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# THE CIO, THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE FORMATION OF THE CANADIAN CONGRESS OF LABOUR 1936-1941

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The desperate and at times deadly struggle to organize the unorganized workers of the United States was crystallized in the dismal years between 1934 and 1938. The battle was waged on two fronts – in the convention halls and council rooms of the American Federation of Labor, and in the plants and factories of such industrial cities as Detroit, Chicago and Pittsburgh. Though the issue of industrial unionism had been a source of conflict within the American labor movement ever since it was first introduced and defeated at the American Federation of Labor convention in 1901, it was not until the 1930's, with the rise of mass production industries and new methods of production, that the issue came to a head.<sup>1</sup> To many trade unionists it had become clear that the outmoded, increasingly anachronistic philosophy of the AFL could no longer keep apace with the rapid social and economic changes of the depression years. It had become patently obvious that a new philosophy was needed. To satisfy this demand, the CIO – the Committee for Industrial Organization – was created.

The philosophy of unionism against which the CIO rebelled is usually associated with Samuel Gompers, who had founded the AFL on the twin principles of craft unionism and trade autonomy. Since Gompers believed that only the most skilled and thus least replaceable workers could be organized, the AFL in the 1920's and 1930's had become a rather select organization – in Veblen's description, a vested interest not greatly different from the vested interests of ownership – consisting largely of skilled workers in craft unions. It was apparent, at least to Gompers, that it was easier to improve the position of a small group, than of the whole working class at once. He abhorred violence and radicalism and rejected as unobtainable any social and political ends for the AFL, since, as a rather select group, it would never be numerically strong enough to win elections. In effect therefore, Gompers succeeded in separating the AFL

<sup>1</sup> J. T. McKelvey, *AFL Attitudes towards Production, 1900-1932*, Ithaca, 1952, pp. 37-45.

from both party politics and radical ideology and in creating out of it an organization exclusively motivated by narrow economic ends.<sup>2</sup>

It was against this *laissez-faire*, conservative craft unionism that the growing industrial labour force of the 1930's rebelled. Led by John L. Lewis and his United Mine Workers, and propelled forward by the New Deal labour legislation, these "new unionists" successfully defied the diehard leadership of the AFL and, under the aegis of the CIO, launched massive organizing campaigns in the mass production industries. Within two years, several million unorganized and largely unskilled workers were brought into the CIO. Aghast at this influx into the organized labour movement of what AFL Teamster president Daniel Tobin called "riffraff . . . good-for-nothings . . . and . . . rubbish,"<sup>3</sup> and fearful of the radical ideas of these aggressive, militant new members, the AFL at first suspended and then finally expelled the CIO. But it was all to no avail. The CIO continued its massive organizing campaigns in the steel, automobile, rubber, smelting and electrical industries. Sparked by victories in the sitdown strikes in the rubber plants in Akron and the automobile plants in Flint, by the end of 1937 it had a membership of almost four million.

In Canada, however, its campaign was less successful. From the beginning CIO activity in Canada was more the result of the forceful demands of the Canadian workers than of the plans of the CIO hierarchy in the United States. Taking their example from their fellow workers below the border, Canadian workers started their own organizing campaigns. For leadership they looked to the AFL counterpart in Canada, the Trades and Labor Congress, but that body was only slightly less conservative and slightly less fervent in its opposition to the new unionism than its parent organization. Almost by default therefore, the unorganized Canadian workers opted for the CIO. But the reaction of the CIO was discouraging. John L. Lewis and his colleagues were much too involved in the hectic labour scene in the United States to give the Canadian movement more than a passing thought. As a sop to the Canadians however, Lewis announced late in 1936 that the CIO would undertake the organization of steelworkers in Nova Scotia, but that this was to be the sole CIO activity in Canada.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the Lewis ukase, Canadian workers refused to submit. Engrossed in its own problems, the CIO had not taken into account

<sup>2</sup> For Gompers' ideas, see Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, two vols., New York, 1925; B. Mandel, *Samuel Gompers. A Biography*, Antioch, Ohio, 1963; P. Taft, *The AFL in the Time of Gompers*, New York, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings*, American Federation of Labor Convention, 1934, pp. 657-659.

<sup>4</sup> *Toronto Star*, Nov. 8, 1936.

the growing demands of Canadian, but most particularly of Ontario workers for organization. Without official CIO sanction, attempts were being made in Ontario by individual workers and organizers – mostly Communists – to organize amongst the miners in Northern Ontario, the steelworkers in Hamilton, the automobile workers in Windsor, and the rubber workers in Kitchener, but by the end of 1936, only a handful – about two hundred – of these men had been enrolled in the CIO.<sup>5</sup> By the beginning of 1937, however, with the example of the successful CIO sitdowns just across the border, it seemed only a matter of time before Ontario workers would rebel against both their deplorable working conditions and their overly cautious union leadership. The flash point was reached at the Holmes Foundry in Sarnia, in March of 1937.

