

## Chapter 4

### An Organization of Revolutionaries

Otto was pleased when I first told him of my desire to join the Party in the summer of 1922. He said that he had known that I had been ready to join for some time, but he suggested that I should wait a while before joining. When I asked why, he told me about an unpleasant situation that had arisen in the Party's Southside branch.

Most of the few Black members were concentrated in this English-speaking branch, but it seemed that a number of recent Black recruits had dropped out. They resented the paternalistic attitude displayed toward them by some of the white comrades who, Otto said, treated Blacks like children and seemed to think that the whites had all the answers. It was only a temporary situation, he assured me. The matter had been taken up before the Party District Committee; if it was not resolved there, they would take it to the Central Committee.

"And if you don't get satisfaction there?" I queried.

"Well, then there's the Communist International!" he replied emphatically. "It's as much our Party as it is theirs."

I was properly impressed by his sincerity and by the idea that we could appeal our case to the "supreme court" of international communism, which included such luminaries as the great Lenin.

The Blacks who had remained in the Party had decided not to bring any new members into the branch until the matter was satisfactorily settled. I was rather surprised to hear all of this. Clearly, membership in the Party did not automatically free whites from white supremacist ideas. Nor, for that matter, did it free Blacks from their distrust of whites. Throughout my lifetime, I found that interracial solidarity—even in the Communist Party required a continuous ideological struggle.

Otto suggested that until the matter was cleared up I should join the African Blood Brotherhood. The ABB was a secret, all-Black, revolutionary organization to which some of the Black Party members belonged—including Otto. I later learned that the matter of white paternalism was eventually resolved to the satisfaction of the Black comrades. I don't recall the details; I think that Arne Swabeck (the district organizer) or Robert Minor from the Central Committee finally came down and lectured the branch on the evils

of race prejudice and threatened disciplinary action to the point of expulsion of comrades guilty of bringing bourgeois social attitudes into the Party.

In the meantime, I took Otto's advice and joined the African Blood Brotherhood. He took me to see Edward Doty, then commander of the Brotherhood's Chicago Post. Vouched for by Otto and Doty, I was taken to a meeting of the membership committee and went through the induction ceremonies. This consisted of an African fraternization ritual requiring the mixing of blood between the applicant and one of the regular members. The organization took its name from this ritual. Doty performed the ceremony; he pricked our index fingers with a needle (I hoped it was sterilized!) and when drops of blood appeared, he rubbed them together.

Now a Blood Brother, I proceeded to take the Oath of Loyalty which contained a clause warning that divulging of any of the secrets of the organization was punishable by death. I was deeply impressed by all this; the atmosphere of great secrecy appealed to my romantic sense. There were two degrees of membership; one was automatically conferred upon joining and the second, which I took a few days later, involved the performance of some service for the organization. In my case, as I recall, it was a trivial task—the selling of a dozen or so copies of its magazine, *The Crusader*.

At the time that I joined the African Blood Brotherhood, I knew little about the organization other than the fact that it was in some way associated with the Communist Party. I do remember having read a copy or two of *The Crusader* before I joined the group.

Some of the history of the ABB I got from Otto and other post members, but most of it I found out much later when I met and worked with Cyril P. Briggs, the original founder of the group. The African Blood Brotherhood was founded in New York City in 1919 by a group of Black radicals under the leadership of Briggs. A West Indian (as were most of the founders), he was a former editor of the *Amsterdam News*, a Black New York newspaper. He quit in disagreement over policy with the owner, who attempted to censor his anti-war editorials. Briggs's own magazine, *The Crusader*, was established in 1919. The Brotherhood was organized around the magazine with Briggs as its executive head presiding over a supreme council.

The group was originally conceived as the African Blood Brotherhood “for African liberation and redemption” and was later

broadened to “for immediate protection and ultimate liberation of Negroes everywhere.” As it was a secret organization, it never sought broad membership. National headquarters were in New York. Its size never exceeded 3,000. But its influence was many times greater than this; the *Crusader* at one time claimed a circulation of 33,000. There was also *The Crusader* News Service which was distributed to two hundred Black newspapers.

Briggs, his associates—Richard B. Moore, Grace Campbell and others—and *The Crusader* were among the vanguard forces for the New Negro movement, an ideological current which reflected the new mood of militancy and social awareness of young Blacks of the post-war period. In New York, the New Negro movement also included the radical magazine, *The Messenger*, edited by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, and *The Emancipator*, edited by W.A. Domingo. Many of the groups were members of the Socialist Party or close to it politically. They espoused “economic radicalism,” an over-simplified interpretation of Marxism which, nevertheless, enabled them to see the economic and social roots of racial subjugation. Historically, theirs was the first serious attempt by Blacks to adopt the Marxist world view and the theory of class struggle to the problems of Black Americans. Within this broad grouping, however, there were differences which emerged later. Briggs was definitely a revolutionary nationalist; that is, he saw the solution of the “race problem” in the establishment of independent Black nation-states in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States. In America, he felt this could be achieved only through revolutionizing the whole country. This meant he saw revolutionary white workers as allies. These were elements of a program which he perceived as an alternative to Garvey’s plan of mass exodus.

