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## A Reevaluation of the Trade Union Unity League, 1929–1934

VICTOR G. DEVINATZ

*ABSTRACT:* The “Third Period” trade union activities of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), especially the creation of independent “red” industrial unions as opposed to continuing to work within the craft-oriented American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions, has been widely criticized in the literature. The recent opening of the CPUSA archives has made it possible to reevaluate the Party’s activities during this era. While the TUUL unions suffered major defeats and had difficulties in organizing in the heavy and mass production industries such as mining, textile, maritime and steel, these unions experienced considerable organizing success in light industries in New York City, particularly after the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in June 1933. Besides promoting industrial organization, the TUUL’s vision of union organization was structurally different from that of the AFL. Specifically, the red industrial unions, unlike the AFL unions, attempted to promote democratic, rank-and-file participation in union affairs as opposed to leaving such activities solely in the hands of the union officialdom.

**M**UCH OF THE PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED LITERATURE on the trade union activities of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) during “Third Period Communism” has been highly critical of the Party’s orientation to create independent “revolutionary,” or “red,” industrial unions in opposition to the craft-oriented American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions at this time. The transformation of the CPUSA’s trade union arm, the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), to the Trade Union Unity League

(TUUL) in 1929 had the explicit purpose of organizing Communist-led "dual unions" in industries where AFL unions already existed. This appeared to be a dramatic shift in policy from the strategy of "boring from within" the AFL that had been in place for the greater part of the 1920s. Factional opponents that had been recently expelled from the CPUSA, the left-wing Trotskyists in 1928 and the right-wing Lovestoneites in 1929, argued that establishment of these revolutionary industrial unions was decidedly un-Leninist and called for their liquidation and the Party's return to working within the craft unions. However, the TUUL remained a central component of the CPUSA's trade union strategy until late 1934 when the Communist International (Comintern) embarked on its Popular Front strategy and ordered the Party to dissolve its red unions and reenter the AFL.

Klehr (1984, 118) has argued that the TUUL was never an effective force in the trade union field during its nearly six-year existence. "Very nearly stillborn by its second anniversary, the TUUL was a ghostly presence in most industries, where its organizers demonstrated an eerie talent for losing what strikes they did succeed in calling." And former Trotskyist Bert Cochran (1977, 44-5) is no less critical in his assessment of the CPUSA's foray into establishing industrial unions:

Throughout their lifetime, the red unions (aside from a few special cases) were propaganda organizations. To the extent that they had members at all, these came in during strikes and left when strikes were lost (which they generally were). . . . the Communists never succeeded in breathing life into their revolutionary industrial unions. The policy, in terms of its declared purposes, was a failure.

Ottanelli (1991, 27) is more favorably disposed to the activities of the League's unions, although he acknowledges that a variety of external forces limited their success. "The common pattern of circumstances — legal and vigilante violence against organizers, strikers and their families; the diminishing number of employed workers; the material inability to provide relief for protracted strikes; and, in the case of agricultural workers, the seasonal character of their employment — all combined to make the organization and strengthening of unions impossible." And the scholar most sympathetic to the formation of the TUUL, Johanningsmeier (2001, 161), argues that the revolutionary industrial unions

represented a significant advance over the previous Communist policy of "boring from within" existing AFL trade unions. Although meager in membership and results, the TUUL helped to establish a new type and style of Communist unionism, more suited to the organization of African-Americans, women, and mass-production workers.

With the recent opening of the CPUSA archives, combined with the current extant secondary literature, it is possible to reevaluate the Party's activities in the U. S. trade union movement during "Third Period Communism." This new material, composed of internal reports, meeting minutes, etc., provides a level of detail and richness concerning the TUUL's activities that is missing from the reporting in the *Daily Worker* or *Labor Unity*, the TUUL's monthly publication. While articles in these two periodicals contain information that is also found in the CPUSA Archives, the archival data fill in numerous gaps that do not appear in the publications. This documentation is not limited to the large, high-profile strikes which were more likely to end in defeat; it therefore provides more than sufficient ammunition for challenging Cochran's (1977) and Klehr's (1984) dominant paradigms.

Although it is true that the TUUL unions experienced major defeats and had difficulties in organizing in the heavy and mass production industries, these unions did experience organizing success in light industries in New York City, where the CPUSA had a significant membership presence, particularly after the implementation of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in June 1933. Besides promoting union organization on an industrial basis, the League's vision of trade unionism was structurally different from that of the AFL in the sense that the red industrial unions attempted to promote the democratic, rank-and-file participation of the membership in union affairs as opposed to leaving such activities solely in the hands of the union officials.

The TUUL's modest achievements are even more impressive when placed in their proper context. During the Third Period, CPUSA membership was relatively small: only 7,545 members in 1930, increasing to a little over 19,000 in 1933 (Ottanelli, 1991, 43). In addition, although the AFL, conservatively speaking, enrolled more than 20 times as many members as the fledgling TUUL, the red trade union federation exceeded its craft-oriented counterpart in channeling militancy, as measured by strike mobilization effectiveness,

for example, to defend and fight for worker gains on and off the shop floor.

But the TUUL's efforts should also be evaluated in another manner. Regardless of the red federation's actual strike success rate, it undoubtedly contributed to sizeable advances for the U. S. working class by providing an important training ground for CPUSA trade unionists, who in the last half of the 1930s would come to play a foremost role in the great triumphs of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 2002).