In early February, a Steel Workers' Organizing Committee (SWOC) representative in Ontario, Milton Montgomery, was invited by several of the employees of the Holmes Foundry to organize the plant into SWOC. Montgomery was dubious, but agreed to see what could be done. His efforts were doomed from the start. Though the plant seemed ripe for organization – low wages, long hours, no security, and unsafe working conditions – there were several factors which made Montgomery's task impossible. A large minority of the workers were foreigners of Slovak, Polish, and Ukrainian descent; the native-born majority would have nothing to do with them. As well, the Holmes management threatened to close the plant rather than negotiate with a CIO affiliate. The recent violent sit-downs in Flint had turned whatever favourable opinion there was in Sarnia against the CIO. Montgomery was therefore able to sign up less than one quarter of the workers – almost all of them the foreign born.<sup>6</sup>

Enraged at the slow progress of organization and at the recalcitrance of the management, and encouraged by the success of the sit-downs across the lake in Michigan, on March 2, some seventy of the workers decided to sit down at their machines. As soon as word spread of the sit-down, a mob of enraged citizens of Sarnia – some employees of the plant, most not, but all united in their hatred of the foreigners – descended on the foundry with an assortment of anti-union devices – crowbars, baseball bats, bricks, and steel pipes. A terrible and bloody battle ensued, and within an hour the union was broken, as were the arms, legs and heads of many of the 'sit-downers.' During the entire incident, the Sarnia police force refused to intervene, claiming that the plant was located in Point Edward,

<sup>5</sup> *Labour Organization in Canada*, 1936, pp. 174-175.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Milton Montgomery; *Canadian Forum*, April 1937.

which was across the road from Sarnia, and therefore not in its jurisdiction.

The first CIO sit-down in Canada was an ignominious failure. The battered and bloodied strikers were taken – some were carried – to court and convicted of trespassing, though no charges were laid against the strike-breakers. Shocked at this apparent injustice, Sam Lawrence, the lone CCF member in the Ontario Legislature, asked Attorney-General Arthur Roebuck in the House what the Government intended to do about the treatment of the strikers. Before Roebuck could answer, Premier Mitchell Hepburn jumped to his feet and shouted emotionally, “My sympathies are with those who fought the strikers . . . . Those who participate in sit-down strikes are trespassers, and trespassing is illegal in this province . . . . There will be no sit-down strikes in Ontario. This Government is going to maintain law and order at all costs.”<sup>7</sup>

Several days later Hepburn amplified his warning in a veiled threat to the CIO. “We are not going to tolerate sit-down strikes,” he stated, “and I point that out to those people now in this country – professional agitators from the United States – who agitate and foment unrest in our industrial areas . . . . I shall put down these sit-down strikes with the full strength of the Provincial Police if necessary and other resources at the Government’s disposal.”<sup>8</sup> There is little doubt that Hepburn’s warning was aimed not at Sarnia where the CIO had been bloodily repulsed, but much closer to home, to the bustling industrial city of Oshawa, less than forty miles from Hepburn’s office in Queen’s Park, where some local men were actively organizing a union, which in a few short weeks would more than anything else mark the birth of industrial unionism in Canada.

In January of 1937 General Motors announced record profits for 1936 of two hundred million dollars.<sup>9</sup> In the same month, its employees in Oshawa suffered their fifth consecutive wage cut in five years.<sup>10</sup> Worse than the low wages, was the lack of job security. Periodic examinations by doctors of the insurance company used by General Motors, weeded out the “bad risks,” that is, those men over fifty.<sup>11</sup> In this way the company maintained a steady supply of young and strong workers. Because of these grievances, in February of 1937, when the company posted new work schedules speeding up production, the overworked, underpaid men of the body shop walked out. One of them took it upon himself to phone the United

<sup>7</sup> Toronto *Telegram*, March 5, 1937.

<sup>8</sup> Toronto *Star*, March 8, 1937.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1937.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Charlie Millard; *Canadian Comment*, May 1937.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Charlie Millard.

Autoworkers headquarters in Detroit for help.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Joe Salsberg, director of the Communist party's trade union section, also instructed one of the unofficial CIO organizers in the province to phone the Autoworkers' office to send an organizer to Oshawa immediately.<sup>13</sup> In response to this call, on February 19, 1937, a UAW organizer, Hugh Thompson, arrived in Oshawa.<sup>14</sup>