A self-governing Black state on U.S. soil was a novel idea for which Briggs sent up trial balloons in the form of editorials in the *Amsterdam News* in 1917, of which he was then editor. Shortly after the entrance of the United States into World War I, he wrote an editorial entitled “Security of Life for Poles and Serbs—Why Not for Colored Americans?”<sup>2</sup>

Briggs, however, had no definite idea for the location of the future “colored autonomous state,” suggesting at various times Washington, Oregon, Idaho, California or Nevada. Later, after President Wilson had put forth his fourteen points in January 1918, Briggs equated the plight of Blacks in the United States to nations occupied

by Germany and demanded:

With what moral authority or justice can President Wilson demand that eight million Belgians be freed when for his entire first term and to the present moment of his second term he has not lifted a finger for justice and liberty for over TEN MILLION colored people, a nation within a nation, a nationality oppressed and jim-crowed, yet worthy as any other people of a square deal or failing that, a separate political existence?<sup>3</sup>

He continued this theme in *The Crusader*. One year after the founding of the Brotherhood, Briggs shifted from the idea of a Black state on U.S. soil to the advocacy of a Black state in Africa, South America or the Caribbean, where those Blacks who wanted to could migrate. In this, he was undoubtedly on the defensive, giving ground to the overwhelming Garvey deluge then sweeping the national Black community. In 1921, Briggs was to link the struggle for equal rights of U.S. Blacks with the establishment of a Black state in Africa and elsewhere:

.Just as the Negro in the United States can never hope to win equal rights with his white neighbors until Africa is liberated and a strong Negro state (or states) erected on that continent, so, too, we can never liberate Africa unless, and until, the American Section of the Negro Race is made strong enough to play the part for a free Africa that the Irish in America now play for a free Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

The Brotherhood rejected Garvey's racial separatism. They knew that Blacks needed allies and tied the struggle for equal rights to that of the progressive section of white labor. In the 1918-1919 elections, the Brotherhood supported the Socialist Party candidates. *The Crusader* and the ABB were ardent supporters of the Russian Revolution; they saw it as an opportunity for Blacks to identify with a powerful international revolutionary movement.<sup>5</sup> It enabled them to overcome the isolation inherent in their position as a minority people in the midst of a powerful and hostile white oppressor nation. Thus, *The Crusader* called for an alliance with the Bolsheviks against race prejudice. In 1921, the magazine made its clearest formulation, linking the struggles of Blacks and other oppressed nations with socialism:

The surest and quickest way, then, in our opinion, to achieve the salvation of the Negro is to combine the two most likely and feasible propositions, viz.: salvation for all Negroes through the establishment of a strong, stable, independent Negro State (along the lines of our own race genius) in Africa and elsewhere: and salvation for all Negroes (as well as other oppressed people) through the establishment of a Universal Socialist Co-operative commonwealth.<sup>6</sup>

The split in the world socialist movement as a result of the First World War led to the formation of the Third (Communist) International in 1919. This split was reflected in the New Negro movement as well. Randolph and Owens, the whole *Messenger* crowd, remained with the social democrats of the Second International who were in opposition to the Bolshevik revolution. Members of *The Crusader* group—Briggs, Moore and others—gravitated toward the Third International and eventually joined its American affiliate, the Communist Party. They were followed in the next year or two by Otto Hall, Lovett Fort-Whiteman and others.

The decline of the African Blood Brotherhood in the early twenties and its eventual demise coincided with the growing participation of its leadership in the activities of the Communist Party. By 1923-24, the Brotherhood had ceased to exist as an autonomous, organized expression of the national revolutionary trend. Its leading members became communists or close sympathizers and its posts served as one of the Party's recruiting grounds for Blacks.

I first met Briggs upon my return from Russia in 1930. We were to strike up a lasting friendship—one that went beyond the comradeship of the Party and which extended over more than three decades, until his death in 1967. Throughout those years, we were associated on numerous projects and found ourselves on the same side of many political issues.

When I first met Briggs, he conformed to the impression that I had been given of him: a tall, impressive-looking man—so light in complexion that he was often mistaken for white. He had a large head and bushy black eyebrows. He was a man possessed of great physical and moral courage, which I was to observe on many occasions. Briggs also had a fiery temper, which was usually controlled in the case of comrades or friends.

He had one outstanding physical defect—he was a heavy stutterer. He stuttered so much that it often took him several seconds to get out the first word of a sentence. When he took the floor at meetings we would all listen attentively; no one would interrupt him because we knew he always had something important and pertinent to say. While he spoke we would cast our eyes down and look away from him to avoid making him feel self-conscious, though he never seemed to be.

We noticed that he stuttered less when he was angry. One such occasion was when Garvey rejected Briggs's offer of cooperation. The wily Garvey saw through the maneuver for what it was—an attempt by Briggs to gain a position from which he could better attack him. Garvey lashed out at Briggs, calling him a “white man trying to pass himself off as a Negro.”

Friends told me that this attack sent Briggs into such a rage that he mounted a soapbox at Harlem's 135th Street and Lenox Avenue and assailed Garvey for two hours without a stutter, branding him a charlatan and a fraud. Not content with this verbal lashing of his enemy, Briggs hauled Garvey into court on the charge of defamation of character. He won the case, forcing Garvey to make a public apology and pay a fine of one dollar.

Briggs's real forte, however, was as a keen polemicist, a veritable master of invective. His speech handicap was a pity, because aside from the stutter he had all the qualities of a good orator. Closely associated with Briggs was Richard B. Moore, a fine orator who did much public speaking for the ABB.

What were the reasons for the decline of the ABB and its eventual absorption by the Communist Party? Why did Briggs fail to develop the program for Black self-determination in the USA? In the fifties, I had a series of talks with Briggs and asked his opinion on these questions.

