scholars have proposed alternatives to the traditional-revisionist dichotomy. For example, Bryan Palmer differentiates between Leninism and Stalinism, rejecting the notion of continuous Soviet domination but suggesting that communism under Stalinism became increasingly Moscow-oriented. See Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History* 2 (December 2003), 139–73. Others, such as Mark Solomon, have proposed that communists were "neither mindless dupes of the Soviet-dominated Comintern nor the new historians' wily, independent radicals clearly sidestepping external directives." See: Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African-Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson 1998), xxiii.

3. Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke 1996), 69; *The Worker*, 18 August 1928; "Report of the Sixth National Convention of the Communist Party of Canada," Library Archives of Canada (hereafter LAC), Communist Party of Canada Fonds, 31 May 1929–7 June 1929, Reel M7380, 22; Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto

*The Worker*, the official newspaper of the CPC, noted that the Third Period represented “a turning point in the history of our party in bringing to a close a period of tolerance and conciliation towards right, opportunist tendencies, and outlining a policy of decisive struggle against such tendencies in our Party.”<sup>4</sup> One practical result of the Third Period was that the Communist Party was instructed to cease cooperating with social democratic parties and mainstream trade unions in order that they could “lead the masses to a frontal assault on the bourgeois state.”<sup>5</sup> Members who did not fervently accept Third Period ideology were expelled from the Party. District and national conventions adopted the “correct Leninist line” which they believed would lead to the creation of a truly revolutionary party.<sup>6</sup> With these pronouncements of loyalty to the Comintern and the CPC, the Third Period was firmly entrenched within the Party, and remained so until 1935, when the Comintern would once again radically change its official doctrine.

## Winnipeg Municipal Politics

Winnipeg municipal politics in the 1920s and 1930s were defined by the divisions exposed by the General Strike of 1919. Both Ed Rea and Brian McKillop have discussed how the legacy of the strike was played out in an ongoing feud on city council between “Citizens” and “Socialists.”<sup>7</sup> Winnipeggers recognized the political struggle within their city as a continuation of the strike fight. For example, General R.Y. Patterson, a local Conservative, proclaimed in a campaign speech that Winnipeg was a battleground in the fight between established institutions and socialists.<sup>8</sup> The conflict between the business-oriented, middle- and upper-class “Citizens” and the labour-oriented, working-class “Socialists” profoundly shaped every aspect of municipal politics during the 1920s and 1930s.

During the late 1920s, the political descendents of the Citizens’ Committee of One Thousand, the organization formed by the local business community to

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1988), 98 and 102.

4. *The Worker*, 12 October 1929. For an account of the Sixth Convention of the CPC, during which the Third Period was adopted by Canadian communists see Stewart Smith, *Comrades and Komsomolkas* (Toronto 1993), 120.

5. Executive Committee of the Communist International, *Capitalist Stabilization Has Ended: Theses and Resolutions of the Twelfth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International* (New York 1932), 14; “Sixth Comintern Congress: Theses and Program” in Albert Fried, ed., *Communism in America: A History In Documents* (New York 1997), 110.

6. *The Worker*, 1 June 1929.

7. J. E. Rea, *Parties and Power: An Analysis of Winnipeg City Council, 1919–1975* (Winnipeg 1976), 1; Brian McKillop, “The Socialist as Citizen: John Queen and the Mayoralty of Winnipeg, 1935,” *Manitoba Historical Society Transactions Series 3* (1973–4), 6.

8. *Winnipeg Free Press*, 10 November 1933.

fight the General Strike, were represented in local politics by the Civic Progress Association (CPA).<sup>9</sup> Not a political party per se, the CPA served as a loose coalition of Liberals and Conservatives that nominated a united slate of candidates to ensure that labour would be defeated and that business interests would be represented.<sup>10</sup> The most important thing a municipal government could do, according to the Citizens, was to run a business-like, efficient administration that maintained low tax rates and civic expenditures.<sup>11</sup>

Winnipeg's largest labour party was the Independent Labour Party (ILP). During the 1930s, 70 per cent of all ILP aldermen were born in Great Britain and, consequently, had been steeped in the socialist environment of British working-class politics before coming to Canada.<sup>12</sup> They advanced a British-style "ethical socialism" that proposed the establishment of a "cooperative commonwealth" to solve society's problems.<sup>13</sup> Prominent ILPer John Queen explained that he was "interested in the organization of all the forces of society for better living for the people: not by individual, but by organized effort."<sup>14</sup> Against the Citizen belief that the city was best run as a business, the ILP argued that the municipal government existed to serve the needs of the people, not money.

The Communist Party in Winnipeg was centred in the North End, a working-class neighbourhood with a large number of recent immigrants. Although the CPC regularly launched membership campaigns in the central and southern regions of the city, these had little success.<sup>15</sup> The ethnic makeup of the

9. Throughout the paper, the terms Citizens and CPA are used interchangeably and have the same meaning.

10. Stanley Knowles, interview with Brian McKillop, 14 June 1969, University of Manitoba Archives (UMA) Ed Rea Collection, MSS 73, Box 1 File 1; "Report Re Manitoba Provincial Elections – 1927: Communist Activities," 18 June 1927, Jacob Penner RCMP File 117-89-57 Supp. H, 192; *Winnipeg Tribune*, 19 November 1935.

11. For example, the business tax in Winnipeg in 1932 was 6.11 per cent, compared with 19.24 per cent in Montreal, 13.27 per cent in Toronto, and 11.16 per cent in Ottawa. Indeed, the tax assessment of a large hotel in Winnipeg was only a quarter larger than the tax assessed on a small home. See Brian McKillop, "Citizen as Socialist: The Ethos of Political Winnipeg, 1919–1935," M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1970, 220; *Winnipeg Free Press*, 21 November 1935.

12. Rea, *Parties and Power*, 2–3. Indeed, no ILPer of German, Polish, or Ukrainian descent was elected to city council between 1919 and 1945, despite the prominence of these nationalities in some neighbourhoods.

13. McKillop, "Citizen as Socialist," 110; Harry Gutkin and Mildred Gutkin, *Profiles in Dissent: The Shaping of Radical Thought in the Canadian West* (Edmonton 1997), 345. Both McKillop and the Gutkins suggest that the ILP advanced a socialism influenced more by J.S. Mill than Karl Marx.

14. *Winnipeg Free Press*, 23 November 1934.

15. "Resolution on the Situation and Tasks of the P. in District No. 7, 1933," LAC C1 Fonds, Reel K286, File 152, 3; "Letter from Charlie to Sam," 22 October 1931, LAC C1 Fonds, Reel K281, File 121.

Party in Winnipeg was similar to that of the party nationally because the vast majority of members were non-English immigrants. Of the 415 members reported in 1934, 236 were Ukrainian while only 32 were English, Canadian, French, or Irish.<sup>16</sup> The party was nearly 90 per cent male and over half of its members were unemployed.<sup>17</sup> Of those who were employed, most were labourers, although there were several members who worked for the railroads. Most recruits were below 30 years of age, and nearly all were younger than 40.<sup>18</sup> The average Winnipeg communist, therefore, was a young, unemployed Ukrainian male, living in the city's poorest working-class neighbourhood, the North End.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, Winnipeg CPC members established or participated in a variety of economic and cultural organizations such as cooperative dairies, lumberyards, ethnic associations, athletic clubs, choirs, and theatre groups.<sup>20</sup> An array of national mass organizations such as the Canadian Labour Defence League, Young Communist League, and National Unemployed Workers Association were established in the city. Other organizations such as the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association included many members who were sympathetic to communist politics, even if they were not card-carrying party members. Reports throughout the 1920s and 1930s suggest that many Winnipeggers were willing to join communist demonstrations. For example, on the International Day Against Unemployment in 1931, 12,000 Winnipeggers marched the streets.<sup>21</sup> Annual May Day parades attracted thousands of

16. "Membership Analysis, Winnipeg," 22 April 1934, LAC C1 Fonds, Reel K284, File 140. While these statistics are from a few years after Kolisnyk's career on council ended, they appear to be a fair representation of the Winnipeg communist community during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Interestingly, in the party's document outlining its membership, the English, Canadian, French, and Irish ethnicities were underlined. The Party routinely attempted to attract more Anglo-Saxon members, with seemingly mixed success. While the CPC in Winnipeg was predominantly Ukrainian, Ukrainians only composed 8.4 per cent of the city's total population. See Alan J. Artibise, "Patterns of Population Growth and Ethnic Relationships in Winnipeg, 1874–1974," *Histoire sociale – Social History* (November 1976), 305. Other ethnic groups with numerous Party members included 30 Poles, 28 Russians, 18 Scandinavians, 18 Jews, and 17 Germans. There were also a handful of Hungarians, Lithuanians, Scots, Yugoslavians, Icelanders, Finns, Austrians, and Italians.