With Thompson begins the CIO organization in Canada. Within weeks of first setting foot in Oshawa, Thompson had succeeded in signing up most of the four thousand G.M. workers into the UAW and had forced the company to begin negotiations with the new union. For the most part, these negotiations proceeded smoothly, and after a few weeks it appeared that a settlement would be reached. It seemed that the CIO would win its first and most important encounter in Canada without a struggle. But such was not to be the case; Mitchell Frederick Hepburn would see to that. Right from the beginning the Ontario Premier had taken an unnatural interest in the proceedings in Oshawa. As early as February he had applied pressure on the federal government to deport Thompson, but was rebuffed.<sup>15</sup> He then ordered his Attorney-General, Arthur Roebuck, to keep Thompson under surveillance and to conduct a secret investigation of the CIO organizer, in the hope that something would be discovered which would force Ottawa to deport him.<sup>16</sup> But once again, when the results of this investigation were forwarded to Ottawa, Hepburn's plea was rejected.<sup>17</sup> Thwarted by his fellow Liberals, Hepburn did not wash his hands of the Oshawa situation. While on vacation in Florida in April, he was kept fully informed of events in Oshawa. When it appeared that the General Motors management had agreed to a settlement favourable to the CIO, it was not too surprising that Hepburn suddenly cut short his vacation and hurried back to Queen's Park. It was equally not totally unforeseen that, shortly after Hepburn's return, General Motors suddenly reversed its position and refused to negotiate with the CIO representatives, Thompson, and Charlie Millard, president of the UAW local in Oshawa.<sup>18</sup> With the company turnabout, a strike was inevitable and on April 8, 1937, the G.M. workers walked out. Thus began the Oshawa Strike, perhaps the real turning point in the history of industrial unionism in Canada.

<sup>12</sup> *United Auto Worker*, May 8, 1967, contains a copy of a letter sent by Hugh Thompson sometime later describing his arrival in Oshawa.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, J. B. Salsberg.

<sup>14</sup> *New Commonwealth*, March 1937.

<sup>15</sup> Ontario Archives, Hepburn Papers, Hepburn to Ian Mackenzie (Minister of National Defence), Feb. 25, 1937; Mackenzie to Hepburn, Feb. 25, 1937.

<sup>16</sup> Hepburn Papers, Memorandum, Hepburn to Roebuck, Feb. 26, 1937.

<sup>17</sup> Hepburn Papers, T. A. Crerar (Minister of Immigration) to Hepburn, March 4, 1937.

<sup>18</sup> Hepburn Papers, *Minutes of Meeting between G.M. and its employees*, April 7, 1937.

Once the strike began, Hepburn publicly explained the reasons for his great interest in developments in Oshawa. He announced that the time had come for a "showdown" with the CIO before its demands could damage the economy of the province. He further warned that since "Oshawa [was] the first open attempt on the part of Lewis and his CIO henchmen to assume a position of dominating and dictating to Canadian industry," he would employ the "entire resources of the province" to destroy the CIO.<sup>19</sup> To help defeat the CIO, Hepburn requested RCMP reinforcements from Ottawa. When the federal government balked at sending the vast contingent demanded by the Ontario Premier,<sup>20</sup> a furious Hepburn set up his own police force of army veterans and University of Toronto students – the so-called Hepburn Hussars or, as they were known in Oshawa, the Sons of Mitches. There seemed to be no limits to Hepburn's attempts to crush the CIO. When the federal Minister of Labour, Norman Rogers, offered to mediate the strike, an infuriated Hepburn bitterly denounced his fellow Liberals in Ottawa for interfering in the affairs of the government of Ontario.<sup>21</sup> When two of his own cabinet ministers, Attorney-General Roebuck and Labour Minister David Croll seemed hesitant in supporting his actions, Hepburn immediately fired them, prompting Croll's famous remark, that he would, in any case, rather march with the workers than ride with General Motors.<sup>22</sup> Despite reports from the chief of police in Oshawa, from newspaper reporters, and indeed from his own secret agents that the situation in Oshawa was peaceful,<sup>23</sup> Hepburn feverishly announced that evidence of a giant Communist conspiracy in Oshawa had been uncovered, and that he was therefore sending in police reinforcements.<sup>24</sup> In fact, however, what prompted Hepburn to increase his pressure on the CIO in Oshawa, were reports not from Oshawa itself, but rather from his agents in Northern Ontario, which warned that the CIO was stepping up its activities amongst the gold miners of that area.<sup>25</sup> It was common knowledge that many of the mining magnates, among them J. P. Bickell and Joe Wright, owner of the *Globe and Mail*, were the Premier's cronies, but what was surprising was just how far Hepburn seemed prepared to go to protect their

<sup>19</sup> *New York Times*, April 9, 1937.

<sup>20</sup> Hepburn Papers, Hepburn to Lapointe, April 8, 1937; April 13, 1937; Lapointe to Hepburn, April 13, 1937; April 14, 1937.

<sup>21</sup> Hepburn Papers, Hepburn to King, April 13, 1937.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, David Croll; Arthur Roebuck; Hepburn Papers, Hepburn to Croll, April 14, 1937; to Roebuck, April 14, 1937; Croll to Hepburn, April 14, 1937.

<sup>23</sup> Hepburn Papers, Secret Reports from Constable Wilson, April 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 1937. *Toronto Star*, April 10, 1937.

<sup>24</sup> *Globe and Mail*, April 16, 1937.

<sup>25</sup> Hepburn Papers, Secret Police Reports, Constable C. W. Hitch, Timmins, April 10, 14, 16, 1937; Inspector Creasy, Haileybury, April 14, 1937.

interests. When he was informed of the CIO activity amongst the miners, he immediately went on radio and announced: "... this has got to stop and we are going to stop it. If necessary we'll raise an army to do it!"<sup>26</sup> He promptly began recruiting more police.