His overall appraisal of the role of the Brotherhood was that it was a forerunner of the contemporary national revolutionary trend and a very positive thing. “Of course, we didn't stop Garvey,” he said, but “we were beginning to develop a revolutionary alternative. We did put a crimp in his sails,” Briggs added.

For a while, the ABB had been a rallying center for left opposition to Garvey. Its membership included class-conscious Black workers and revolutionary intellectuals and drew membership from both disillusioned Garveyites and radicals who never took to Garvey's

program in the first place. The main reason for de-emphasizing the idea of Black nationhood in the United States, Briggs stated, was the unfavorable relationship of forces then existing.

Garvey, with his Back to Africa program, had preempted the leadership of the mass movement and corralled most of the militants. His hold over the masses was strengthened by the anti-Black violence of the Red Summer of 1919. This gave further credence to Garvey's contention that the U.S. was a white man's country where Blacks could never achieve equality. Indeed, for these masses, his program for a Black state in Africa to which American Blacks could migrate seemed far less utopian than the idea of a Black state on U.S. soil.

As for the South, Briggs did not feel that such a region of entrenched racism could be projected realistically as a territorial focus of a Black nationalist state. It would not have been so accepted by the masses who were in flight from the area. For himself, he reasoned, the very idea of self-determination in the United States presupposed the support of white revolutionaries. That meant a revolutionary crisis in the country as a whole, and in that day no such prospect was in sight. In fact, white revolutionary forces were then small and weak, the target of the vicious anti-red drives of the government and employers.

In other words, he felt that Black self-determination in the United States was an idea whose time had not yet come. The communists didn't have all the answers, and neither did we, Briggs indicated. Whites, as well as a number of Black radicals, undoubtedly underestimated the national element; socialism alone was seen as the solution. Briggs was impressed, however, by the sincerity and revolutionary ardor of the communists and by the fact that they were a detachment of Lenin's Third Communist International. He felt that the future of the revolution in the United States and of Black liberation lay in multinational communist leadership.

Though the ABB ceased to exist as an organized, independent expression of the national revolutionary current, the tendency itself remained, awaiting the further maturing of its main driving force, the Black proletariat. By the end of the decade, the national revolutionary sentiment was to find expression in the program of the Communist Party.

By the time I joined the Brotherhood's Chicago post in the summer of 1922, *The Crusader* had dropped much of its original

national revolutionary orientation. Although I was then unaware of it, Briggs and the supreme council were presiding over the absorption of the organization into the Communist Party.

In Chicago, the decline of the organization was slower than elsewhere. Perhaps this was because it had a strong base among Black building-tradesmen, plumbers, electricians and bricklayers. Edward Doty, a plumber by trade, was simultaneously the ABB post commander and a leader and founder of the American Consolidated Trades Council (ACTC). The council was a federation of independent Black unions and groups in the building trades industry who had formed their own unions for the double purpose of protecting Black workers on the job and counteracting the discriminatory policies of the white AFL craft unions dominant in the field.

Doty, a tall, muscular man, was born in Mobile, Alabama, and had come north in 1912 at the age of seventeen. According to him, most of the Black steamfitters and plumbers had learned their trades in the stockyards during the industrial boom and labor shortage that accompanied World War I. Some, however, had gotten their training at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Active in the Brotherhood along with Doty were such outstanding leaders of the Black workers' struggle as Herman Dorsey (an electrician) and Alexander Dunlap (a plumber).

Besides the tradesmen, other members of the ABB post included a number of older radicals such as Alonzo Isabel, Norval Allen, Gordon Owens, H.V. Phillips, Otto Hall and several others. Together with Doty, they made up the communist core of the Brotherhood.

My experiences in the ABB marked my first association with Black communists. I had met some of them before, at forums and lectures; I had heard Owens speak at the Bugs Club and Dill Pickle forums, but I had never worked together with any of them before.<sup>7</sup> They were mostly workers from the stockyards and other industries. One or two, like myself, were from the service trades. Like Otto, several of them had previously been in the Garvey movement. There was no doubt that they represented a politically advanced section of the Black working class. They were the types who today would be called "political activists," the people who kept abreast of the issues in the Southside community and participated in local struggles.

I was interested to learn their backgrounds and how they had come to the revolutionary movement. I found that some of them had

been among Chicago's first Marxist-oriented Black radicals and had been associated with the Free Thought Society. This society was formed immediately after the war and held regular forums. I believe its leader and founder was a young man named Tibbs. He was one of the earliest of Chicago's Black radicals. A victim of police harassment and persecution, Tibbs was arrested during the Palmer raids in 1919 and spent several years in jail on a fake charge of stealing automobile tires. This continual persecution reduced his political effectiveness, which was as the authorities intended.

Members of the Free Thought Society Forum, I learned, had cooperated with the New Negro group of economic radicals centered around the radical weekly, *The Whip*, edited by Joseph Bibb, A.C. MacNeal (who later became secretary of the Chicago NAACP), and William C. Linton. The members of this group, unlike their New York counterparts, were not avowed socialists. They were, nevertheless, influenced by socialist ideas and regarded the "race problem" as basically economic.

In 1920, members of the Free Thought Society took an active part in the campaign of the Independent Non-Partisan League, sponsored by *The Whip* and its editors. This coalition ran a full slate of candidates in the Republican primary of that year, in which they challenged the old guard Republicans of the second ward Republican organization as well as the so-called New People's Movement of Oscar DePriest.<sup>8</sup>

The election platform called for abolition of all discrimination, for public ownership of utilities, civil service reform, women's suffrage, children's welfare service and "organization of labor into one union." While they were not successful in turning back the Republican old guard, the campaign resulted in appreciable gains for some of the league's candidates.