17. "Membership Analysis, Winnipeg," 22 April 1934, LAC C1 Fonds, Reel K284, File 140. Of the 415 members, 226 were unemployed and only 52 were women.

18. "District No. 7 Report, 1935" LAC C1 Fonds, Reel K290, File 180; Interview with Andrew Bilecki by Doug Smith, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Doug Smith Collection, C407.

19. This was not an atypical party composition among North American communists. For example, in her study on the CPUSA in Chicago, Randi Storch found that local communist membership in Chicago was "overwhelmingly male, unemployed, proletarian, and ethnic." See Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots* (Chicago 2007), 63.

20. Doug Smith, *Joe Zuken: Citizen and Socialist* (Toronto 1990), 39.

21. Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada*, 77. In comparison, 5000 marchers attended rallies in both Montreal and Vancouver.

workers, while speeches in Market Square regularly drew hundreds or thousands of listeners. Certainly there was an active communist base in the city, whether visible in the Workers' and Farmers' Cooperative, May Day parades, ethnic clubs, or in associations for the unemployed.

## William Kolisnyk

William Kolisnyk was born in western Ukraine in 1887 and immigrated to Canada in 1898. His first experience with labour activism, claimed a CPC tribute, came as the spokesperson for a group of soft-drink bottling workers at the age of 14.<sup>22</sup> He was instrumental in the establishment of a branch of the Social Democratic Party in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba before moving to Winnipeg in 1910 where he quickly became involved in the Ukrainian radical community. Kolisnyk's first taste of electoral politics came in 1922, when he ran for the Workers' Party of Canada in the District of St. Clements, Manitoba.<sup>23</sup> He was a frequent speaker at communist gatherings, and has been described as one of the "community's best orators."<sup>24</sup> Kolisnyk earned a living by establishing a bicycle shop on Main Street which, according to the RCMP, was "quite prosperous."<sup>25</sup> Kolisnyk, therefore, was a small businessman rather than a worker, a fact that caused some tension among party members.

Despite Kolisnyk's business background, James Mochoruk has described him as a man with "impeccable radical credentials."<sup>26</sup> One of Kolisnyk's most significant accomplishments was helping to found and manage the Workers' and Farmers' Cooperative Association, an important North End institution, in 1928.<sup>27</sup> Kolisnyk argued that a cooperative would help workers struggle against "unmerciful capitalism" while providing a vital service to meet the needs of the North End community.<sup>28</sup> The organization quickly became a success, selling \$20,000 of fuel in its first year alone. The Cooperative eventually branched out into dairy operations. Under Kolisnyk's management, the Cooperative achieved a substantial membership, including many non-communists, and

22. "Bill Kolisnyk Honored: A Staunch Fighter," *Pacific Tribune* found in William Kolisnyk RCMP File 117-89-39, 236.

23. "Brief for the Advisory Committee," 9 September 1941, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 126.

24. James Mochoruk, *The People's Co-op: The Life and Times of a North End Institution* (Halifax 2000), 16.

25. "Report Re Communist Party of Canada – Winnipeg," 6 December 1926, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 45.

26. Mochoruk, *The People's Co-op*, 9.

27. William Kolisnyk, "In Canada Since the Spring of 1898," *Marxist Review* 18 (January–February 1961), 38 and 40.

28. Mochoruk, *The People's Co-op*, 16.

was known within the community for its fair business practices and quality products.<sup>29</sup>

Kolisnyk's rise in the local structure of the CPC came as a result of his work within the Ukrainian community. In 1917, he undertook a fundraising tour in eastern Canada for the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple Association. As early as 1921, the RCMP recorded speeches made by Kolisnyk for Ukrainian Labour Temple events.<sup>30</sup> By 1924, he was the Secretary of the Communist Party Ukrainian Branch in Winnipeg.<sup>31</sup> The RCMP reported in 1927 that "Kolisnyk has been very active recently in giving his time and advice to Ukrainian workers who have asked for some, in this way thinking to acquire some degree of popularity."<sup>32</sup> He also was a member of the National Ukrainian Party Fraction Bureau and visited numerous camps, mines, and communities across Manitoba in that capacity.<sup>33</sup> Through these connections, Kolisnyk developed a natural constituency for his political career, as he continued to be tremendously influential among Ukrainian communists until the mid-1930s.

## Election Campaigns and Ethnicity

Communists began running candidates in Winnipeg's Ward Three aldermanic elections in 1923. In that year, Matthew Popovich, another prominent Ukrainian communist, ran for the CPC as an aldermanic candidate. He would run again in 1924 and 1925, winning a high of 17.5 per cent of first choice votes in Ward Three in 1925. After Popovich withdrew his candidacy prior to the 1926 campaign, Kolisnyk was selected in his place, largely because of his popularity in the Ukrainian community. In Kolisnyk's first election victory, he won 18.2 per cent of first choice votes, winning the third of three available aldermanic seats after numerous rounds of vote redistribution.<sup>34</sup>

Kolisnyk was elected on a nine-point platform summarized by the slogan "Shall the Workers or Bankers Rule?"<sup>35</sup> The program focused on the right of civic employees to organize in unions (which had been taken away after the

29. Mochoruk, *The People's Co-op*, 26.

30. "Brief for the Advisory Committee," 9 September 1941, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 126.

31. "William N. Kolisnyk," William Kolisnyk RCMP file, 117-89-39, 13.

32. "Report Re 'Ukrainian Labour News' – Winnipeg," 4 March 1927, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 50.

33. "Brief for the Advisory Committee," 9 September 1941, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 126.

34. Under Winnipeg's system of voting, candidates were ranked in order of preference and three were elected per ward. After first choice ballots were counted, the candidate receiving the least votes was removed and their second place votes were then distributed.

35. *The Worker*, 11 December 1926.



General Strike); full time work for all unemployed workers or the equivalent in relief; municipal ownership of all public utilities; the removal of tax exemptions for corporations; the establishment of universal franchise (rather than a property-based voting system) for municipal elections and referendums; and a reduction in the tax rate for working-class houses.<sup>36</sup> On the surface, these policies, although radical, were certainly not revolutionary. As the *OBu Bulletin* observed sarcastically a year later, the most “revolutionary” CPC policy in the election was a five-cent street car fare.<sup>37</sup> These policies, a product of the pre-Third Period CPC, demonstrated a pragmatic focus on the immediate needs of workers.

Prior to the Third Period, CPC election materials encouraged Party supporters to vote for ILP mayoral candidates and to give their second choice aldermanic votes to ILP candidates. In 1927, for example, a campaign newspaper explained that the “main thing is the defeat of bourgeois candidates” and that voters should support a “solid labour ticket,” albeit with communist candidates ranked first.<sup>38</sup> For the mayoralty race that year, the paper advised that “it is the duty of the workers to oust (Dan) McLean (the Citizen candidate), smash the united efforts of the Liberals and Conservatives to defeat Labour and elect (John) Queen as mayor over the heads of the reactionary capitalist parties.”<sup>39</sup> Prior to the Third Period, therefore, it seems that it was acceptable for communists to support ILP candidates. Such a stance would be considered heretical only two years later.