Moreover, in spite of claims that the red industrial unions failed because of their revolutionary rhetoric, including slogans of "class against class" and "defend the Soviet Union," the TUUL unions, in a manner similar to the non-revolutionary AFL unions, focused primarily on achieving economic and trade-union demands. Thus, within the League unions, CPUSA activists operated as competent and dedicated industrial unionists, as opposed to using these labor organizations solely to build support for the Soviet Union, as TUUL detractors would have us believe.

However, throughout the early 1930s and until the red federation's disbanding, the CPUSA adopted a two-pronged approach in its trade union activities: in addition to organizing the TUUL unions, the Party experienced some success in continuing to actively organize left-wing oppositions within AFL unions and in working within independent unions that were not affiliated to either federation. In spite of the Party's abrasive rhetoric in considering these non-League unions to be either "fascist" or "social fascist" (depending on the labor organization's particular leadership), this flexibility in strategy served the Party well and kept the CPUSA in touch with developments in all segments of the U. S. trade union movement throughout the first half of the 1930s.

### *Building the TUUL Unions*

The TUUL was formally launched at an August 1929 conference of CPUSA and other radical trade unionists in Cleveland. Prior to the organization's birth, four Party-led unions had already been formed: the National Miners Union (NMU), the National Textile Workers Union (NTWU), the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union (NTWIU) and the Auto Workers Union (AWU). Both the NMU and

the NTWU had been founded in September 1928, the NTWIU was born on January 1, 1929, and the AWU — an independent industrial union that began as a Knights of Labor affiliate — came under Communist control by the late 1920s (Levenstein, 1981, 17; Keeran, 1980, 32).

Soon after the TUUL's organization, approximately a dozen new industrial unions appeared in industries such as maritime, agriculture, laundry, food and tobacco. The standard historical interpretation is that the federation's formation came about because of Comintern directives after Lozovsky, head of the Profintern (Red International of Labor Unions), stated, at the Sixth World Congress in the summer of 1928, that the U. S. Communists had to stop "dancing a quadrille around the AFL" (Cochran, 1977, 43). Johanningsmeier (2001, 161), however, points out that "significant support already existed in the CPUSA for this change" due to the fact that Party trade union organizers "who often came out of an indigenous tradition of radical industrial unionism" acknowledged the failure of the CPUSA's "boring from within" strategy within the AFL unions throughout the 1920s. At its founding conference, the League outlined that it would use three organizing strategies: 1) forming national industrial unions along the lines of the NMU, NTWU and the NTWIU; 2) in industries where the federation lacked sufficient strength to organize fully developed industrial unions, grouping together local unions and shop committees into national industrial leagues, "industrial unions in embryo"; and 3) organizing left-wing oppositions in the AFL unions (Levenstein, 1981, 17).

Within six months of the TUUL's founding, the NTWU was leading a major strike of unorganized workers in the American Woolen Company mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the site of two prior successful general strikes. Although the walkout began in February 1930 as a fight against speedup, with only 33 workers in one department, within two weeks 10,000 to 12,000 workers were on strike demanding union recognition, overtime pay at time and a half, the right of workers to elect departmental committees, elimination of "efficiency men," and reduction in the number of combs, from nine to three, that each worker had to operate. The employer conceded on all of the strikers' demands except time-and-a-half pay for overtime work, and 650 workers joined the NTWU during the strike's first week. Nevertheless, upon the work stoppage's conclusion the employer immediately set out to destroy the union (Stachel, 1930, 1).

An August 1930 document reveals the initial difficulty that the TUUL unions had in recruiting members. Although the federation's membership numbered between 45,000 and 50,000, besides the NTWIU, only the Food Workers Industrial League, the Marine Workers Industrial League and the NTWU registered more than 2,000 members (Schmies, 1930, 3).

Much of the League's membership enrollment activities during the early 1930s was intricately connected to strikes led by the organization. These walkouts of unorganized workers were primarily of a defensive nature, involving fights against wage cuts and speed-up. However, a number of TUUL-led strikes during this period possessed an offensive character in attempts to obtain wage increases or improve working conditions. A major problem was that these struggles were often spontaneous, providing no opportunity for the unions to prepare adequately and restricting them to offering leadership only after the walkouts had taken place. Thus, the TUUL attempted to carry out two major activities during these work stoppages: it provided guidance and resources to the struggles, and sought to recruit members to the affiliated unions. Although many (but not all) of these TUUL-led strikes were lost, a number resulted in concrete gains for the workers, although these successes did not necessarily lead to either a long-term membership increase or organizational stability for the federation's unions.

Compared with 1930, the red industrial unions led an increased number of walkouts throughout 1931. For example, of 67,000 workers on strike during July 1931, the TUUL was leading a work stoppage of 10,000 textile workers in Lawrence, and a coal miners' strike of 40,000 in western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio and western Virginia (RILU, [1932], 5).

The NMU-led walkout was the largest miners' strike in 1931 and the biggest industrial action that had been led by the CPUSA up to this time. In response to a wage cut, 1,000 miners at the western Pennsylvania Carnegie mine struck on May 26 and a total of 40,000 had left the pits by the end of June (Klehr, 1984, 44). The Party organized a major relief effort to collect money for feeding the strikers and their families during this bitter and bloody conflict. Although some mine owners were willing to settle, the NMU was committed to achieving a general agreement and rejected these owners' individual offers. By the beginning of July, the struggle had bogged down, but the CPUSA

refused to recognize the severity of the situation until late in August when William Z. Foster stated that a "temporary and organized retreat" was necessary in order to regroup for future battles (Klehr, 1984, 45; Cochran, 1977, 51).