At that time, the main efforts of the ABB were directed at mobilizing community support for the Black ACTC tradesmen. While retaining a secret character, its members participated as individuals in campaigns on local issues. They collaborated with the Trade Union Education League (TUEL) of which Doty was a member, in its drive to organize the stockyards. The TUEL supported the demands of the ACTC. At that time, it was led by William Z. Foster and Jack Johnstone. Later to become the Trade Union Unity League, it was a gathering of the revolutionary and progressive forces within trade unions to fight against the reactionary labor bureaucracy and their

collaborationist policies and Jim Crowism.

Other members of the Brotherhood participated in the campaign against high rents that was waged in the Southside community. This was a fight in which a white Party member, Bob Minor, and his wife, Lydia Gibson, played leading roles.

I found my experience in the Brotherhood both stimulating and rewarding. In addition to learning a lot from the communists with whom I was associated, it was here I forged my first active association with Black industrial workers. I found them literate, articulate and class conscious, a proud and defiant group which had been radicalized by the struggles against discriminatory practices of the unions and employers. They understood the meaning of solidarity and the need for militant organization to obtain their objectives. In this, they were quite different from the people with whom I had been associated at the post office, as well as writers whom I so commonly found to be stamped with a hustler mentality. Doty and his followers in the Trades Council were pioneers in the struggle for the rights of Black workers, a struggle which has continued over half a century and remains unfinished to this day.

The older tradesmen finally fought their way into the unions, the electricians in 1938 and the plumbers in 1947. In the early fifties, Doty became the first Black officer in the plumbers' union. But these gains were only token! The bars are still up against Blacks and other minority workers seeking jobs in the ninety billion dollar-a-year industry.

## THE YOUNG COMMUNIST LEAGUE

My sojourn in the African Blood Brotherhood was brief—about six months. I felt the need to move on. My original goal was the Communist Party. While I was in the ABB, the problem of white chauvinism in the Southside branch had been cleared up. Joining the Party was no longer a problem, after all, the Brotherhood had been but a stopover.

I was about to apply for admission when H.V. Phillips asked me to join the Young Workers (Communist) League, the youth division of the Communist Party. Phillips, I learned, was a member of the district and national committees of the League. When I told him I was just about to join the Party, he said: “That’s all right, but you’re a young fellow and should be among the youth. Besides, more of us Blacks are needed in the League.”

I thought the matter over. “Why not? It’s all the same, they’re all communists.”

The next day Phillips took me to meet John Harvey, a white youth who was district organizer of the League. Harvey told me that I had been highly recommended to them by Phillips and others. He expressed delight at my decision to join and said that it fit right in with their plans since they were anxious to move forward with work among Black youth, but were handicapped by the fact that they had only a few Black members.

I expressed doubt that I could be considered a youth at the age of twenty-five.

They replied that there were a number of members my age and older in the organization. All that was needed, they assured me, was for one to have the “youth angle.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“Oh, that simply means the ability to understand youth and their problems and to be able to communicate with them.”

I was not sure I had all of these qualities, but the proposition appealed to me. So I joined the YCL in the winter of 1923. The League at that time was a close-knit fraternity of idealistic and dedicated young people determined to build a new world for future generations. When we sang the Youth International at meetings, we actually felt ourselves to be, as the song proclaimed, “the youthful guardsmen of the proletariat.”

The organization was small, with only several hundred members. As I recall, Phillips and myself were the only Blacks. I was still working on the Santa Fe and on layovers I spent most of the time getting acquainted with my new comrades, attending classes, meetings and social gatherings. I was impressed by what seemed to me to be a high level of political development and by their use of Marxist terminology. It made me keenly aware of my own sketchy knowledge of Marxism and the revolutionary movement and spurred me to close the gap. A partial explanation for their political sophistication, I felt, was the fact that a large number of them, perhaps a majority, were “red diaper” babies—their parents being old revolutionaries, either members of the Party or its supporters. On the whole, they were a spirited, intelligent group, and as far as I could discern exhibited not a trace of race prejudice. Many went on to become leaders of the Party.

There was our district organizer, John Harvey, a lanky youth

and one of the few WASPs; Max Shachtman, a brilliant young orator and editor of the League's theoretical organ, the *Young Worker*, who was later to become first a Trotskyist and then a rabid, professional anti-communist. There was Valeria Meltz, an able young leader, and her brother; their ethnic background was Russian-American, as was that of Jim Sklar (Keller). His brothers Gus and Boris were old stalwarts in the Russian Federation and were well known. There was also Nat Kaplan (Ganley) and Gil Green. Gil was about sixteen at the time; we used to call him "the kid." He went on to become national chairman of the YCL and later a national leader in the Party. I met a number of the League's national leaders: Johnny Williamson, a Scottish-American and national secretary, Herbert Zam, Sam Darcy, Marty Abern, Phil Herbert and others, many of whom were to become national leaders of the Party.

There was no scarcity of places for meetings or for social affairs. We were on friendly terms with Jane Addams and her people at Hull House, where we sometimes met. Other times we used the halls of various language groups. We participated in and supported the activities of the Anti-Imperialist League, headed by Manny Gomez, the Party's Latin American specialist. The main campaign at the time was against the invasion of Nicaragua by the U.S. Marines.