The ILP had a different impression of communist electoral tactics. During the same election year as highlighted above, for example, supporters of communist aldermanic candidate Leslie Morris had given more second choice votes to J. F. Palmer, the Citizen candidate, than to J. A. Cherniak of the ILP, thus ensuring Palmer’s election. It is not clear why communists were instructed to support one ILP candidate, but contributed to the defeat of another. The *Weekly News* declared that “this so-called Simon pure working-class party who prate no truck or truckle with the boss, have a lot of explaining to do as a result of the transfers of the ballot.”<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the ILP was annoyed with the communists’ tendency to only focus on the ILP rather than their Citizen opponents. The *OBu Bulletin* described how, after the communists elected Kolisnyk, “the message went out to the world that the Communist Party had defeated the Independent Labour Party in Winnipeg. They did not say

36. *The Worker*, 13 November 1926.

37. *OBu Bulletin*, 1 December 1927.

38. *Communist Party of Canada Election Bulletin No. 2* (1927), LAC, A.A. Heaps Fonds, Reel H2271.

39. *Communist Party of Canada Election Bulletin No. 2* (1927), LAC, A.A. Heaps Fonds, Reel H2271.

40. *Weekly News*, 2 December 1927.

a word about defeating a capitalist opponent.<sup>41</sup> The ILP, naturally, was concerned about the competition for working-class affiliation from a party whose ideology it so despised. Their rivalry with the communists certainly involved ideology, but much of their dislike was likely based on simple mathematics: if communists were elected, ILPers were not.

The campaign to get Kolisnyk elected involved much of the Party's membership. Young Pioneers contributed by distributing campaign bulletins throughout the North End. According to *The Worker*, over twelve thousand flyers were distributed in English, while leaflets were also published in several other languages to attract support from the numerous ethnic groups in the ward.<sup>42</sup> The immigrant population of the North End played a significant role in the Party's election strategy. Jewish, Polish, German, and Ukrainian sub-committees were formed to carry out election work among the major language groups.<sup>43</sup> The RCMP noted that Kolisnyk's election campaign was being handled in a "very systematic and businesslike manner," as he was the only candidate to appeal to foreigners in their own language.<sup>44</sup> Unlike the Citizens or the ILP, the CPC was not dominated by people of British descent and recognized the importance of appealing to the North End's numerous immigrant communities.

The ILP and its supporters vehemently opposed communists in municipal elections, particularly denouncing the appeal they had among Eastern European immigrants. The *OBU Bulletin* wrote that the communists were "opportunists of the first water" who were "exploiting the sentiment of two or three nationalist groups."<sup>45</sup> They suggested that communists had "no knowledge of Canadian conditions, Canadian problems, or the working class

41. *OBU Bulletin*, 1 December 1927.

42. For example, in a 1935 publication, the *North Winnipeg Elector*, instructions on how to vote were given in five languages: English, German, Ukrainian, Polish, and Hebrew. See *North Winnipeg Elector*, 12 October 1935, located in Communist Party of Canada – Manitoba Archives, Election Bulletins Scrapbook, 1930–1935, no accession number.

43. *The Worker*, 13 November 1926; *The Worker*, 11 December 1926; *The Worker*, 27 November 1926.

44. "Report Re: Communist Party of Canada – Polish Group – Winnipeg," 22 November 1926, in Communist Party of Canada – Winnipeg, RCMP File 117-91-94, 12. An interesting example of the ways that the CPC appealed to ethnic groups as part of their municipal election campaign is illustrated in an article written in the Communists' election press, *The Workers' Vanguard*. In a paper dedicated to the municipal election effort, an article on the Middle East was included that affirmed the Communists' support for self-determination for both the Jewish and Palestinian people. While seemingly out of place in a municipal election campaign, it does indicate the importance the Party placed on appealing to ethnic groups. See "To The Jewish Workers of Winnipeg," *The Worker's Vanguard*, November 1929, located in LAC, A.A. Heaps Fonds, MG27 III C7, Reel H2271.

45. *OBU Bulletin*, 17 November 1927.

movement in this country."<sup>46</sup> Thus, the communists were cast by their labour opponents as foreigners unfamiliar with local conditions who could only appeal to the nationalistic tendencies of immigrants.

The ILP's newspaper, the *Weekly News*, minimized the significance of the Communist victory. It suggested that, "the number of North Winnipeg voters who understand the communist philosophy and desire to see the communist platform carried out in Winnipeg, or Western Canada, are [sic] negligible."<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the paper declared that "everybody is saying that Mr. Kolisnyk was elected to the City Council not by a communist vote, but by a nationalist vote."<sup>48</sup> An RCMP investigator came to a similar conclusion, reporting that campaign literature published by the Ukrainian Sub-election Committee of the CPC emphasized the importance of electing a Ukrainian worker to council, although it should be noted that both the ILP and RCMP were opponents of the communists and had an interest in portraying them as foreign.<sup>49</sup>

Communists dismissed allegations of nationalist voting and countered that Kolisnyk's election demonstrated that the workers were tired of the ILP's reformist tactics and desired a more radical alternative. *The Worker* commended the Winnipeg comrades for placing "the revolutionary party on the parliamentary map."<sup>50</sup> Although they had spent much of their campaign attempting to reach out to immigrant voters, communists did not believe that Kolisnyk's nationality was the reason for his victory. Instead, the CPC argued that Kolisnyk secured his aldermanic seat because his message was reaching the working class. No longer isolated figures on the margins of municipal politics, communists were now able to play a more significant role, both in elections and on council.

The issue of ethnicity continued to be a point of tension between the ILP and the communists. While the ILP and its allies accused the communists of merely appealing to nationalistic sympathies in their 1926 election victory, communists suggested that the ILP was itself engaging in such activities. In 1927, the CPC accused the ILP of using an "old electioneering trick of the bosses" when they ran Stanley Bobiowski as an aldermanic candidate in Ward Three. The communists suggested that this merely served to split the Ukrainian vote and to "play on the national feelings of the Ukrainian workers in Ward Three." They called upon "the class-conscious workers of Ward Three to vote for our men, not as members of any race but as Communist Party candidates voicing

46. *OBV Bulletin*, 1 December 1927.

47. *Weekly News*, 10 December 1926.

48. *Weekly News*, 10 December 1926.

49. "Report Re: Communist Party of Canada – Polish Group – Winnipeg," 22 November 1926, Communist Party of Canada – Winnipeg RCMP File 117-91-94, p. 12.

50. *The Worker*, 10 December 1927.

the Communist Party program.”<sup>51</sup> Yet by making the accusation that the ILP was targeting the Ukrainian vote, the communists perhaps demonstrated that they were hoping to benefit from national sentiments by running their own Ukrainian candidates. The fact that communists recognized that a second Ukrainian candidate would split the Ukrainian vote suggests that they had counted on it as their own.