The Party attributed the loss of the miners' walkout to NMU organizers failing to develop and train "necessary new cadres from below" that would be able to take over the strike's leadership. The CPUSA argued that the organizers performed all of the leadership work without involving the leaders duly elected by the workers, and that the walkout could not be consolidated because of the failure to build "local and pit organizations" that had "daily contact with the central strike leadership." Another reason for failure, according to the Party, was that the union did not sufficiently "develop a strong relief movement from the beginning of the strike" as well as the inability of the NMU to build a united front from below with the Musteite-led miners' work stoppage in southern West Virginia (RILU, [1932], 5-7).

Although the miners' strike was decisively lost, the Lawrence textile work stoppage ended in a partial victory (elimination of the efficiency experts and employer recognition of the mill committees) for the NTWU. However, a larger walkout occurred in the Lawrence textile mills in October 1931; some 23,000 workers shut down the city's entire industry when employers slashed wages by 10%. The NTWU was caught off guard and union organizers were quickly dispatched to Lawrence although they found themselves in competition with a reinvigorated Musteite-led United Textile Workers Union (UTW) for leadership. Both unions established their own strike committees, meetings and picket lines. With the two unions fighting the owners as well as each other, the walkout was easily defeated in six weeks and the workers ended their industrial action with the wage cut remaining in effect (Klehr, 1984, 43-44).

Certainly a major reason for the Lawrence textile strike's collapse was due to the NTWU's failure to form a united front from below with the UTW members. On the other hand, the furriers achieved a total victory in their work stoppage which the CPUSA attributed to the NTWIU's "correct application" of the united-front-from-below tactics by working systematically within the International Fur Workers Union (IFWU). Due to this strategy, the red needle trades union won these workers over to its programmatic demands and organized a



successful walkout leading to weekly wage increases from \$5 to \$15 (RILU, [1932], 8–9).

Membership figures for April 1931 demonstrate the problematic status of many TUUL unions, with only the NTWIU and the AWIL experiencing increased membership since August 1930 (RILU, [1932], 9), largely through conducting successful strikes. The CPUSA acknowledged the large gap between the influence that it exerted “among the masses” and the unions’ organizational stability, blaming the lack of growth on the TUUL’s inability to penetrate large factories and its failure to organize walkouts on the basis of the workers’ shop floor grievances. It also admitted that the red industrial unions had problems in retaining membership during and after strikes, was hindered by the labor organizations’ lack of daily work in addressing the “special grievances” that African-American, women and immigrant workers experienced, and that these unions were created on a national basis from above without sufficient representation from workers engaging in “the struggle in the shops” (RILU, [1932], 9–10).

The NTWIU, the healthiest of the TUUL affiliates, increased in size through its united front tactics and the managing of a number of successful strikes in 1931. However, the Party acknowledged that the union’s major weakness was that the bulk of its membership was located in New York City, with locals in Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston consisting of only a few hundred members each. In addition, the NTWIU had been unsuccessful in gaining access to the most influential independent union in the industry, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW), and in developing a united front from below with its members, according to the Party (RILU, [1932], 10–11).

While the TUUL languished on a national scale, it fared considerably better in the New York City district, doubling its membership from 8,500 to 17,000 from October 1931 to the middle of February 1932. The federation had established 68 shop groups among the district’s plants (not including those in the needle trades), and had organized 30 opposition groupings in factories represented by either independent or AFL unions. This resulted in the League having “direct organized contact” with 115,000 workers in the New York metropolitan area, while “its ideological influence” was even more extensive (TUUL, 1932a, 1).

From the middle of August 1931 through the middle of February 1932, the New York City District TUUL, operating under the name

of the Trade Union Unity Council (TUUC), led approximately 11,000 workers in defensive strikes against wage cuts and in offensive strikes for pay raises. About 65% of these walkouts ended in victory. Most of the defensive walkouts were won; in the "well organized" offensive work stoppages, employer-provided wage increases and either shop committee recognition or union recognition was achieved. This success was attributed to an expansion and "more successful operation of [the Party's] factory groups," the constructing of opposition groups within the non-TUUL unions, the successful implementation of united-front-from-below tactics, and a serious attempt to remove "bureaucratic practices and organizational chaos" from the "inner workings" of the red trade unions (TUUL, 1932a, 1).

In spite of the TUUC's successes, a number of primary weaknesses was outlined as reasons why the organization was "not making greater advances" among New York City workers. Major criticisms included having the trade union federation focusing on organizing smaller shops as opposed to larger ones, a failure to collectively activate the membership, and having "the office" serve as the union, using methods and tactics that appealed to neither youth nor women workers, and implementing an insufficient approach to attracting African-American workers (except in the needle trades). Other criticisms focused on deficient methods in planning strikes and insufficient collection of funds, inability to provide defense and distribute relief, having the TUUL affiliates assume leadership "at the tail of events," and reacting to mass pressure from below rather than shaping the development of events in a planned and purposeful manner (TUUL, 1932a, 2).

By the beginning of July 1932, the TUUC had approximately 20,000 members, with 16,500 found in eight industries: needle trades (10,000), shoe (1,500), food (1,200), laundry (1,000), office work (1,000), marine (900), furniture (600), and metal (300). These figures indicate that the New York City organization's strength was in the light industries, while it exhibited considerable weakness in the basic industries. The NTWIU experienced a continual upward trend, although development was uneven among its sections, leading the Party to claim that the union lacked organizational stability. For example, significant progress was being made among the furriers, dress-makers, and the knitgoods section, although the NTWIU was having trouble attracting cloak makers (Zack, 1932, 1).