Meanwhile the strike continued in a peaceful, almost serene atmosphere. Hepburn had taken upon himself the rather unlikely role of mediator, but his behaviour was anything but mediatory. Whenever a settlement seemed imminent he would either ask the company to break off negotiations, or else chase the union negotiators out of his office.<sup>27</sup> His outbursts against the union seemed to coincide with the arrival in his office of secret reports from the mining areas indicating that the CIO was only waiting for a favourable settlement in Oshawa "before mobilizing the mines."<sup>28</sup> To defend his rather partisan behaviour Hepburn again took to the air waves and claimed that his opposition to the CIO in Oshawa had "greatly handicapped the CIO's drive to dominate Canadian industry."<sup>29</sup> In any case he admitted that he was "more concerned about the CIO threat in the minefields than in the automobile industry... for Oshawa is only an attempt by the CIO to pave the way for the real drive against the fundamental wealth of the province and its mine fields." Unashamedly, he then warned, "... let me tell Lewis here and now, that he and his gang will never get their greedy paws on the mines of Northern Ontario, as long as I am Prime Minister." To many, and certainly to the CIO, it appeared that the only greedy paws Hepburn wanted on the mines should belong to his mine-owner friends.

For the two weeks of the strike Hepburn was in absolute command. Supported by almost all the newspapers of the province, with the significant exception of Joe Atkinson's *Toronto Star*, the premier urged G.M. to stand firm against the union. But after two weeks the company was anxious to resume production, and the union, which was completely bankrupt, was desperate for a solution.<sup>30</sup> In one last valiant effort to abort an agreement, Hepburn sent an urgent telegram to G.M. president Colonel McLaughlin, who was on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean, informing the Colonel that he had secret

<sup>26</sup> *Toronto Telegram*, April 10, 1937.

<sup>27</sup> On April 10, 1937, he abruptly broke off negotiations because Hugh Thompson was in the room. *Toronto Star*, April 12, 1937; on April 17, 1937, he once again broke off negotiations because Thompson had the "temerity" to use the phone in the Premier's "private vault"; *Toronto Star*, April 19, 1937.

<sup>28</sup> Hepburn Papers, H. P. Knox to Hepburn, April 16, 1937.

<sup>29</sup> *New York Times*, April 19, 1937; as Neil McKenty points out in his biography of Hepburn, these mining magnates had also bought for Hepburn many gold-mining stocks. See McKenty, *Mitch Hepburn*, Toronto, 1967, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, Millard; the entire strike was carried out without "one cent" of assistance from the UAW in the United States.



information that a total collapse of the strike was imminent, and that therefore the company should at all costs avoid a settlement.<sup>31</sup> General Motors management had, however, had their fill of Hepburn's interference, and over the Premier's protests an agreement was signed recognizing the UAW as the sole bargaining agent for the G.M. workers in Oshawa.<sup>32</sup> Hepburn was dismayed. In the words of the partisan *Financial Post*, he had hoped to demolish the CIO in one great stand, but had succeeded merely in "holding it at arm's length."<sup>33</sup> Even George McCullagh, the Premier's closest adviser and friend, and editor of the *Globe and Mail*, who personally took credit for Hepburn's virulent opposition to the CIO, admitted that the Oshawa Strike was not the "body-blow" to the CIO he had hoped for.<sup>34</sup>

The achievement of the Oshawa strikers in fighting and defeating both the power of big business and government inspired workers throughout Canada. It gave the CIO the impetus it so desperately needed to begin organization in the mass production industries of the country. The agreement at Oshawa, but particularly Hepburn's peculiar behaviour, had suddenly turned the rather somnolent CIO organizing campaign into a violent crusade. The Oshawa strikers had won a great victory for themselves, but even more important for the CIO, they had created the psychology of success and enthusiasm needed for a massive organizing effort. What Akron and Flint had done in the United States, Oshawa was to do for Canada. It proved to be a landmark in Canadian labour history.

The successful conclusion of the strike let loose a flood of pent-up CIO activity. While the strike continued organization was at a standstill. If the CIO could take on both the largest company in the world and the most anti-labour government in the country and defeat them, then nothing could stop it. At least this was the feeling of the CIO leaders and press at the time. Most of their efforts were therefore directed towards assisting the strikers at Oshawa. With victory there, they turned back with renewed vigour to their own organizing plans. Immediately following the strike they began an organizing campaign unprecedented to that time in Canadian history. Printing presses began working overtime. Young Communists and CCYM (Co-operative Commonwealth Youth Movement) members headed out all over Southern Ontario to begin organization. Graham Spry, the nominal Ontario CCF leader, complained to David Lewis,

<sup>31</sup> Hepburn Papers, Hepburn to McLaughlin, April 20, 1937.

<sup>32</sup> Hepburn Papers, Contract between General Motors and its Employees, April 24, 1937.

<sup>33</sup> *Financial Post*, May 8, 1937.