I was particularly impressed by Bob Mazut, a young Russian representative of the Young Communist International (YCI) in the League. A small, dark-complected and soft-spoken young man. Mazut hailed from Soviet Georgia. His mild manner belied his impressive background. Only twenty-five when I met him, he had fought in the Revolution and Civil War, first as a Red Partisan and then in the Red Army, in which he advanced to the rank of colonel. He spoke what we called "political English," and we were always amused by some of his expressions. For example, I remember how we used to kid Mazut about his being sweet on a certain girl comrade. "She likes you very much," someone would say, "but she's a little overawed by you."

He replied very seriously, "How can I liquidate her suspicions of me?"

He took particular interest in me. I believe Phillips and I were the first Blacks he had ever really known and for us he was the first real Soviet communist we had met. I asked questions about Russia and told him I wanted to go there and see it for myself. "You un-

doubtedly will,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone, as if the matter were settled.

On one occasion he told me of a discussion he had had on the eve of his departure from Russia. Zinoviev, then president of the Communist International, had asked him to look closely into the Afro-American question in the United States, and to see if he could find any confirmation for his belief and that of other Russian leaders that the right of self-determination was the appropriate slogan for Black rebellion. Zinoviev added that he had long believed that the question would become the “Achilles heel of American imperialism.” I told Mazut that I liked the part about the “Achilles heel,” but I didn’t feel that the slogan of self-determination was applicable for U.S. Blacks. It was my understanding that the principle had to do with nations, and Blacks were not a national but a racial minority. To me, it smacked of Garvey’s separatism.

Mazut nevertheless raised the question of self-determination for discussion in a meeting of the Chicago District Committee of the YCL. Desirous of getting the committee’s reaction to the question, he was literally shouted down by the white comrades. “Blacks are Americans,” they said. “They want equality, not separation.” Phillips and I, the only Black members of the committee, were non-committal. And that was the end of that. They did not pursue the matter further.

In order to move forward in work with Black youth, we struck upon the idea of organizing an interracial youth forum on the Southside. The organizing committee consisted of Chi (Dum Ping), a Chinese student at the University of Chicago; a young woman official of the colored YMCA; Phillips, a white League member; and myself. During this period, I was still working on the Santa Fe, but on my layovers I devoted all my time to the forum. We had rented a small hall, decorated it and got out our publicity—leaflets, posters and an ad in the *Chicago Defender*. Our first speaker was to be John Harden, a Black radical orator. It was our first effort at mass work among young Blacks and with our youthful enthusiasm, we were certain of success. But the venture proved to be abortive.

I can still remember our shock when we came to our meeting place to find it wrecked. Furniture was smashed, posters ripped from the walls. There was no doubt in our minds that this was the work of the police who had unleashed their stool pigeons against us. Some of our non-communist friends dropped out, and the project

collapsed. The idea of a forum was abandoned—temporarily, we hoped. A less ambitious plan was then agreed to.

If we could enlarge our cadres by a few more Blacks, we thought, we would have a better base from which to approach mass work. It was therefore suggested that Phillips and I approach some of our acquaintances and try to recruit them directly into the League. I eliminated my waiter friends, all of whom were too old, and approached one of my former colleagues, a postal worker, who had been in our study circle and whom I considered a likely prospect. I remember that he sat very quietly while I delivered a long lecture on the League's program and activities and the need to get support among Black youth.

Finally interrupting me, he blurted out, "I'm sorry, Hall, but I find being Black trouble enough, but to be Black and red at the same time, well that's just double trouble, and when you mix in the whites, why that's triple trouble."

At first I was rather shocked by his off-hand rebuff, considering it to be an expression of cynical opportunism. I felt that he had backslid, even from his position at the post office, but he continued in a more serious tone. Apparently he felt a deep distrust for whites and their motives. He regarded the YCL as just another organization of white "do-gooders" and saw me as their captive Negro. When I interrupted to say something about socialism, he cut me short. He said that he too was for socialism as a final solution, but that was a long way off and he would not put it beyond the whites in the United States to distort socialism in a manner in which they could remain top dogs. In any case, he believed Blacks would have to be on guard. In the meantime, he believed Blacks should retain their own organizations under their own leadership. Alliances, yes—but we ourselves must decide the terms and conditions, he said.

Our exchange had gotten off on the wrong foot. I was deeply chagrined by his charge that I was a captive of the whites and that the League was a white organization. For me, that meant that he felt that I was a "white folks' nigger." As I recall, I retorted by calling him a Black racist who saw everything in terms of Black and white.

"Why not?" he replied. "Being a Negro, how else should I see things?"

After this flare-up, our tempers cooled off and we continued our discussion in calmer tones. But I was definitely on the defensive,

trying to explain why I was in the League and that it was not an organization of white “do-gooders” as he had charged. It was a revolutionary, interracial vanguard organization, I asserted. Sure, we only had a few Blacks now, but our numbers would grow, I argued.

He was still skeptical and repeated that he was for socialism, but a special road toward this goal he felt was necessary for Black Americans, under their own leadership and organization.

“Do you mean a Black party?” I queried.

“Why not?” he rejoined. “It might be necessary as a safeguard for our interests.”

I had no answers to his position. There was a logic to it which I hadn't thought about.

We finally parted on friendly terms, promising to keep in touch. I left, realizing that I'd come out the worst in our exchange. I felt that I had failed in my first effort to recruit a good Black man to the League and that we still had some study to do with regards to Black nationalism.