If the ILP’s strategy was indeed to capture enough Ukrainian votes to win an aldermanic seat, the plan failed miserably. Bobiowski won slightly less than ten per cent of the first count vote (1,244 votes). If the purpose, however, was solely to split enough Ukrainian votes away from the communist candidate, Matthew Popovich, to ensure the election of the two other ILP candidates, the ploy succeeded as Popovich missed out on election by approximately 500 votes. This outcome demonstrates the intersection of ethnicity with politics in Winnipeg’s North End. While it is impossible to determine the relative importance of class politics in the mind of Winnipeg voters, local politicians believed that ethnicity was a significant factor in the political decision making of the immigrant community.<sup>52</sup>

Although the Communist Party often fretted over the lack of Anglo-Saxon members in its midst, the CPC attacked the relationship of the ILP to Eastern European ethnic groups. They condemned it for being Anglo-centric and ignoring the needs of the immigrants that made up much of the North End’s population. In 1929, for example, the Party’s election newspaper declared:

The ILP, professedly internationalist, but having a PATRONIZING attitude to foreign-born workers, has one member within its ranks who speaks for the chauvinist “superiority” of the nobly-born Anglo-Saxon. Recently a session of the Improvements Committee of the City Council was held to investigate the discharge of some workers and charges against one of the city foremen. Alderman Flye made the statement at this meeting that “THE SOONER THEY FIRE THESE FOREIGNERS THE BETTER IT WILL BE!”<sup>53</sup>

Despite the importance that the Party placed on the recruitment of Anglo-Saxon workers and its attempts to expand the Party organization beyond the confines of North Winnipeg’s immigrant communities, the CPC also attempted

51. *Communist Party of Canada Election Bulletin No. 2* (1927), LAC, A.A. Heaps Fonds, Reel H2271. Four years later, the local election paper of the CPC made a similar comment, remarking that “whatever your racial origin may be, the fact that you are a member of the working class is the decisive factor. No one gets higher wages or better unemployment relief because of his nationality. Workers of all nationalities – stick together.” See *The Workers Vanguard*, 17 November 1931.

52. Work done by Nelson Wiseman and K.W. Taylor analyzes the relationship between ethnic and class factors in Winnipeg voting records. Their work, which studies elections beginning only in 1945, suggests that ethnic factors were subservient to class factors. See Nelson Wiseman and K.W. Taylor, “Ethnic vs. Class Voting: The Case of Winnipeg, 1945,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 2 (June 1974), 314–28.

53. *The Workers’ Vanguard*, November 1929.

to position itself as the natural home of radicalism among Eastern Europeans and as the protector of immigrants.

Ethnicity was not only an issue between the ILP and CPC, but also within the Communist Party itself. In particular, there appear to have been regular squabbles between the Ukrainian and Jewish branches of the Party in Winnipeg. In 1924, the RCMP reported that the Jewish Branch had "taken a disinterested view on Party activities" when Matthew Popovich was chosen as the CPC's municipal candidate that year.<sup>54</sup> After Kolisnyk's victory, an RCMP informant reported that "the victory of Kolisnyk is all the more pleasing to the radical Ukrainian element at the Ukrainian Labour Temple by reason that his candidature was opposed by the Jewish section of the Communist Party."<sup>55</sup> Even though there were many close connections among radical Jews and Ukrainians in Winnipeg (for example, Matthew Popovich's wife was Jewish), there was reportedly tension between the two groups within the CPC.

Other non-Ukrainians also had doubts about Kolisnyk. In a nomination race in 1928 between Thomas Ewen and Kolisnyk, the latter (the incumbent at the time) only won by eleven votes to ten. Kolisnyk's support came from the local Ukrainian community. Many non-Ukrainian members felt that Kolisnyk was "outwitted by the ILP" and were concerned that he was a businessman rather than a worker.<sup>56</sup> Dan Holmes went as far as to suggest that "with such a representative on the City Council, the 'Party' is being discredited on every move [Kolisnyk] makes." He complained that, "for all we tried to remedy the situation, we were always confronted with the groups of Ukrainian comrades."<sup>57</sup> As Kolisnyk was being portrayed as a blundering fool by non-Ukrainian communists, the *Ukrainian Labour News* regularly published letters to the editor highlighting how Kolisnyk assisted local workers. According to one, sent by D. Havrylenko, "Alderman Kolisnyk is a true and sincere helper in working men's matters."<sup>58</sup> There was seemingly a significant difference of opinion regarding Kolisnyk's effectiveness in his position, and this division seems to have been split along ethnic lines.

The debate within the Party in Winnipeg grew to the point that the national Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the Communist Party considered intervening to end the turmoil. After Kolisnyk was narrowly nominated over Ewen,

54. "Report Re Civic Elections – Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1924, Communist Party of Canada Activities," 29 November 1924, Matthew Popovich RCMP File 117-91-98, 103.

55. "Minutes of the Political Committee," 15 October 1928, LAC CPC Files, Reel M7380; "Report Re Communist Party of Canada – Winnipeg, Man., W. N. Kolisnyk – Candidate for Alderman – Winnipeg Civic Election – 1926," William Kolisnyk RCMP File 117-89-39, 43.

56. "Minutes of the Political Committee," 15 October 1928, LAC CPC Fonds, MG28-IV4, Reel M7380.

57. Letter from Dan Holmes to Tim Buck, 21 August 1929, LAC, CPC Fonds, Reel M7376.

58. "Report Re 'Ukrainian Labour News' – Winnipeg," 4 March 1927, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 50.

the CEC reviewed the events that had transpired in Winnipeg. It was explained that “considerable internal Party dissent” had arisen out of the nomination process. On one side, Ukrainian communists claimed that no candidate other than Kolisnyk would stand a chance of winning. It was also suggested that withdrawing Kolisnyk would strengthen anti-communist Ukrainians in Winnipeg. Meanwhile, non-Ukrainians argued that Kolisnyk was not the most able communist to hold the post of alderman. The CEC sided with the Ukrainians of Winnipeg, supporting the nomination of Kolisnyk by a vote of seven to one. They proceeded to condemn those who had suggested that they would not support Kolisnyk fully during the election campaign. This, the CEC explained, “must be combated and condemned. It could not be tolerated in the Party.”<sup>59</sup>

It is not clear what to make of the rivalries between the ethnic groups in the Party. The Communist Party, after all, was not supposed to be a federal party, but one that practiced democratic centralism. Perhaps in a city whose communist community was dominated by a tight-knit group from a particular ethnicity, it was only natural that jealousies and tensions should arise. At the very least, this demonstrates that there was significant tension between the various ethnic groups in the Party in Winnipeg. It also indicates that some groups in the city were willing to challenge decisions of the Party regarding their municipal candidate. Some party members appear to have been more interested in internal squabbles than carrying out the Party’s decisions. Lita-Rose Betcherman, however, demonstrates that inner-Party divisions were kept carefully hidden from the outside world, so Kolisnyk appeared to most of the city to be the uncontested communist candidate.<sup>60</sup> The issue of ethnicity continued to plague the party for many years. In 1934, the Ukrainian Farmer Labour Temple Association (ULFTA) wanted to put forward Kolisnyk or another leading member of their organization as the Communist candidate, but it was felt that such a candidate would have lost “owing to nationalistic jealousy.”<sup>61</sup>

59. “Minutes of the Political Committee,” 15 October 1928, LAC, Fonds, MG28-IV4, Reel M7380.

60. Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band* (Ottawa, 1982), 99.

61. Communist Party of Canada – Winnipeg RCMP File 117-91-67, 984. The ULFTA was formed in 1918 and had its most significant presence in Winnipeg due to the large number of Ukrainians in the city. The relationship between the ULFTA and the CPC was close, and numerous leaders of the ULFTA (such as Matthew Popovich and John Navis) became leaders in the Party as well. Nevertheless, there remained tensions between the ULFTA and the Party over the relationship of ethnicity to the class struggle. See Joan Sangster, “*Robitnytsia*, Ukrainian Communists, and the ‘Porcupinism’ Debate: Reassessing Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Early Canadian Communism, 1922–1930,” *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (Fall 2005), 56.

## Kolisnyk in Office

Once they had succeeded in electing an alderman, communists had to determine what his role would be. *The Worker* proposed that Kolisnyk had the double task of “exposing the reformist tactics of the ILP and fighting the bosses’ aldermen.”<sup>62</sup> It was further suggested that Kolisnyk was to vote with the ILP while providing a “Communist interpretation” in Council debates.<sup>63</sup> The latter was obviously written before the Third Period, as it publicly endorsed cooperation on council between the ILP and the communists. Kolisnyk was the visible representative of the Communist Party and was supposed to carry out the Party line in municipal politics. As a member of the Party, his role on council was linked to the revolutionary struggles of the CPC outside the aldermanic chamber, working alongside mass organizations and bringing their causes before City Council.