<sup>34</sup> McCulloch to McLaughlin, Jan. 18, 1943; to McMaster, Jan. 18, 1943; quoted in B. Young, *The Leadership League*, M.A., Queen's University, 1966, p. 206.

the Party's national secretary, that "everywhere there is the demand for union organizers, everywhere there is the cry — labour party — everywhere there is a new attitude, a new public opinion, and everywhere the CCF is almost totally ineffective."<sup>35</sup> He wrote that places such as Galt, Guelph, Brantford, Hamilton, and Kitchener were "hives of labour activity," but the CCF groups in these cities were "really out of touch with the community," that they were "almost useless" and in some cases the groups were "for practical purposes dead."

By default, therefore, the well-oiled Communist machine was able to take sole advantage of this newly created opportunity. Long before the CIO had undertaken the organization of the mass production industries, the Communists had maintained an elaborate framework of unions, both inside and outside the Workers' Unity League. Some of these had existed only on paper, but they had been built around a faithful and militant nucleus of experienced Party members who knew how to chair meetings, make motions, give speeches, print pamphlets, mimeograph handbills, and organize picket lines — all indispensable when thousands of workers without previous trade union experience flocked to union halls.<sup>36</sup> As Tim Buck put it, "our Party had trained and developed a whole cadre of people who knew about unions and knew how to go about organizing them. And the Party members, even though they didn't work in the industry would go out distributing leaflets, helping to organize the union."<sup>37</sup> When the order was given in 1935 to disband the Workers' Unity League, the Communist unions moved directly into the Trades and Labor Congress and most of the Party organizers began organizing for the CIO. Without their aid, CIO efforts in Canada would have been vastly circumscribed, and conceivably even aborted. Under the guidance and direction of J. B. Salsberg — "the 'Commissar' of the trade unions" — such able young Communists as Harvey Murphy, C. S. Jackson, Dick Steele, Harry Hunter and Alex Welch took charge of the various CIO organizing efforts in Ontario.

The days following the Oshawa strike were euphoric for the CIO. From everywhere across the province appeals poured into Thompson's office in Oshawa asking him to address workers and launch organizing campaigns.<sup>38</sup> Panic-stricken financial page editors ran a slew of articles warning that one million unorganized Canadian

<sup>35</sup> Public Archives of Canada, CCF Papers, Spry to Lewis, April 30, 1937.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Hunter, *From the Other Shore*, unpublished manuscript, 1965.

<sup>37</sup> United Electrical Workers Archives (UE), transcript of interview with Tim Buck, Oct. 3, 1960, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> United Autoworkers Archives (UAW), Wayne State University, Thompson Papers, File on Oshawa Strike.

workers in five major industries – rubber, textile, auto, steel and metal mining – were soon to be the object of CIO organization. Success by the CIO would, the *Financial Post* warned, “cripple” the Canadian economy.<sup>39</sup> For the next few weeks at least the *Financial Post’s* clarion rang true. From Timmins it was announced that George Anderson, the CIO and Communist Party organizer, had succeeded in forming a CIO local in the huge McIntyre and Hollinger operations in the area. Another Communist, Alex Welch, supported by his Y.C.L. troops, organized a local of the Textile Workers in the big Silkknit plant in Toronto, and within a week the several hundred immigrant girls working in the plant were on strike. Welch was also active in the large Empire Cotton Mills in Welland as well as in textile plants in Cornwall and Peterboro. C. S. Jackson, a young Party member, had just quit his job as an auditor at the Thor washing machine plant, and began organizing for the newly created United Electrical Workers. Dick Steele, Harry Hambergh, and Harry Hunter, all active Party members, started organizing steel plants in Toronto, Oshawa, Hespeler, and Hamilton. Other Party members, led by Bill Walsh, were organizing in the rubber plants of Kitchener, Toronto, and Hamilton.<sup>40</sup>

These halcyon days for the CIO, however, turned out to be sadly evanescent. The Silkknit strike was lost and the first Steelworkers’ strike in Canada, in the small Cuthbert plant in Montreal, was also defeated, as was a rubber strike in Toronto. Many of those who had signed up with the CIO in the first flush of enthusiasm after Oshawa, soon drifted away. By August, CIO organization had come to a standstill. Despite its six months of activity, SWOC had contracts in only three small plants in Oshawa and Hespeler, and had signed up less than ten per cent of Hamilton’s steelworkers. The Rubberworkers had been even less successful; some plants had been partially organized, but even in these the union membership was rapidly declining. The UAW had succeeded in organizing only a few small auto part plants in Oshawa and Windsor, and the UE had nothing to show for its four months of activity. But even more damaging for the CIO, several textile locals left the CIO and returned to the TLC largely because the resistance of the employers to the CIO proved too great to be overcome.<sup>41</sup>

The CIO failure following Oshawa was inevitable. Without funds, experienced organizers, and direction, organization campaigns were doomed. The CIO hierarchy below the border was just too

<sup>39</sup> *Financial Post*, May 24, 1937.

<sup>40</sup> *Daily Clarion* for May-July 1937; *Labour Gazette*, 1937.