My friend had been, as I recalled, a bitter critic of Garvey, and I therefore assumed that he was hostile to Black nationalism. But now it seemed that he expressed some of Garvey's racial separatism. Thinking the matter over, I finally came to the conclusion that the main reason for my inability to counter his arguments was that I sensed that they contained a good measure of truth. What was most disturbing was the sense that his position was less isolated from the masses of Blacks than was my own.

Up to that point, I had failed to understand the contradictory nature of Black nationalism. I had rejected it totally as a reactionary bourgeois philosophy which, in the conditions of the U.S., had found its logical expression in Garvey's Back to Africa program. It was therefore a diversion from the struggle for economic, social and political equality—the true goal of Blacks in the United States. The fight for equality, I felt, was revolutionary in that it was unattainable within the framework of U.S. capitalist society. Nationalism, moreover, was divisive and played into the hands of the reactionary racists. This, of course, did not exclude (the acceptance of some of its features, such as race pride and self-reliance, which were not inconsistent with, but an essential element in, the fight for equality.

While rejecting nationalism, I also rejected the bourgeois-assimilationist position of the NAACP and its associates, and their blind acceptance of white middle class values and culture. What

confused me were attempts to amalgamate what I felt were two mutually contradictory elements—socialism and the class struggle on the one hand, and nationalism on the other. Or was the contradiction more apparent than real, I wondered. My friend's nationalism did not go to the point of advocacy of a separate Black nation. He demanded only autonomy in leadership and organization of the Black freedom movement. Was this inconsistent with the concept of equality and class unity? Had not Blacks the right to formulate their conditions for unity? For me, this was the first time I had encountered these questions.

I attempted to reflect on my short experience in the YCL. Was there not a basis for Black distrust of even white revolutionaries? The situation in the League was not as idyllic as I had first thought. There was a certain underestimation of the importance of the Black struggle against discrimination and for equal rights among both the youth and the adults of the communist movement. Behind that, I sensed there was a feeling that the Black struggle was not itself really revolutionary, but was sort of a drag on the "pure" class struggle.

This was no doubt a legacy of the old Socialist Party. Even such a revolutionary as Debs had said: "We have nothing special to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races. The Socialist Party is the party of the working-class, regardless of color."<sup>9</sup> And regarding the Afro-American question: "Social equality, forsooth ... is pure fraud and serves to mask the real issue, which is not *social equality, but economic freedom*."<sup>10</sup> "The Socialist platform has not a word in reference to 'social equality'."<sup>11</sup> Evidently, there were a number of theoretical matters still to be cleared up on the question of the struggle for Black equality and freedom.

I joined the Party itself in the spring of 1925, recruited by Robert Minor, with the consent of the League. I had quit the Santa Fe the summer before, and, totally committed to the communist cause, I then decided to devote more time to the work and to eventually becoming a professional revolutionary. I took extra jobs on weekends and worked banquets and an occasional extra trip on the road. I was living at home with my Mother, Father and sister, who had an infant child, David. All were employed, with my Mother accepting occasional catering jobs.

Minor, whom I had known for some time, was a reconstructed white Southerner from Texas, a direct descendant of Sam Houston (first Governor of the Lone Star State). He was a former anarchist

and one of the great political cartoonists of his day. His powerful cartoons were carried in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and later on in the old *Masses* (a cultural magazine of the left) and in the *Daily Worker*. Among his many talents, he was a journalist of no small ability. Having travelled widely in Europe as a news correspondent during the First World War, Minor had visited Russia during the revolutionary period and had met and spoken with Lenin.

With these impressive credentials, he was now a member of the Party's Central Committee and responsible for its Negro work. This was understood as an interim assignment, eventually to be taken over by a Black comrade as soon as one could be developed to fill the position. The person then being groomed for the job was Lovett Fort-Whiteman, who was then in Russia taking a crash course in communist leadership. He had been an associate of Briggs on *The Crusader* and also worked with Randolph and Owens on *The Messenger*. Later, as I recall, his selection was the cause for some disgruntlement among the Black comrades.

Why was Fort-Whiteman chosen in preference to such well-known and capable Blacks as Richard B. Moore, Otto Huiswood or Cyril P. Briggs, all of whom had revolutionary records superior to Fort-Whiteman's? At that time, there were no Blacks on the Central Committee, and even when Fort-Whiteman returned from Russia in 1925 to take charge of Afro-American work, Minor remained responsible to the Central Committee. While not as flamboyant as Fort-Whiteman, these Black leaders had records comparable to, or better than, those of many whites on the Central Committee.

Be that as it may, of all the white comrades, Minor was best fitted for the assignment because of his wide knowledge of and close interest in the question. His intense hatred of his Southern racist background came through in some of the most powerful cartoons of the day. He had wide acquaintances among Black middle class intellectuals. Bob and his wife Lydia had turned their Southside apartment into a virtual salon where Black and white friends would gather to discuss the issues of the day. There I met various Black notables, including Dean Pickens, national field secretary of the NAACP, and Abraham Harris, then secretary of the Minneapolis Urban League. Harris would later become Chairman of the Economics Department of Howard University, and then a full professor of the same subject at the University of Chicago.

## THE FOURTH CONVENTION OF THE CPUSA

It was the period immediately before the Fourth National Convention of the Communist Party. The factional fight was at its height, with the Party split between two warring camps: the Ruthenberg-Pepper group vs. the Foster-Bittelman group. The atmosphere was rife with charges and counter-charges of “right opportunism” and “left sectarianism.” This factionalism had spilled over into the League, which reflected the alignments then current within the Party.