In basic industry, the TUUC organizations were extremely weak. The Marine Workers Industrial Union (MWIU), composed mostly of deep seamen, had "very little activity" and virtually no organization on the waterfront, while in the Metal Workers Industrial League (MWIL) mass unemployment in the industry had decimated union activity (Zack, 1932, 4).

The one major walkout in heavy industry led by a TUUL affiliate was the Briggs Strike in Detroit, which began on January 23, 1933. Due to a wage cut, speed-up and dangerous working conditions, 6,000 workers struck four Briggs plants and turned to the AWU for help. The union and the CPUSA provided leadership, organized soup kitchens, and attempted to raise funds for the strikers. However, due to public red-baiting resulting in the removal of Communists from the strike committee, combined with lack of sufficient funds, the walkout foundered by early March, and the strikers returned to work having achieved only a few minor concessions (Cochran, 1977, 64-65; Keeran, 1980, 75-95; RILU, 1933, 20-23).

By March 1933, two of the three major TUUL unions, the NMU and the NTWU, had virtually disintegrated. Although the NMU stated that 102 locals existed, the union admitted that none were organized on the basis of either mines or pits. The NTWU was even in a worse situation, with only 700 to 800 members as of January 1933 concentrated mainly in Lawrence and New Bedford. The only League affiliate with any degree of stability was the NTWIU, which had increased to 14,000 members by January 1933, with approximately 12,000 based in New York City (RILU, 1933, 1-4).

With the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in June 1933, and the inclusion of Clause 7(a) which provided most private-sector workers with a federally protected right to organize, membership in all types of labor organizations dramatically increased (Klehr, 1984, 123). Within a matter of weeks after the Act's implementation, the TUUL benefitted from the increased demand for union representation.

By July 1933, the red industrial union federation claimed 50,000 to 60,000 members, between 65,000 and 70,000 one month later, and by the end of October 1933 the TUUL estimated a membership of approximately 125,000 to 130,000 (TUUL, 1933h; TUUL, 1933g, 3; TUUL, 1933c). More than half of the organization's members at this time were located in the East (67,000), 20,500 were found in the

Midwest and the remainder of the membership was scattered throughout the nation's other regions. In terms of industrial concentration, 73,000 members were in the light industries (needle, shoe, food, furniture, office and building) with only 29,500 members in heavy industry (mining, steel and metal, marine, auto, textile and packing) (TUUL, 1933c).

In late 1933, the bulk of the federation's membership appeared in companies that had fewer than 300 employees. In many shops with 150 workers or fewer, where the TUUL had a presence, particularly in needle and shoe, either all or a majority of employees were members of the respective affiliate. In establishments in excess of 1,000 workers, usually in either steel or metal, relatively low concentrations of League members existed. For example, in Hudson Motor, out of 2,500 employees, only seven were AWU members. The best member-to-employee ratio in large steel or metal establishments was found at Illinois Steel, with 22 SMWIU members out of 1,000 employees (TUUL, [1933j]).

The CPUSA's shop nuclei within the TUUL were in dismal shape. According to Klehr (1984, 41-42), only 10% of the Party's total membership was involved in 1930. In New York City in late 1933, the CPUSA had 52 shop nuclei in 12 industries, with 288 (either Party or Young Communist League) members. The most shop nuclei and the largest presence of members were in the needle trades, with 16 shop nuclei and 63 members, and the shoe industry, with 10 shop nuclei and 57 members (TUUL, [1933i]).

The New York City District had the most CPUSA and TUUL members, as noted; the Party's shop nuclei were either nonexistent or barely functioning in other sections of the country. For example, in the Philadelphia District TUUL affiliates, the CPUSA had only one member in a 600-strong packinghouse union; within the AWU only three workers were Party members, out of 200 SMWIU members only two were in the CPUSA and none were in the Party in a 150-member NTWU local (TUUL, 1933e, 2).

Compared to 1932, the NIRA's passage resulted in tripling the number of strikers in 1933 (Klehr, 1984, 123). The CPUSA estimated that nearly 670,000 workers engaged in work stoppages during the first eight months of 1933, with the red federation itself conducting walkouts in more than 15 industries (TUUL, 1933g, 1).

Of the 666 strikes occurring from January through August 1933, AFL unions led 311 strikes, TUUL affiliates directed 125 walkouts,

independent labor organizations conducted 129 work stoppages, and 101 spontaneous strikes emerged. The AFL-led walkouts were concentrated in three industries — mining, needle trades and textile — while a majority of TUUL-led strikes occurred in four industries: mining, needle trades, auto and shoe (TUUL, 1933g, 1). Two months later, the CPUSA estimated that one million workers had struck since the beginning of 1933. The AFL had directed 45% of these strikers, the TUUL had led 20%, independent unions had headed 17.5%, and 17.5% had been involved in spontaneous walkouts (*ibid.*).

If we estimate that the AFL had approximately 2.8 million members and the TUUL 125,000 members at the end of 1933 (Mikhailov, *et al.*, 1977, 205; Stachel, 1933, 1) then in calculating an index of strike mobilization effectiveness (number of strikes led divided by membership size), the AFL conducted one strike for every 9,003 members, while the TUUL directed one strike for every 1,000 members. Using an alternative measure, the ratio of number of strikers to membership, the AFL led approximately one-sixth of its membership on strike, while the TUUL led 1.6 times the number of its members in work stoppages during the first ten months of 1933.