Why were communists involved in municipal political campaigns in the first place? Were they falling into the “trap of parliamentarism” that they so despised? Communists suggested that municipal council was not a place for merely debating trivial local issues, but was part of the broader class struggle. J. Naviziwsky, the manager of the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Publishing Association, argued that the Communist Party was “not sending its representatives to city council because it wanted a new sidewalk, but for the definite purpose of class fighting.” Kolisnyk added that “we use the civic election campaigns for propaganda.”<sup>64</sup> Elections offered a venue for communists to access the media, gain the attention of working class voters throughout the city, and provided an opportunity to “draw native elements into the Party,” thus solving one of the Party’s greatest perceived problems, the lack of “Canadian” members.<sup>65</sup> For communists, elections were often seen as many previous generations of leftists had regarded them: an excellent opportunity for propagandizing among the masses.

Clearly the proletarian revolution could not come about through municipal reforms. Yet at the same time, such immediate reforms were not altogether ignored. A year after Kolisnyk’s defeat, the CPC acknowledged that it was proper that the “Communist Party program in these elections is composed of the immediate and pressing demands of the masses” even if the ultimate goal was the “abolition of capitalism and the rule of the workers.”<sup>66</sup> As will be seen, Kolisnyk’s activities reflect a similar philosophy. Immediate and practical

62. *The Worker*, 11 December 1926.

63. *The Worker*, 12 February 1927.

64. *Manitoba Free Press*, 16 November 1929.

65. “Bulletin and Directives on Building Plan for District Seven,” LAC, C1 Fonds, Reel K284, File 140, 3.

66. “Program of the Communist Party for the Municipal Elections of 1931,” LAC, C1 Fonds, Reel K282, File 125, 4.

reforms were an important component of his activity, along with more revolutionary stances. Therefore, communist campaigns cannot merely be dismissed as propaganda exercises. While the election of alderman was not the desired revolution, communists seemed willing to seek out immediate reforms along the way.

An interview with Kolisnyk shortly after his election suggests that he had a different interpretation than the rest of the party as to what his role on council was to be. He declared that he was “in the council as an alderman. I have the interests of the city at heart as much as anyone, and I will do my best for the city as a whole.” He went on to say, “it is senseless to suppose I would ignore the general affairs of the city and narrow my activities to the particular demands of the working class only. I have friends in all classes and get along very well with people directly opposed to me politically and economically.” Kolisnyk also explained that the Communist Party did not believe in the use of force to bring about revolution and denied that the Soviet Union controlled or financed the CPC.<sup>67</sup> Rather than being the unequivocal voice of the working class, Kolisnyk presented himself as a representative of numerous interests within the city. The uncompromising class politics that many associated with communists were obviously tempered, in 1926, by a streak of political pragmatism.

Kolisnyk’s interview statements were not received well by fellow communists. The RCMP reported that Kolisnyk was immediately ordered to appear before a Communist Party committee composed of John Navis, Leslie Morris, J.W. Esselwein, and Dan Holmes. Leslie Morris visited the *Free Press* reporter, who showed him the longhand and shorthand notes from the interview to verify his account. Morris reported to John Esselwein that the incident “must be kept mum” and that “in the future, we will have to guard (Kolisnyk) closely from taking such false steps in this direction.”<sup>68</sup> Kolisnyk was commanded to immediately retract his interview and was reminded of his role as the Party’s representative.<sup>69</sup> As the public face of the CPC in Winnipeg, Kolisnyk was expected to be a close adherent to the Party line, not an independent spokesperson. Party discipline was a fact of life in the CPC, and one that would not be changed by an electoral victory. Indeed, a year into Kolisnyk’s first term as alderman, the CPC’s election bulletin explained that “he was responsible to the Party all through. He reported regularly upon his activities therein. He was

67. Quoted in *OBV Bulletin*, 9 December 1926.

68. Letter from Leslie Morris to J.W. Esselwein, 2 December 1926, located in William Kolisnyk RCMP File 117-89-39, 46. Interestingly, Esselwein turned out to be an undercover RCMP investigator who infiltrated the CPC between its founding and 1928. He would later testify as the key witness in the 1931 trial of Tim Buck and seven other prominent communists. Indeed, several reports in Kolisnyk’s RCMP file were written by Esselwein. See Steve Hewitt, “Royal Canadian Mounted Spy: The Secret Life of John Leopold/Jack Esselwein,” *Intelligence and National Security* 15 (Spring 2000), 144–68.

69. “Brief for the Advisory Committee,” 9 September 1941, William Kolisnyk RCMP File 117-89-39, 125.



not a free-lance but a party member sent to the Council in the name of over two thousand workers.”<sup>70</sup> It would seem, according to this report at least, that Kolisnyk had learned his lesson and was properly carrying out the Party line.

A second controversy erupted after Kolisnyk backed out on a promise to give 40 per cent of his aldermanic salary to the Communist Party. He claimed that he needed the money to pay off his debts so could not afford to turn it over.<sup>71</sup> After significant debate within the Party, Kolisnyk successfully convinced members that he should be able to retain his entire salary. Nevertheless, seemingly compromising statements in Kolisnyk’s interview and the question of his aldermanic pay raised questions in the minds of many communists even before their comrade officially took office.

Despite the controversies that plagued Kolisnyk within the Party, he still played an instrumental role as the Party’s representative on city council. It is possible to centre William Kolisnyk’s career on city council around three main themes: transportation, labour rights, and unemployment relief. These topics were at the forefront of his politics both before and after the introduction of the Third Period. They were also issues on which he often found support from the ILP, despite the tension between the two parties. Most of all, these were matters that were tremendously important in the daily lives of people in the North End. Rather than being an isolated ultra-revolutionary, Kolisnyk’s efforts on municipal council were primarily based on the needs of the North End’s working-class community.

William Kolisnyk regularly brought transportation issues to the attention of council. The affordability and accessibility of transportation was important for North Enders because they relied on street cars and buses to travel to work in the downtown core. The ILP and Kolisnyk often cooperated on efforts to reduce street car fares to five cents per ride.<sup>72</sup> This effort failed as they were outnumbered by Citizen aldermen who opposed the plan. Kolisnyk also regularly

70. *Communist Party of Canada Election Bulletin No. 2* (1927), located in LAC, A.A. Heaps Fonds, MG27 111 C22, Reel H2271. Kolisnyk apparently learned his lesson well. In an article appearing in the *Workers Election Bulletin* written by Kolisnyk in 1932, he explained that “most... matters taken up by the city council are of a class character.” See *Workers Election Bulletin*, 22 November 1932, located in CPC-MA, Election Bulletins Scrapbook, 1930–1935.

71. “W.N. Kolisnyk – Winnipeg,” William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 9; “Brief for the Advisory Committee,” 9 September 1941, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 125. An aldermanic salary was not large as aldermen continued to work in their previous occupations in addition to serving on council. Interestingly, the ILP had dealt with a similar situation when they began to elect aldermen to city council. Many members of the ILP requested that elected representatives of the ILP give 10 per cent of their salary to the party. There was significant discussion over the issue in the party. Alderman John Blumberg, for example, contended that he was losing money by sitting as an alderman so he should not have to pay additional amounts to the party. In the end, the ILP decided not to mandate donations from its elected officials. See “Minute Book of the Centre Branch, Winnipeg,” 15 September 1921 and 13 October 1921, Independent Labour Party Fonds, PAM, MG14-D4.

72. *Weekly News*, 29 July 1927.

brought forward motions throughout his time on council asking that the city engineer investigate street car service in the North End or to request that the Winnipeg Electric Company (which had a monopoly on street cars and buses in the city) open new bus routes through his ward. Additionally, numerous requests were made for infrastructure programs on North End streets. This was by no means a revolutionary activity, but rather, an attempt to ensure that working-class people received proper transportation services.