I had stood aloof from these factions, as I did not clearly understand the issues. The question of Blacks did not seem to be directly involved. I assumed it was a clash mainly between personalities and narrow group interests, and did not reflect political principles. Each side accused the other of responsibility for the “Farmer-Labor fiasco” which left the Party isolated in its first major attempt to form a united front.<sup>12</sup> I could see no differences among the factions on the question of bolshevization of the Party.

The Comintern had recently called upon the Party to bolshevize its ranks. Among other things, this called for the reorganization of the Party on the basis of shop and street units, and the elimination of the foreign language clubs as federated organizations within the Party. These clubs remained close to the Party, however, and followed its leadership.

I was inclined to favor the Ruthenberg-Pepper group because most of the Party’s Black members—Doty, Elizabeth Griffin, Alonzo Isabel, Otto and my sister Eppa—were in that group. This, I suspected, was partly due to the influence of Bob Minor and Lydia Gibson—their work on the Southside in the tenants’ struggle of 1924, their support of Doty’s Consolidated Trades Council, and their consistent advocacy in the Party of the importance of work among Blacks. (Most of this occurred after had left the ABB and joined the YCL.)

Upon joining the Party, I immediately became part of the Ruthenberg group. Under Minor’s tutelage, I was to undergo intensive indoctrination. According to the Ruthenberg faction, Foster, Bittelman, Jack Johnstone and their allies (Cannon, Dunne mid Shachtman) were opportunist, narrow-minded trade unionists lacking in Marxist theory and hence in the ability to lead a Marxist party. They said that Foster’s group, which possessed a majority of the

delegates, was out to steamroll the convention and toss Ruthenberg, Pepper and Lovestone out of the leadership.

For most of us, the clincher was that the Foster group lacked the confidence of the Communist International. This latter charge, it seemed to me, was confirmed by the decisions of the Fourth Party Convention the following summer. I was a delegate to this convention from the YCL. I was to witness the intervention of the CI in the person of its on-the-spot representative, Comrade Green (Gusev), an old Bolshevik friend and co-worker of Lenin and Stalin. For obvious security reasons, only the leaders of both factions had direct contact with him. His job was to suppress factionalism and to unite the Party on the basis of the Comintern line. I must say that he tackled this task with an expertise that was remarkable to behold.

First, he set up what was called a Parity Committee, composed of an equal number of top leaders of both factions, with himself as a neutral chairman. Since the two factions were evenly represented on the committee, his was the deciding vote. I remember that there was widespread speculation among the delegates as to which faction he would support. We didn't have long to wait.

The convention had been in session about a week. The atmosphere was charged, passions inflamed, a split seemed imminent. Indeed, our caucus leaders had difficulty in preventing a walkout by some of the more hot-headed members. A message finally arrived in the form of a cable from the CI (which undoubtedly was sent at Gusev's urging). The cable was presented to the Parity Committee by Gusev. It demanded that "under no circumstances" should the Foster majority "be allowed to suppress the Ruthenberg group... because," it went on to say, "the Ruthenberg group is more loyal to the decisions of the Communist International and stands closer to its views. It has the majority or strong minority in most districts and the Foster group uses excessively mechanical and ultra-factional methods." It further demanded that the Ruthenberg group "get not less than forty percent of the Central Executive Committee" and insisted as "an ultimatum" to the majority "that Ruthenberg retains post of Secretary... categorically insist upon Lovestone's Central Executive Committee membership... demand retention by Ruthenberg group of co-editorship on central organ."<sup>13</sup>

The results were greeted with great jubilation by our group. Foster refused to accept the majority of the incoming Central Committee under these circumstances (in which his loyalty was ques-

tioned) and ceded leadership to the Ruthenberg group. The result was that the Ruthenberg-Pepper group retained key positions on the new Central Committee—Ruthenberg as general secretary, Lovestone as organizational secretary, Bedacht as agit-prop head.

Despite factionalism, the convention marked a step forward in the work among Blacks. Although its decisions threw no new light on the question, the platform adopted did contain the most elaborate statement the Party had thus far made.

It subscribed to full equality in the relationship between Black and white workers. It advocated the right to vote, abolition of Jim Crowism in law and custom, including segregation and intermarriage laws. The main thrust of the program, however, was directed towards building Black and white labor unity on the job and in the union. Toward this end the platform asserted that:

Our Party must work among the unorganized Negro workers destroying whatever prejudice may exist against trade unions, which has been cultivated by white capitalists... (and) the Negro petty-bourgeoisie... Our Party must make itself the foremost spokesman for the real abolition of all discrimination of the as yet largely unorganized Negro workers in the same union with the white workers on the same basis of equality of membership, equality of right to employment in all branches of work and equality of pay.<sup>14</sup>

The Party called for the inclusion of Black workers in the existing unions. It came out against racial separatism and dual unionism, but it declared its intention to organize Blacks into separate unions wherever they were barred from existing organizations and to use the separation as a battering ram against Black exclusion. Emphasizing the relationship between these partial demands and ultimate goals, the platform declared that the accomplishment of the above aims was not an end in itself and that on the contrary, it was the struggle for their accomplishment that was even more important:

In the course of the struggle with such demands we will demonstrate... that these aspirations can be realized only as a result of the successful class struggle against capitalism and with the establishment of the rule of the working class in the Soviet form.<sup>15</sup>

It must be remembered that by this time the attempts to infil-

trate the Garvey movement had proven unsuccessful and that the African Blood Brotherhood, the sole revolutionary Black organization in the field, had been dissolved. To meet the need for an organizational vehicle to put our program into effect, the Party and the Trade Union Educational League sponsored the American Negro Labor Congress (ANLC).<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, Lovett Fort-Whiteman, our man in Moscow, returned to head up the Negro work and to prepare the launching of the ANLC. H. V. Phillips, Edwards, Doty and I were assigned to the organizing committee for the congress, drafting and circulating the call, and approaching organizations for delegates. As I remember, most of the Blacks in the Party were assigned to work on the congress. Otto was not involved in these activities, as immediately after the Fourth Party Convention, he had left for Moscow with the first batch of Black students.