The only labor organization that conducted strikes in agriculture during the last half of 1933 was the TUUL-affiliated Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU), previously named the Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union (AWIU) and before that, as previously mentioned, the AWIL. Since directing 5,000 Mexican and Filipino lettuce workers in a walkout in California's Imperial Valley in January 1930, the AWIL and its successor organizations had retained a strong presence among California agricultural laborers. Although the lettuce workers' strike eventually collapsed and the CAWIU lost other major California farm worker walkouts, the union did win 13 of at least 18 strikes among cotton pickers, pea pickers, strawberry pickers, lettuce workers, cherry pickers, pear pickers, and beet workers, the largest of which was the 18,000 cotton picker strike in the fall of 1933 in the San Joaquin Valley (Daniels, 1984, 111–116, 141–221; RILU, 1933).

In New York City, the TUUC unions were prospering, attaining a membership of 45,000 with the NTWIU having 18,200 and the SLWIU 8,500 members, respectively (TUUL, 1933c; TUUL, [1933k]). From the NIRA's enactment until the beginning of October 1933, the AFL conducted strikes of 112,700 workers and the TUUL affiliates directed walkouts encompassing 64,400 workers in New York City.

In virtually all of these actions, workers struck to obtain wage increases, minimum pay scales, reduced hours, an "equal division of work during the slow period in seasonal trades," and union recognition (TUUL, 1933f, 1).

The TUUC affiliates won most of the work stoppages that they conducted during this period. More than half of these strikers (35,000) were in the needle trades. Among this group, successful walkouts occurred among fur workers, bathrobe workers, custom tailors and knit good workers. In knit goods and bathrobe, strikers obtained wage increases ranging from 20% to 35%; in knit goods, the 35-hour work week was achieved. In bathrobe, union recognition was also attained, while in fur, substantial pay raises were won along with a 35-hour work week (TUUL, 1933f, 1; TUUC, [1933], 1-2).

In New York City, the SLWIU conducted walkouts that culminated in pay increases of between 20 and 50% for the vast majority of shoe workers; union membership multiplied more than seven-fold, from 1,200 to 9,000. As in other successful industrial actions, the CPUSA attributed the strike's success to a united-front-from-below policy with shoe workers organized in independent unions (TUUL, 1933f, 1; TUUC, [1933], 4-6).

However, not all TUUC-led work stoppages at this time were successful. Strikes of 2,000 tobacco workers and 2,000 cleaners and dyers ended in defeat, while a walkout of 1,000 laundry workers obtained only "shop committees with some improvements in the conditions of the workers" (TUUC, [1933], 5).

Virtually all TUUC-led strikes in the latter half of 1933 were conducted in light industries; there were no work stoppages in the heavy industries, such as transport, railroad, marine and heavy metal, which the CPUSA admitted the TUUC unions had problems penetrating (TUUC, [1933], 2). In addition, many of these strikes occurred in shops of at most several hundred workers, characteristic of the industries in which the TUUC unions experienced the most organizing success.

### *The TUUL's Oppositional Activities Within the AFL and the Independent Unions*

As mentioned earlier, one TUUL organizational strategy involved engaging in oppositional work within the AFL unions. This activity

focused on building Communist fractions within the AFL unions to eventually win the federation's rank-and-file membership to the revolutionary industrial unions. Klehr (1984, 119) argues that the Party placed, at best, minimal emphasis on organizing within the reformist unions; this conclusion is based on the CPUSA 1930 Convention Resolution, which devoted only one sentence to the work within the AFL while allotting four pages to the construction of the TUUL unions. Through 1932, Klehr claimed (1984, 120), "the Party was barely visible within the A.F. of L."

The reality, however, was far different from these official pronouncements, even though the CPUSA did not make significant progress within the craft-oriented federation until 1933. As early as February 1930, the TUUL actively organized the 5,000-worker New Orleans longshoremen strike, led by the AFL (Stachel, 1930, 2). In an April 1931 letter to Profintern leader Lozovsky, the Party reported that the NTWIU's Executive Board acknowledged that the union "has failed to develop any real minority organization" within the AFL needle trades unions and that the success of the red needle trades union depended on this (TUUL, 1931, 6).

The purpose of building League groups within the AFL needle trades unions was to organize a "struggle around a program of economic demands" and "united front movements between the minorities and the NTWIU" in order to eventually achieve "mass affiliation of these workers to the NTWIU." In the communication's conclusion, the CPUSA pointed out that work within the AFL unions was becoming an important issue not only for the NTWIU, but for all TUUL affiliates (TUUL, 1931, 7).

Through the end of 1932, the League's work within the AFL was deemed woefully inadequate by the radical trade union federation. The only major achievement that the TUUL could claim in this field was its campaign for unemployment insurance, in which "dozens of branches" of AFL unions, comprising approximately 200,000 members, supported the organization's drive. However, by fall 1932, this movement had bogged down and the momentum achieved within the AFL had essentially fizzled (RILU, 1933, 27-28).

Oppositional work within many individual AFL unions was equally dismal. For example, in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), the red miners' union lacked a "general programme of work," activity was uncoordinated, and the NMU did not occupy a leading role

(RILU, 1933, 2). The most successful work occurred within the six AFL needle trades unions. The primary focus of the NTWIU's activity took place in seven New York City locals of the 30,000-member ILGWU, although similar efforts also occurred in Chicago, Cleveland and Los Angeles. In Local 1, the NTWIU had obtained substantial majorities in electing 12 members to the Executive Board; in Local 9, the union's opposition group possessed approximately 800 members and controlled the Executive Board, with two of its members voted in as board chairman and board secretary. Finally, in Local 22, the 150-member opposition group elected several NTWIU members to the union's executive board (RILU, 1933, 6-7).