A second topic that Kolisnyk frequently discussed on council, both before and during the Third Period, was working conditions for labourers. He used his platform as an alderman to bring forward the plight of workers, including those outside the city. Kolisnyk questioned the fate of agricultural labourers imported from Great Britain, those working in bush and mining camps, or those employed at the Slave Falls hydroelectric project.<sup>73</sup> Most of Kolisnyk's efforts on labour issues were on behalf of city workers. After the General Strike, municipal employees had been prohibited from unionizing. Kolisnyk demanded that they be allowed to unionize and took up their cause for increased wages and improved working conditions. He put forward several motions demanding increases in wages and increased holiday time for municipal employees. In 1927, Kolisnyk held a meeting attended by approximately 250 civic employees to determine what should be done to increase wages, which was seen as the first step towards the recreation of a civic employees union.<sup>74</sup> In an article in the *Marxist Review* many years later, Kolisnyk claimed to have encouraged workers to organize the Federation of Civic Employees (FCE).<sup>75</sup> *The Worker* was quick to take credit for the lifting of the "slave pact" in 1930, when a Citizen alderman put forward a motion to allow unionization. According to *The Worker*, this action was the result of pressure that the communists had exerted on the issue for a long time, most notably through their representative on council.<sup>76</sup>

Communist policy on municipal employees was actually not significantly different from that of the ILP. Both parties worked on many of the same issues in regards to working conditions and the right to organize, and both demanded the end of the slave pact. Cooperation on these issues did not change with the

73. In 1927 and 1928 Kolisnyk raised the fate of agricultural labourers, and suggested that the federal government should assist British workers (who had been imported to work on the harvest) to return to Britain. Additionally, he argued that no more labourers should be imported because unemployment in Canada was already high. See Motion 865, 8 July 1927, *City Council Minutes* (hereafter *CCM*), 712. The motion was put forward by Kolisnyk and seconded by John Blumberg and was sent to committee for further study. All city council minutes are available at the City of Winnipeg Archives; Motion 1134, 4 September 1928, *CCM*, 882; Motion 996, 7 August 1928, *CCM*, 777; Motion 208, 20 February 1928, *CCM*, 161; Motion 1041, 19 August 1929, *CCM*, 945.

74. *The Worker*; 12 March 1927.

75. Kolisnyk, "In Canada Since the Spring of 1898," 39.

76. *The Worker*; 13 September 1930.

onset of the Third Period. That communists such as Kolisnyk were willing to work on behalf of the organization of municipal employees shows remarkable flexibility for the Third Period, considering that the FCE worked closely with the OBU, enemies of the communists at the time. At a time when the communists were promoting the radical version of unionism offered by the Workers' Unity League, the decision to support an OBU-backed union for civic employees demonstrated an openness to pragmatism.

Kolisnyk also used his position on council to advance positions held by labour unions, both locally and internationally. In doing so, he demonstrated how communist aldermen could be involved with much broader labour struggles. For example, Kolisnyk seconded a motion put forward by ILP Alderman Durward that the city should show sympathy with Local 122 of the Machinists' Union.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Kolisnyk put forward a motion (seconded by Durward) calling on the city to boycott American La France and Foamite Corporation until a strike at that company had ended to the satisfaction of the strikers.<sup>78</sup> Despite the inability to pass motions on labour issues because of the large Citizen presence on Council, communists clearly did not conceive municipal politics as isolated from other areas of activism. Rather, a council seat was but one tool to further the communist program and advance the cause of organized labour.

William Kolisnyk often used his position as an alderman to complain about municipal expenditure on items that did not assist the working class. For example, he voted against motions to provide a luncheon for a visiting group of lawn bowlers from New Zealand and to give grants to the Manitoba Curling Association.<sup>79</sup> On one occasion, when Kolisnyk voted against a grant to the Curling Association for its annual bonspiel, he explained that the city should not be giving money to curling clubs while claiming that there was not enough money to support the unemployed.<sup>80</sup> In a similar move, Kolisnyk attempted to have the money spent on receiving distinguished visitors transferred to unemployment relief. While the sum of money itself was not large, only \$4,000, it was indicative of Kolisnyk's attempts to re-orient city politics towards workers and away from the bourgeoisie.

With the collapse of Winnipeg's economy at the onset of the Great Depression, unemployment became an increasingly important issue on City Council, and William Kolisnyk and the Communist Party played a pivotal role in this debate. With the possible exception of transportation, unemployment was the topic most frequently addressed by Kolisnyk on Council. He repeatedly put forward motions requesting that relief provisions be extended to more

77. Motion 1135, 4 September 1928, *CCM*, 882. The motion was defeated by ten votes to five.

78. Motion 1067, 20 August 1928, *CCM*, 839. The motion was ruled out of order.

79. Motion 1068, 20 August 1928, *CCM*, 839; Motion 366, 1 April 1929, *CCM*, 330.

80. *Weekly News*, 13 January 1928.

people and to have conditions improved for those already on it. ILP aldermen tended to be relatively reliable allies of the Communist Party on the issue of unemployment prior to the introduction of the Third Period. As late as 1928, the One Big Union, often a close ally of the ILP, coordinated a public meeting with the CPC on the issue of unemployment, attended by three thousand people (according to communist estimates) and sent a delegation, led by Kolisnyk, to meet with the Unemployment Committee of City Council.<sup>81</sup> A few weeks later, another joint rally was held. Marchers paraded from Market Square to the legislative building and were addressed by Tim Buck and William Kolisnyk from the CPC and John Queen and William Ivens from the ILP.<sup>82</sup>

Less than a year after holding the joint rally with the OBU, though, the introduction of the Third Period led to a dramatic shift in how the communists' unemployment policy was implemented. Communists became outspoken critics of the unemployment system, both inside and outside the council chamber, castigating the ILP for failing to protect the interests of the unemployed. In the summer of 1930, for example, a group of unemployed communists harassed ILP aldermen John Blumberg and Thomas Flye at City Hall.<sup>83</sup> Whereas Kolisnyk had once worked with ILP aldermen to put forward motions on unemployment, he now found that no ILP aldermen would second his motions on relief rates.<sup>84</sup>

The problem of unemployment and its effect on the relationship between the ILP and the communists devolved into an ugly dispute in May 1930. During a mass meeting in Market Square, Kolisnyk declared that James Simpkin, an ILP alderman and the chair of the Unemployment Relief Committee, was "instrumental and responsible for (the) unemployed being sent to the city wood yard as a relief measure."<sup>85</sup> Kolisnyk disliked the wood yard because he said it was a means test in disguise and was unfair to the unemployed. Simpkin and the ILP vehemently denied the charge. Simpkin claimed that Kolisnyk was "misrepresenting and he knew it! He was deliberately heroizing before his friends."<sup>86</sup> He suggested that Kolisnyk himself had supported the wood yard in committee and so was being hypocritical by denouncing it.<sup>87</sup> Citizen aldermen also rallied to Simpkin's defence. They reminded Kolisnyk that since Simpkin had been

81. *The Worker*, 3 May 1928.

82. *The Worker*, 19 May 1928.

83. *The Worker*, 7 June 1930.

84. *The Worker*, 4 October 1930.

85. *Manitoba Free Press*, 29 April 1930. See also *Weekly News*, 2 May 1930. The *Weekly News* had a different interpretation of events, suggesting that Kolisnyk said, "Alderman Simpkin favours wood-sawing ... and I protested in committee."

86. *Weekly News*, 2 May 1930.