<sup>41</sup> *Financial Post*, August 7, 1937.

involved in its own projects to lend much assistance or thought to Canada. As one relieved hostile observer wrote: "There has been no noticeable repetition in Canada of the CIO system below the border — turning whole squads and battalions of organizers loose on a particular plant, area, or industry, selected for penetration."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, by October, largely because of the worst business recession for several years, CIO organization was at a standstill. As well, the determined opposition of Premiers Hepburn and Duplessis, and their use of their provincial police, had broken several CIO organization efforts. Hepburn's landslide reelection in the fall of 1937, on an anti-CIO ticket further demoralized the CIO, though CIO spirits were raised somewhat by the imaginative *Globe and Mail* report that CIO agents were planning to kidnap Hepburn's two children.<sup>43</sup> Against this combined offensive from both government and business, the CIO could do little. As it was, it already found itself spread much too thinly across a wide front in the U.S., and hampered at every turn by its lack of money and personnel. Of even more importance, however, the CIO had made a significant strategic decision: all organization in Canada, it was decided, would have to be undertaken by Canadians themselves. For this reason, Hugh Thompson had been transferred from Oshawa to Buffalo where he was to look after CIO organization in upstate New York but would be available as well to lend advice to Canadian organizers, and Silby Barrett, Lewis' lieutenant in Nova Scotia was appointed director of all CIO activity in Canada.<sup>44</sup> As Sydney Hillman, the theoretician of the CIO put it: "Canada must develop its own leaders if it is to have a sound labour movement."<sup>45</sup> Both Lewis and Hillman felt that organization in Canada would have to wait until there was sufficient Canadian personnel to carry out the job.

Symbolically, just when the CIO was deciding to recognize Canada as a separate entity, the AFL was beginning to circumscribe the autonomy of its Canadian affiliate, the Trades and Labor Congress. It demanded that the TLC stop acting independently and follow its lead by suspending its CIO affiliates. For two years the TLC withstood the AFL pressure; finally, in 1939, it reluctantly succumbed and expelled its CIO unions. There were more serious problems besetting the CIO, however; internal squabbles were threatening to tear it apart. This dissension resulted from the struggle between the Communists, who were chiefly responsible for setting up and organizing many of the new CIO unions, and the CCF and anti-Com-

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Globe and Mail*, Sept. 2, 1937.

<sup>44</sup> UAW, Thompson Papers, John L. Lewis to Thompson, Aug. 15, 1937.

<sup>45</sup> *Financial Post*, Oct. 30, 1937.

munist forces, who, the Communists believed, were attempting to take over the unions that they had created. The union most directly threatened was the UAW.

The influence of the Communist Party in the Autoworkers union at this time was supreme; in fact so influential was the Party that the UAW headquarters in Detroit would send the weekly edition of the union's newspaper to Communist Party headquarters in Toronto to be distributed to the various Auto locals in Southern Ontario.<sup>46</sup> Much of the early organizing in the automobile field had been done by the Communists, and though there were relatively few Party members in the union, they made up much of its leadership. When a factional dispute broke out in the International between President Homer Martin and his left-wing opponents – with Millard for a time supporting Martin – the Party turned against Millard and forced him out of office, less, perhaps, because he was in Martin's camp than because, as a dedicated member of the CCF, Millard was attempting to move the UAW from the Communist into the CCF orbit.<sup>47</sup> Soon after his defeat, Millard was put on the CIO payroll by John L. Lewis, to work with Barrett and to take charge of the CIO organization in Ontario.<sup>48</sup>

Millard's appointment came as a shock to the CIO office in Toronto. Until Millard's appointment CIO activity in the province had been under the direction of the Steelworkers staff, and these men – Dick Steele, Harry Hunter and Harry Hambergh – were all prominent Communists. Together with other leading Communists such as Jackson of the Electrical Workers and Welch of the Textile Workers, they manned the CIO office in Toronto and were largely responsible for directing all CIO organizing campaigns in Southern Ontario and Quebec. Thus, from his first day on the job, Millard found himself surrounded by Party members. Only on Saturday morning, when the Party held its regular weekly meeting, did Millard have the office to himself, and even then a Party member stayed behind, in Joe Salsberg's words, "to keep his eye on things."<sup>49</sup> There was thus a direct pipeline from the CIO offices to Communist headquarters; decisions made at the latter would shortly thereafter be made at the former, while those made at the former would instantly be known at the latter.<sup>50</sup> The Communists were of course appalled at Millard's appointment, not so much because Millard had been

<sup>46</sup> Interview, J. B. Salsberg.

<sup>47</sup> UAW, Addes Papers, Millard to Addes, Feb. 1, 1939. United Steelworkers Archives (USW), Millard to Thompson, May 3, 1939.

<sup>48</sup> USW, Millard to Lewis, April 24, 1939.