Within the AFL fur workers union, virtually the entire New York City branch of the IFWU joined the NTWIU after the latter's successful furrier strike, which also resulted in the Philadelphia IFWU local affiliating with the red union. The NTWIU's strongest oppositional activity within the Cloth, Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers' International Union took place within New York City Locals 24 and 42, where the union had organized factions of between 200 and 300 members. In the Tailors' Union, an oppositional group performed effective work and had secured control of the Chicago local through the end of 1932 (RILU, 1933, 7-8).

After the NIRA's passage, the TUUL affiliates' activity within both the AFL and independent unions experienced a significant upturn. By July 1933, the red union federation directed a number of independent unions that it hoped to eventually affiliate with the League, the largest being the Tobacco Workers Union of Florida (5,000 members), the SubPostal Workers (4,200 members), the Hod Carriers Union in New York City (800-1,000 members), and the Alteration Painters Union in New York City (800-1,000 members). Besides these labor organizations, the TUUL controlled several smaller independent unions totaling a few thousand members in industries such as metal, packinghouse, building, etc. in smaller cities (TUUL, 1933h, 1-2). By the end of October 1933, the red federation was leading 30,000 workers in independent unions, including textile (5,000 members), postal (4,000 members) and packing (3,000 members) (TUUL, 1933b).

In Philadelphia, the TUUL was particularly successful in organizing and leading independent unions. By the middle of October 1933, there were seven independent unions, totaling 7,025 members, that were either sympathetic to the federation or were directed by



either CPUSA or TUUL members. The largest of these unions were in textile (3,000), cement works (1,200), linoleum (1,000) and at Victor Radio (1,200). These membership figures in the League-led independent unions compared quite favorably to the 5,000 members in the Philadelphia district TUUL unions (TUUL, 1933e, 1).

Towards the end of 1933, the red federation believed that it was necessary to intensify its efforts within the independent unions because of the gains it felt it could achieve. For example, the League was working within the Progressive Miners of America (PMA), an Illinois-based 30,000-member union formed from a split in the UMWA and led by the Musteites and the Trotskyists. Because the PMA members strongly opposed reaffiliation with the UMWA and due to a growing revolt against the UMWA leadership among rank-and-file members, the TUUL felt that a strong independent union could be created that could rival the UMWA (RILU, 1933, 1; Stachel, 1933, 2).

After June 1933, the radical trade union federation made significant progress inside the AFL unions. Prior to the NIRA's implementation, the League's AFL oppositional activity had been primarily restricted to the needle and building trades. By the end of 1933, however, work "within the AFL [was] much more extensive and on a higher plane" than at any time since the TUUL's founding, particularly in the mining, building, metal, needle, textile, marine, baking, printing and railroad industries where the craft unions predominated. This activity within the AFL was most developed in New York City, where the League had "50 important opposition groups with the AFL unions" along with 1,200 CPUSA members at this time (TUUL, 1933a, 2).

In mining, the TUUL basically abandoned the NMU and focused much of its efforts in developing left-wing movements within the UMWA. The Pittsburgh district's entire activity, which had been the main base of the NMU, was involved in the UMWA and, although work was only in the preliminary stages, several hundred had been organized into opposition groups. In addition, in many UMWA locals, either CPUSA members or NMU supporters had been elected to leading positions (TUUL, 1933a, 2).

In metal, the League acknowledged that it was carrying on "very little work" within the AFL unions, although it was "making some progress" in several of the newly established federal AFL locals such as Philco Radio (6,000 members) in Philadelphia, in various Cleveland locals, and among navy yard and shipbuilding workers in New York City.

In textile, oppositional efforts occurred in the Philadelphia district among hosiery workers, knit goods workers, plush weavers and silk workers and in the New Jersey district among silk weavers and recently organized dye workers. In marine, TUUL activists were making significant gains within the Baltimore and Norfolk AFL locals, although many of the leading League members resisted working within the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) because of its reputation of being a racketeer-controlled union (TUUL, 1933e, 1; TUUL, 1933a, 2).

The most extensive TUUL work in the AFL was in the needle and building trades, including virtually all crafts such as the carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers, bricklayers, and structural iron workers. For example, within the Carpenters Union, the red federation had established a national movement and had received endorsement of its program from 400 local unions, with 225 Painters Union locals supporting a similar platform (TUUL, 1933a, 2).

Within the needle trades, oppositional efforts were being carried on in most of the nation's large cities, with the most advanced work occurring in the New York City district. In some locals, this movement had elected the leadership; it encompassed 2,000 members of the various AFL needle trades unions, the most significant being the ACW and the ILGWU (TUUL, 1933a, 2).

With the TUUL experiencing more success within the AFL unions during the second half of 1933, the League's oppositions also were more likely to play dominant roles in AFL-led strikes. In many of these walkouts, these groups forced the AFL leadership to agree to the election of rank-and-file strike committees, provided picket line direction and fought against the union acceding to what they characterized as "a sellout settlement." In their strike support work, the TUUL activists distributed leaflets among the participants, raised their programs at both shop and mass meetings and continued to propagandize and agitate through their day-to-day contact among the strikers (TUUL, 1933g, 2; TUUL, 1933f, 2).