87. *Manitoba Free Press*, 29 April 1930.

the chair of the committee, he would not have voted on the establishment of the wood yard as the chairman only voted in case of a tie.<sup>88</sup>

ILP aldermen had, by 1930, heard enough communist attacks. They had endured numerous verbal assaults from their revolutionary opponents, who had ceaselessly accused them of failing to assist the unemployed and bowing to the wishes of the bourgeoisie. The *Weekly News* explained that the incident marked “an important point in the campaign of gross and deliberate misrepresentation of the ILP aldermen which for several years has been almost the stock-in-trade of local communists.”<sup>89</sup> The ILP, with the support of the Citizen aldermen, demanded that Kolisnyk apologize to the Council for his statement. Since Kolisnyk refused to do so, the Council passed a motion that he should withdraw from the chamber. When he declined to leave voluntarily, Kolisnyk was escorted out by a constable.<sup>90</sup>

The saga did not end there. At the next council meeting Kolisnyk took up his regular seat but was asked once again to apologize to Simpkin. John Blumberg, a vocally anti-communist ILP alderman, called the Communist Party the “most autocratic” organization in existence and proposed that the Council should not be blamed for expelling Kolisnyk since the Communist Party had done much the same to Leon Trotsky.<sup>91</sup> A few Citizen aldermen tried to negotiate a truce between their warring colleagues, but the effort was to no avail. Since Kolisnyk continued to refuse to retract his statement or apologize to Simpkin he was again ordered to leave. When he did not leave the chambers, the constable was asked to remove him. This time Kolisnyk resisted, informing the constable that he would only go with him “if you’re stronger than I am.” The constable jerked Kolisnyk out of his seat and hauled him out of the Council Chamber.<sup>92</sup>

This incident marked, one could argue, the coming of age of the Third Period in Winnipeg. Kolisnyk, who had once cooperated with the ILP on unemployment issues, had now accused them of betraying the interests of the unemployed. Communists linked this incident on Council to their broader efforts. According to *The Worker*, over 1000 unemployed workers met in Market Square with the express purpose of protesting Kolisnyk’s removal.<sup>93</sup>

88. *Weekly News*, 2 May 1930.

89. *Weekly News*, 2 May 1930. ILP alderman John Blumberg, in attacking Kolisnyk’s alleged statement, said, “It is not the first time that he and his Communist friends have done this sort of thing. Kolisnyk also stated that the Labour members of council were behind the police force in using clubs at the parade last month. That was a lie.” See *Manitoba Free Press*, 29 April 1930.

90. Motion 497, 28 April 1930, *CCM*, 437.

91. *The Worker*, 24 May 1930.

92. *Manitoba Free Press*, 14 May 1930.

93. The number, of course, may be highly exaggerated although this is not necessarily important. Rather, what is interesting in this situation is the link between Kolisnyk’s role on Council and the broader mass organizations linked to the CPC. See *The Worker*, 3 May 1930.

Kolisnyk also used the incident as fodder for a May Day speech shortly after his expulsion. He declared that his ejection was a scheme of Ralph Webb and the “labour fakirs” to eliminate the communist voice on Council.<sup>94</sup> For the communists, the expulsion of their alderman served as a “clear verification” that the ILP were truly social fascists.<sup>95</sup>

Such denunciations, an integral part of Third Period communism, were nothing new to Winnipeg communists. In 1927, communist aldermanic candidates had referred to the ILP as “politically degenerate” and “continually bankrupt.”<sup>96</sup> During the Third Period, these comments escalated even further as communist speakers frequently attacked the ILP with great ferocity. An RCMP informant at the International Unemployment Demonstration in 1930 commented that Kolisnyk spent his speech “venting most of his spleen on the social democrats and ILP and especially the local members of the latter party, who he described as labour fakirs and capitalist lick-splitties.”<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, Tom Ewen, another Winnipeg communist, described the ILP as “lackeys and agents of the ruling class and deserters of the true Labor movement and traitors to the workers’ cause.”<sup>98</sup> This aspect of Third Period ideology was eagerly accepted by Winnipeg communists who, seemingly, were more than happy to denounce their ILP opponents.

In one election race, for example, the ILP was not amused when the communists ran Saul Simkin in the same ward as the ILP’s James Simpkin. The resulting confusion increased the communists’ vote by nearly four-fold.<sup>99</sup> The ILP also tired of the frequent assaults against them made by Kolisnyk or other communists. The *Weekly News* suggested that “no line of attack was too dastardly for these saviours of society to launch. No slander was too base for

94. “Report Re: May Day Celebration – Winnipeg – May 1, 1930,” Communist Party of Canada – Winnipeg RCMP File 117-91-67, 1997; *The Worker*, 3 May 1930. The *Weekly News* suggested that Kolisnyk “played the role of the martyr excellently.” See *Weekly News*, 14 November 1930.

95. *The Worker*, 24 May 1930. An interesting anecdote emerged out of a Council meeting in November 1930. Kolisnyk had complained about a plan to dig a ditch using manual labour (as a means to provide more employment) because he said it was a “work test.” Immediately Ald. Durward of the ILP rose and read directly from a pamphlet published in the Soviet Union. The pamphlet discussed how the Soviets were employing manual labour to dig ditches as a means of creating employment – the exact proposal that Kolisnyk had just opposed! See *Weekly News*, 28 November 1930.

96. *The Worker*, 26 November 1927.

97. “Report Re: Communist Party of Canada – General – Winnipeg – International Unemployment Protest Demonstration,” Communist Party of Canada – Winnipeg RCMP File 117-91-67, 2013.

98. *Manitoba Free Press*, 22 November 1929.

99. *Weekly News*, 5 December 1930. Simkin won 20 per cent of the vote in the Ward Two school board race in 1930. A year later, communist candidate George Ashbrook received only five per cent of the vote in the Ward Two School board race. For the following two elections, the communist vote remained steady at around five per cent.

them to circulate.”<sup>100</sup> In the face of repeated attacks, the ILP grew increasingly hostile towards the CPC. Marcus Hyman, a frequent mayoral candidate for the ILP, warned against both the demagogues of the CPC and the reactionaries of the business community, suggesting that communists “carelessly and sometimes even maliciously throw sparks in all directions in material all too inflammable” while the reactionaries created the conditions for such behaviour.<sup>101</sup> Whereas the *Weekly News* had once treated the communists as an inconsequential pest, they were now singled out as important enemies of the ILP who had to be fought at all costs.

One practical result of this move was a dramatic decline in the number of motions forwarded or seconded by William Kolisnyk. This proved significant because, since there was only one communist on council, a member of another group always had to agree to second his motions if they were to be put before council. In 1930, Kolisnyk only managed to put forward two motions, one on street car service and the other on rent assistance for those on relief. Compared to his other years on council, this marked a dramatic drop-off. In 1927, Kolisnyk had put forward six motions, fourteen in 1928, and six in 1929.<sup>102</sup> He was no longer able to find the support he had once had to put his motions forward. At his last council meeting, Kolisnyk remarked that he hoped “if he was ever in council again [that] he would find someone willing to second his motions.”<sup>103</sup>

In addition to exchanging verbal blows with the ILP, the communists, including Kolisnyk, also occasionally engaged in physical confrontations with the police. On 6 March 1930, for example, an impromptu procession of unemployed communists led by Kolisnyk was assailed by 40 police officers. The *Free Press* described how “charging across the market place, beneath the shadow of the old city hall building, the police swept the demonstrators before them, batons swinging and fists pounding, until the solid mass was shattered into a melee of fleeing people, leaving the street covered with hats and coats, rubbers, [and] overshoes.” It went on to say that, “police used their ‘billies’ generously; sent obstinate Communists to the pavement with punches and thrusts and hustled the leaders from the fore-front away down the side-streets.”<sup>104</sup> Kolisnyk has been described by Lita-Rose Betcherman as the “hero” of the demonstra-

100. *Weekly News*, 5 December 1930. As a side note, the *Weekly News* almost always employed sarcasm in discussion of the Communist Party. As an example: “is the idea that when such a day comes persons like Kolisnyk and (Leslie) Morris shall rise as supermen out of the wreckage, establish a dictatorship, and tell us one and all just where we get off at. A pleasing prospect!” See *Weekly News*, 2 May 1930.