<sup>49</sup> Interview, J. B. Salsberg; C. S. Jackson.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, Salsberg; Millard.

repudiated by his own union, but because, as a dedicated anti-Communist, Millard would spare no effort to rid the CIO of Party domination. Nonetheless, at a special Party meeting, it was decided that "labour unity was more important than one person," and that the Party people should co-operate with Millard in the hope that if they "gave him enough rope he would hang himself."<sup>51</sup>

The position of the CIO in Ontario when Millard took over as regional director was precarious. The year 1938 had been a disaster, — so bad in fact, that most CIO unions had fewer members at the end of the year than at its beginning. The UAW had lost a thousand members; both Rubber and Electric had lost half their membership; SWOC declined by over two thousand, and Textile did not even bother filing a report.<sup>52</sup> Only the established CIO unions — the United Mine Workers and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers — reported gains. It seemed that the only hope for the continued existence of the CIO in Canada would be the creation of separate CIO organization in the country to direct all the union's activities. But even after the expulsion from the TLC, John L. Lewis refused to set up a central CIO organization in Canada because of the overwhelming Communist influence. As Millard unhappily described it: "The head office of SWOC and the CIO in Toronto... has become the centre of Communist trade union activity" and if a separate organization of the CIO were formed, the Communists would control it.<sup>53</sup> When Lewis was at last compelled to create a central organization in order to ensure the survival of a CIO presence in Canada, it readily became apparent how accurate were Millard's predictions. Of the 105 delegates attending the founding convention of the Canadian Committee of the CIO in November of 1939, 82 represented unions dominated by the Communists.<sup>54</sup> Resolutions were passed only with Party approval; only those policies supported by the Communists could be adopted. Indeed so dominant was the Communist control of the CIO that Barrett and Millard considered asking Lewis to disband the entire CIO organization in Canada. As a final recourse, Millard approached the militantly nationalistic All-Canadian Congress of Labour to discuss a possible merger,<sup>55</sup> the purpose of which would be to end the Communist domination in the CIO.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, Salsberg.

<sup>52</sup> *Labour Organization in Canada*, 1938, p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> CCF Papers, Notes by David Lewis of a Conference with Millard, Feb. 11, 1939.

<sup>54</sup> UE, Report of the first Conference of the Canadian Committee for the CIO, Ottawa, November 4-6, 1939. Those unions that usually supported Party policy were the UAW, SWOC, UE, Furworkers, Shoeworkers and Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers.

<sup>55</sup> USW, Millard to Haywood, Nov. 8, 1939.

That the CIO should be discussing a merger with the ACCL, seemed, on the surface at least, totally implausible. From the moment the CIO had entered Canada, the ACCL had been second to none in the malevolence of its attacks. Indeed, after the Oshawa strike, ACCL president Aaron Mosher had applauded Hepburn for attempting to “curb domination by foreign agitators and Communists,”<sup>56</sup> while the ACCL journal, the *Canadian Unionist*, congratulated Hepburn for having “done a great service to Canadian Labour.”<sup>57</sup> The ACCL hostility was understandable. Aside from the competition, the CIO was an American union and seemed to be a Communist organization as well – and both were anathema to the militantly nationalist and anti-Communist ACCL leadership. The official ACCL position was that “there [was no] room for both United States and Canadian unions in this country . . . [and] the sooner we get rid of United States unions in Canada, the better it will be for the workers and people of this country.”<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, the ACCL was in no position to compete with the CIO. Its membership was concentrated in two unions, Mosher’s Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees and the recently affiliated Algoma Steel Workers Union. It was financially bankrupt and organizationally impotent.<sup>59</sup> Against the incursions of the TLC and the CIO it was helpless. Its only hope of survival it seemed, was to merge with one of its competitors. Merger with the TLC was impossible; not only was it completely dominated by its American affiliates, but it had already – in 1921 – expelled Mosher and the CBRE for their opposition to international unionism.<sup>60</sup> Thus merger with the CIO seemed to be the only way out of an untenable situation.

For the CIO, the ACCL had three valuable inducements – the prestige of the CBRE, its own printing press, and no Communists. It was this latter benefit, however, which made a merger most attractive to Lewis, Barrett and Millard. By 1939, Lewis had begun “weeding” the Communists out of the CIO in the United States.<sup>61</sup> With Lewis’ change of heart towards co-operating with the Communists, Silby Barrett, urged on by Millard and especially David Lewis,<sup>62</sup> also became concerned, for the first time, over the Communist influence in

<sup>56</sup> Hepburn Papers, Mosher to Hepburn, April 24, 1937.

<sup>57</sup> *Canadian Unionist*, April 1937, p. 273.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, May 1937, pp. 323-324; August 1937, p. 64.

<sup>59</sup> Interview, Norman Dowd; USW, Report on the CIO in Canada, June 1939, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Proceedings*, Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, 37th Annual Convention, 1921, pp. 165-171.

<sup>61</sup> CCF Papers, David Lewis to Angus MacInnis, Dec. 21, 1939.