For example, in AFL-led walkouts in New York City in the summer and fall of 1933, the radical federation was active in strikes of needle trades workers (75,000), pocketbook workers (5,000), hatters (3,000) and doll workers (3,000). The TUUL obtained wage increases 15% higher than the union officials were initially willing to accept in the hatters' walkout and had "the sellout settlement" unanimously rejected in the doll workers' strike (TUUL, 1933f, 1-2).

In the various AFL needle trades' work stoppages, the TUUL helped to defeat the leadership's "sellout settlement" in the white goods walkout. In the cloakmakers strike, League activists led the successful vote, by a two-to-one margin, against the implementation of piecework and forced the AFL officials and the National Recovery Administration to "give the cloakmakers a code that is perhaps the best in the country" (TUUL, 1933f, 2).

*Did TUUL Unionism Offer a Different Vision than AFL Unionism?*

Besides organizing industrial workers, the TUUL attempted to promote a more democratic, activist and participatory unionism, or "bottom up unionism," among its rank-and-file members, as opposed to the AFL's bureaucratic, or "top down," approach. The League unions also tried to address the concerns and develop the leadership of workers traditionally ignored by the AFL: young, women and African-American workers. Although it was not always successful in achieving these lofty objectives, the radical trade union federation worked diligently to turn its vision into a reality.

As early as the summer of 1930, the TUUL noted with pride that the NTWIU had been "reorganized on a shop delegate basis" and that more than half of its leaders were workers who had come directly out of the shops. Progress had also been made with regard to African-American and young workers and both groups were represented in the union's general leadership. In addition, within the NTWU, the union's national council was composed of an "overwhelming majority" of "rank-and-file workers, including young workers from the shops" (Schmies, 1930, 1-2).

In spite of attempts to reach out to women and African-American workers, the TUUL argued, in April 1931, that a problem limiting the organization's growth was that it was not adequately addressing the "special grievances among Negro and women workers" (TUUL, [1932b], 1). Even in New York City, where the red trade union federation began to experience a modicum of success in late 1931 and early 1932, the League acknowledged that its work among women, African-American and young workers was insufficient. However, the TUUC unions' major weakness was considered to be the "lack of planned, collective activization of the membership." In addressing

this problem, the New York City organization discussed how its organizing tactics must necessarily be different from those of the AFL, if it was to be successful in enrolling workers:

A union with a small active and large passive membership could exist, "the office" functioning as the union. Red trade unions, whose existence and effectiveness depends not only on the mass but how alert that mass is to its class interests at the point of production, must have a tremendously large active organization for collective leadership. Organization inside big plants can only be done by developing the workers that work there into rank-and-file organizers. This essential difference between old organizing tactics emanating from class collaboration days and red trade union organization is not understood. (TUUL, 1932a, 2.)

In the summer of 1932, the TUUC concluded that it "functions as an office" and that "real collective leadership" had not been developed and that participation depended solely on a "narrow circle" of union activists (Zack, 1932, 5).

In analyzing the failure of certain TUUL-led work stoppages during the 1930-1932 period, the organization believed that insufficient worker involvement was a major drawback. For example, in the 40,000-strong NMU-led strike in the late spring/summer of 1931, a key problem in the walkout, according to the League, was "the failure to activise (the workers) for the building of local and pit organisations." In addition, noting the important role of young workers in the mining industry, the radical trade union federation pointed out that the red miners' union failed to develop "special youth commissions attached to the strike leadership" in order to recruit young workers as strike leaders. Finally, although it was acknowledged that the African-American miners "showed themselves as brave fighters in the strike," the TUUL criticized the NMU for not sufficiently drawing this group of workers into the strike leadership, for ignoring the "specific discriminations" of the African-American workers and for not conducting "a systematic campaign against all manifestations of chauvinism among the white workers" (RILU, [1932] 7-8).

This problem of the League unions insufficiently addressing the particular complaints of African-American workers and not confronting "the chauvinism of white workers" during strikes was a recurring problem from 1930 to 1932. For example, a walkout conducted by

the SMWIU in September 1932 at the Trumbell Mill of the Republic Steel Corporation in Warren, Ohio was criticized on the grounds that the union performed unsatisfactorily in organizing African-American workers, failed to include their specific demands in the strike program and capitulated to the chauvinist attitudes of the white, native-born workers (RILU, 1933, 8–9).

Even after the TUUL affiliates led many more successful work stoppages after the NIRA's passage, the federation noted that "there are still many serious shortcomings to be overcome." While applauding the fact that "the strike committees were organized on a democratic basis," it criticized these bodies for not being "placed in full leadership" of the walkouts. In many industrial actions, the League noted, the strike committees played more of an agitational role than one of actually "leading the strikes," with the direction of the work stoppage remaining "in the hands of the top leadership" (TUUC, [1933], 9).

In relation to these more successful walkouts in the latter half of 1933, the TUUL remarked on the continuing deficiencies of its organizing among African-American, women and young workers. Their special demands were not incorporated into the strike programs, and workers from these three groups were not sufficiently integrated into leadership roles. Finally, the League unions were unsuccessful in combating "white chauvinism among the workers" during work stoppages and for allowing, in some shops, African-American workers to receive "lower prices than white workers" for performing the same job (TUUC, [1933], 10–11).