101. *Winnipeg Tribune*, 19 November 1930.

102. It should also be noted that Kolisnyk missed several council sessions in 1929 due to a severe bout of encephalitis.

103. *Weekly News*, 5 December 1930.

104. *Manitoba Free Press*, 7 March 1930.

tion. He headed the march and shouted encouraging words to his comrades before being dragged away by two large police officers.<sup>105</sup>

William Kolisnyk was defeated in the municipal election of November 1930 after serving two terms on City Council. Communists interpreted Kolisnyk's defeat as the result of an unprecedented effort by the "social fascist" ILP to remove him from office because of his increased attacks against their "deception of the workers." *The Worker* accused the ILP of turning "openly fascist and leading the movement against the party."<sup>106</sup> The ILP, meanwhile, celebrated the defeat of their communist rival, arguing that workers were simply tired of the "unfair tactics" utilized by the communists.<sup>107</sup> They argued that communists had spent too much time attacking the ILP and were not interested in practical solutions to the unemployment problem.<sup>108</sup>

Interestingly, the platform that Kolisnyk ran on when he was defeated was essentially the same as it had been in 1926, despite the introduction of the Third Period. Unemployment was the focus of the campaign, particularly increases in unemployment relief. Other prominent platform planks included a minimum wage for municipal employees, a five-cent street car fare, and the right of free speech for demonstrations.<sup>109</sup> Considering the dramatic shift in communist politics that had taken place between 1926 and 1930, it is intriguing that there was very little change in the municipal party platform as it continued to be dominated by fairly reformist measures rather than revolutionary demands.

Upon his defeat in 1930, Kolisnyk continued in his role as a manager at the Workers' and Farmers' Cooperative Creamery and maintained his other business ventures in bicycle and automobile repair.<sup>110</sup> He continued to attract controversy after his defeat. He was accused of not properly following the party line during the Workers' Benevolent Association executive election because he supported a slate of candidates that included non-party members.<sup>111</sup> Thus, when he considered running for office again in 1931, a group of communists signed a letter to announce to the City Central Committee that they would not support Kolisnyk's campaign "materially or morally."<sup>112</sup> Kolisnyk did not

105. Betcherman, *The Little Band*, 100.

106. *The Worker*, 15 November 1930.

107. *Weekly News*, 5 December 1930.

108. *Weekly News*, 5 December 1930.

109. *Manitoba Free Press*, 6 November 1930.

110. "Personal History File, Page 2," William Kolisnyk RCMP File 117-89-39, 15; "Summary of File for the information of the Advisory Committee on Orders of Restriction and Detention Re: William Kolisnyk," William Kolisnyk RCMP File 117-89-39, 99.

111. Betcherman, *The Little Band*, 99.

112. Letter to the Winnipeg City Central Committee, 31 October 1931, Communist Party of Canada – Winnipeg RCMP file 117-91-67, 1558.



disappear from municipal politics, however. In 1934 his name resurfaced as a potential communist mayoral candidate, although eventually the Party decided not to run anyone.<sup>113</sup>

Controversy continued to plague Kolisnyk. Two years after leaving council, Kolisnyk and Harry Sydor (another manager at the Workers' and Farmers' Cooperative) were accused of personally profiting from the 1929 purchase of a lumberyard by the Cooperative. A member named J. Kozlowski brought documents to the 1932 annual meeting claiming that the agents who bought the land for the Co-op had purchased it for \$8,800 before reselling it to the Co-op for \$12,000. Someone had profited at the Co-op's expense. Scandal erupted within the Ukrainian community in the North End. Such humiliating evidence was the perfect excuse for anti-communist Ukrainians to attack their political opponents, and the result was a bitter fight between pro- and anti-communist Ukrainians. A five member board of inquiry was formed to investigate the accusation and, eventually, Kolisnyk and Sydor were cleared of all charges. Despite being exonerated by the board, Kolisnyk resigned from his post, although he retained his Party membership.<sup>114</sup>

On 6 July 1940, Kolisnyk's home was searched and, according to the RCMP, subversive literature was seized. Given its prevalence in Kolisnyk's RCMP file, the police were seemingly fixated on a comment he had made in 1931 that "we must copy the example given us by our comrades in Soviet Russia, and we will fight and win a Soviet Canada."<sup>115</sup> Along with several other local communists, Kolisnyk was interned as part of the war effort. Kolisnyk, who had a history of severe illness (he had spent two months in hospital in 1928 with inflammation of the brain) did not take well to detention.<sup>116</sup> He went blind and was eventually released on medical grounds. He spent the rest of his life living in British

113. "Communist Party of Canada United Front Winnipeg Civic Election Campaign," 22 October 1934, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 81.

114. Mochoruk, *The People's Co-op*, 49–50. In 1935, an RCMP informer reported that Kolisnyk had committed "acts of malfeasance and scandalous manipulation" in his role as manager of the creamery. He stood accused of manipulating the sale of cream and covering it up by pouring milk into the sewer. According to this explanation, Kolisnyk was quite literally skimming the cream off the top! I have found no other sources to support the RCMP's claim. Given the hostile atmosphere surrounding the Cooperative at the time, it is possible that the informant was merely relying on the rumours that were undoubtedly rampant in the Ukrainian community over the issue. Presumably, if Kolisnyk had committed such an egregious offence against a Communist Party-run organization he would have been quickly expelled from the CPC. See "Report Re: ULFTA – (Workers and Farmers Cooperative Creamery – Winnipeg)," William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 83; "Brief For the Advisory Committee," William Kolisnyk RCMP File 117-89-39, 123.

115. Quoted in "Brief for the Advisory Committee," 9 September 1941, William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 124; "W. N. Kolisnyk – Winnipeg," William Kolisnyk RCMP file 117-89-39, 13.

116. Kolisnyk, "In Canada Since the Spring of 1898," 40.

Columbia, where he worked on behalf of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.<sup>117</sup> Kolisnyk died in Vancouver on 4 November 1967.

## Conclusion

Where, then, does the story of Kolisnyk's career fit within the historiographic debate about the role of the Comintern in party affairs? His politics were dramatically transformed by the introduction of the Third Period. Whereas he regularly cooperated with ILP aldermen in 1927 and 1928, Kolisnyk was engaged in a bitter feud with James Simpkin and the ILP in 1930. Kolisnyk's expulsion from Council has all the classic marks of Third Period communism. By this point, the Communist Party was dedicated to exposing the "social fascists," even if it had to play with the truth to do so. This dramatic turn would suggest, as traditional scholars have proposed, that the Comintern's influence in local party affairs was far-reaching.

Taken in isolation, William Kolisnyk's career gives little reason to seriously challenge the traditionalist interpretation that emphasizes the influence and power of centralized decision-making. This paper, however, has also demonstrated the significance of ethnicity, personality, and local communities which, while not necessarily opposed to traditionalist models, does highlight the importance of studying communists at the local level. For example, while the Communist Party was supposed to be a centralized unit with no room for internal divisions, the ethnic politics played out in Winnipeg demonstrate the difficulties of bringing numerous conflicting ethnic groups within the Party together to work for a common candidate. Similarly, while Kolisnyk was supposed to act as the public voice of the Communist Party on Council, he often, according to other communists, misspoke. Finally, at a time when communist publications and speakers were fervently using revolutionary rhetoric to attract support for their causes, it appears that communists in Winnipeg continued to mobilize for elections around rather reformist issues. Thus, while recognizing the importance of international and national decisions on the career of a local politician such as William Kolisnyk, it is also necessary to appreciate the importance of the communities in which communist politics were played out.

117. Mochoruk, *The People's Co-op*, 9.