<sup>62</sup> CCF Papers, David Lewis to Winch, Feb. 16, 1939; to MacInnes, Dec. 21, 1939.

the CIO in Canada. This concern turned to outrage with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet alliance in August of 1939, when, overnight, Party policy suddenly underwent a total reversal. The treaty shook the Canadian Party to its roots. For a full week the Party did not know how to react — whether or not to continue its passionate anti-Nazi activity and propaganda. Ordinarily, whenever there was a change in Party policy, a courier from the American Communist Party headquarters would arrive at the Party office in Toronto and announce the new policy. Then quickly, and with a minimum of dissension, the Party theorists — men like Salsberg and Tim Buck — would adapt the new policy to the Canadian situation.<sup>63</sup> But over the new policy towards Germany, the Party split; many left the Party, but most members reluctantly accepted the new Party line. More than anything else, this sudden and complete turnabout in policy destroyed the Party's carefully cultivated image as the guardian of the Canadian working man. It had been made blatantly clear that the interests of the Party were not always those of the worker, and that in the final analysis Party members would always put the interest of the Soviet Union ahead of that of the Canadian union movement. Following the Nazi-Soviet pact, the interests of the Communist Party no longer coincided with those of the CIO. Thus, by the end of 1939, it seemed that the strategic and political needs of the CIO coincided with the financial and organizational needs of the ACCL to make possible a merger which, several months before, would have been impossible.

There was, of course, some opposition within the CIO to the merger, largely from the Communists. Whereas in the CIO they had played a primary role, their role following the merger promised to be secondary. All the leading forces behind the merger, Millard, Mosher and Barrett, were active supporters of the CCF, and thus the hegemony of the Party was threatened.<sup>64</sup> Though the ardour of the Party for labour unity had lessened since the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact, there were still leading Communists such as C.S. Jackson and Harry Hunter who favoured the merger and worked strenuously both within the CIO and within Party circles to achieve it.<sup>65</sup> Even Joe Salsberg secretly helped draw up the constitution of the new organization.<sup>66</sup> There was some opposition as well within the ACCL, but the autocratic Mosher ignored it. Finally, on September 9, 1940, the merger of the CIO and the ACCL was consummated when the two

<sup>63</sup> Interview, J. B. Salsberg.

<sup>64</sup> Toronto *Clarion*, May 1, 1940; Canadian Labour Congress Archives (CLC), Millard to Mosher, May 13, 1940.

<sup>65</sup> CLC, Mosher to Millard, May 15, 1940; Interview, Jackson, Salsberg.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, Jackson, Salsberg.



labour bodies gathered together in Toronto to create the Canadian Congress of Labour.

For the history of the Canadian labour movement the creation of the new Congress marked the beginning of the end of two great ideals – one ideological, the other national. Ideologically, it forever doomed the ambitions of the Communist Party to create in Canada a powerful labour organization based on Marxist principles. It marked the end of the Party's hegemony over the industrial union forces in Canada. As the Communists had feared, the CCF had replaced them in the leading circles of the new Congress. In the election of officers, the entire CCF slate was victorious; of the six new executive officers, four were active partisans of the CCF, while the other two were sympathetic.<sup>67</sup> The entire Communist slate was shut out, its resolutions defeated, and its programmes rejected. But this, of course, did not mark the end of the Party's influence within the Congress. Communists had contributed too much, and had too many positions of power to be defeated so easily. It would take another decade, and a series of Party miscalculations and Congress manipulations, before the CCL rid itself of its Party dominated unions and of its large Communist-leaning minority.

Though on the whole they have been rather unfairly maligned, I think, by such recent commentators on the period as Gad Horowitz, there seems little doubt that the contribution of the Communists to the creation of the CIO in Canada was invaluable. They were activists in a period which cried for activity; they were energetic, zealous and dedicated, in a period when organizing workers required these attributes. They helped build the CIO and helped it grow until it was strong enough to do without them. They did the work that no one else was willing or able to do. Although there are many nasty things one can say about the Communists, and many reprehensible accusations one can justifiably level against them, undeniably in building a viable industrial union movement in Canada, theirs is a contribution not easily measured.

For the national union forces in Canada, the merger also marked the beginning of the end; it marked the start of the final Americanization of the Canadian labour movement. While the ACCL continued independent, there remained some hope – minute as it might have been – for a fairly strong purely Canadian labour center. But with the merger, the nationalist aspirations of the ACCL were submerged by the internationalism of the CIO, though it would

<sup>67</sup> *Proceedings, First CCL Convention, Sept. 9-12, 1940, p. 72; CCF Papers, Cotterill to Lewis, Sept. 14, 1940.*

take another decade for this to become fully apparent. CIO organizational policies were adopted; all independent ACCL unions within CIO jurisdictions were compelled to join the appropriate CIO unions.<sup>68</sup> For the next decade the national forces in the Congress led by Pat Conroy would attempt to keep the Congress autonomous and free of American domination, but their efforts were doomed. With their huge American treasuries and membership, the CIO unions would naturally dominate the Congress. In the final analysis, therefore, the creation of the Canadian Congress of Labour signified the ultimate triumph of democratic socialism over Communism and of internationalism over nationalism in the Canadian labour movement. Both were victories which would not become fully evident for another ten years, but which were nonetheless irreversible. For the Canadian nationalist thirty years later, the formation of the Canadian Congress of Labour seems to have been a mixed blessing. True, it put an end to the Communist threat in the union movement; unfortunately, it also made the Canadian labour movement less Canadian.

<sup>68</sup> *Proceedings, op. cit.*, pp. 39-41.