### *The End of the Road for the TUUL*

In 1934, independent union growth slowed. Three of the four major class battles of that year were won by AFL affiliates, although they were led or supported by ideological leftists of various stripes — the Musteite-led Toledo Auto-Lite Strike, the Trotskyist-led Teamsters strike in Minneapolis and the CPUSA-led strike in San Francisco of the ILA. Analyzing this wave of industrial conflict in September 1934, the Party Central Committee resolved that it was necessary for the CPUSA to intensify its efforts in the AFL while simultaneously strengthening both its work and leadership in the TUUL unions (Klehr, 1984, 132).

However, at this time, the ground was shifting in Moscow, with a movement to return to the reformist unions. This led to the federation's folding in two phases. In November 1934, Stachel reported that the NMU had been disbanded in late spring of 1934 and the NTWU had collapsed during the September 1934 textile strike. He instructed the steel union and the AWU to cease operations and to enter the AFL. Although Stachel announced that the Party's major policy was to join and to build oppositions within the craft unions, he stated that those TUUL affiliates that possessed a mass base in industries where no reformist union existed or the union was weak would not be abolished unless the AFL would accept these labor organizations "with their leadership and organizations intact." According to Stachel, "the metal, marine, fur, food, and furniture unions" would continue to function as red industrial unions (Cochran, 1977, 75; Klehr, 1984, 132).

However, even the affiliates that the Party felt were viable soon went under. In December 1934, the Comintern Executive Committee called for the elimination of the revolutionary unions, leading the CPUSA Central Committee to order the remaining TUUL affiliates to join their respective AFL unions under any conditions. In February 1935, the MWIU closed shop and its members entered the International Seaman's Union; that same month, the NTWIU's fur workers section began discussion with the IFWU and merged with the union in the summer of 1935. The Metal Workers Industrial Union (minus its steel section, which had joined with the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers in the fall of 1934) went into the International Association of Machinists in the spring of 1935 (Cochran, 1977, 75; Klehr, 1984, 132-3).

### *Conclusion: A Reevaluation of the TUUL*

While the widely-held view is that the TUUL was an abject and total failure, this article demonstrates that a more nuanced understanding of its successes and failures is required and necessary for an accurate evaluation. Even though the League unions took over many spontaneous strikes, especially from 1930 to 1932, and lost many of them, they did provide a voice and leadership to workers who received little to no support for their activities from any other quarter. Although the TUUL never developed a concentration in heavy industry and was fairly weak (or nonexistent) in many parts of the United

States, it did develop a base of support in New York City, where it had some success in organizing and conducting strikes in smaller shops in light industries, particularly in the needle trades and shoe. In a number of these walkouts, the red trade unions were victorious when they were able to effectively implement united front tactics from below with workers who were members of competing labor organizations. In addition, the TUUL worked within both the AFL and the independent unions in obtaining leadership posts, and in many industries built active and vibrant left-wing oppositions. These activists continually pushed the AFL officials to fight in a more aggressive and principled manner during strikes, and many times League members provided essential leadership during walkouts of independent unions.

Although much of the organization's literature aimed for public consumption was filled with political slogans, such as "Defend the Soviet Union," in their daily activities, TUUL organizers did not emphasize implementation of these slogans. In fact, one complaint of the federation's leaders was that "our organizers" and the "leading comrades" in the Party were not willing to "bring forward the Party or even to explain the revolutionary character" of the League unions to rank-and-file members (TUUL, 1933e, 2). Instead, they practiced a far-sighted industrial unionism that was meant to appeal to workers not traditionally represented by labor organizations, such as agricultural, African-American, women and young workers.

The TUUL also offered an alternative vision of trade unionism when compared with the AFL. While it attempted to reach out to the more oppressed groups of workers mentioned above, it also promoted a democratic, participatory and shop-floor-oriented approach to trade unionism. Although the League was not always successful in developing fully self-governing and activist unions, it continually pushed its affiliates in this direction.

If the Comintern had not abolished the TUUL in 1934, could it have become the foundation of a viable left-wing industrial trade union federation in the post-Wagner Act period, when organizing became considerably easier? Based on the organization's strength being centered in the light industries in and around New York City, combined with its difficulties in effectively recruiting in heavy industry, it is unlikely that the TUUL would have been able to achieve such status. Furthermore, when militancy intensified in 1934 and AFL unions led three of the four major strikes that year, the red trade

unions were in the process of being eclipsed by a somewhat reinvigorated AFL.

Nevertheless, this vision of a democratic and activist trade unionism, nurtured in the TUUL in the early 1930s until its demise in 1934, provided a bridge and an excellent training ground for CPUSA trade union activists when they reentered the AFL in 1934 and 1935. Becoming a major force in organizing the CIO unions in the mid- to late-1930s, the League's initial efforts laid the foundation for large gains for the U. S. working class. For example, the NTWIU's fur section became the basis of the reconstituted Fur and Leather Workers' Union, the largest openly Communist labor organization in the CIO, when it reentered the AFL union in 1935 (Foner, 1950). In addition, establishment of a tightly interwoven rank-and-file structure on the shop floor, initially advocated by the TUUL, served as the lynchpin of the CPUSA's amazing success in organizing and acquiring leadership of the 600,000-strong United Electrical Workers (Filipelli and McColloch, 1995). Moreover, the CPUSA not only helped to build many of the CIO unions; Party-led unions of the late 1930s and 1940s were also more likely to have had a more activist shop-floor orientation than non-CPUSA-led unions (Gilpin, 1988; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 1991, 2002; McColloch, 1992; Devinatz, 1996).

The TUUL unions' important struggle was the beginning of the CPUSA's commitment to building a viable industrial unionism in the United States. When these unions are viewed from this perspective, one must consider them to have been far from a total failure.

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