Fort-Whiteman was truly a fantastic figure. A brown-skinned man of medium height, Fort-Whiteman's high cheekbones gave him somewhat of an Oriental look. He had affected a Russian style of dress, sporting a *robochka* (a man's long belted shirt) which came almost to his knees, ornamental belt, high boots and a fur hat. Here was a veritable Black Cossack who could be **seen** sauntering along the streets of Southside Chicago. Fort-Whiteman was a graduate of Tuskegee and, as I understood, had had some training as an actor. He had been a drama critic for *The Messenger* and for *The Crusader*. There was no doubt that he was a showman; he always seemed to be acting out a part he had chosen for himself.

Upon his return from the Soviet Union, he held a number of press conferences in which he delineated plans for the American Negro Labor Congress, and as a Black communist fresh from Russia, he made good news copy.

Fort-Whiteman had taken responsibility for lining up entertainment for the opening night of the congress. Characteristically, with his Russian affectations, he arranged for a program of Russian ballet and theater. The rest of us didn't question what he was doing, and the incongruity of the program didn't occur to us until the opening night.

The meeting took place in a hall on Indiana Avenue near Thirty-first Street, in the midst of the Black ghetto. When I arrived it was packed—perhaps 500 people or so. Inside, I was suddenly attracted by a commotion at the door. As a member of the steering

committee, I walked over to see what was the matter. Something was amiss with the “Russian ballet” which was about to enter the hall. A young blonde woman in the “ballet” had been shocked by the complexion of most of the audience, which she had apparently expected to be of another hue. Loudly, in a broad Texas accent, she exclaimed, “Ah’m not goin’ ta dance for these niggahs!”

Somebody shouted, “Throw the cracker bitches out!” and the “Russian” dance group hurriedly left the hall.

The Russian actors remained to perform a one-act Pushkin play. They, at least, were genuine Russians from the Russian Federation. But alas, it was in Russian. Of itself, the play was undoubtedly interesting, but its relevance to a Black workers’ congress was, to say the least, unclear. Although Pushkin was a Black man, he wrote as a Russian, and the characters portrayed were Russian. More significant, however, and perhaps an indication of our sectarian approach, was the fact that no Black artist appeared on the program.

Fort-Whiteman made the keynote speech outlining the purposes and tasks of the congress. He was a passable orator and received a good response. Otto Huiswood, an associate of Briggs and one of the first Blacks to join the Party, also spoke. Richard B. Moore brought the house down with an impassioned speech which reached its peroration in Claude McKay’s poem, “If We Must Die.” I was spellbound by Moore; I had never heard such oratory.

That night, Phillips and I left the hall in high spirits. In fact, I was literally walking on air. At last, I felt, we were about to get somewhere in our work among Blacks. Phillips, a bit more sober than I, remarked, “Let’s wait and see the report of the credentials committee.”

His caution was justified, for the big letdown came the following morning. The first working session of the congress convened with about forty Black and white delegates, mainly communists and close sympathizers. The crowd of 500 at the opening night rally had been mainly community people. I think it was Phillips who remarked that there was hardly a face in the working session that he didn’t recognize; most participants, sadly, were from the Chicago area.

The organizing committee had prepared draft resolutions for the congress to consider. As we had anticipated a much larger turnout, we had made plans for a credentials committee, resolutions committee, etc. But in light of the small attendance, these resolutions and

preparations took on an Alice-in-Wonderland quality. For example, according to the constitution, the group's purpose was to "unify the efforts... of all organizations of Negro workers and farmers as well as organizations composed of both Negro and white workers and farmers."<sup>17</sup>

Despite our efforts and work, the ANLC never got off the ground. Few local units were formed, resolutions and plans were never carried into action. Only its official paper, the *Negro Champion*, subsidized by the Party, continued for several years.

Among the post-mortems undertaken on the organization was the one made by James Ford in his book, *The Negro and the Democratic Front*. He commented that "for the period of its existence, it (the ANLC) was almost completely isolated from the basic masses of the Negro people."<sup>18</sup> Disappointment and disillusionment followed and personal differences surfaced among our group. The fact was that the congress had failed, and with it, the first efforts to build a left-led united front among Blacks.

There was a natural tendency to find scapegoats for the failure, Moore and Huiswood, the able delegates from New York, seemed to have come to Chicago with a chip on their shoulders. They made no attempt to hide their contempt for Fort-Whiteman, whom they had known in New York. They openly alluded to him as "Minor's man Friday." At the time, I was a bit shocked at what I felt was an attempt to malign these comrades. This was especially true of Bob Minor, whom I regarded with respect and affection. He was sort of a father figure to me.

Fort-Whiteman, on the other hand, was still an unknown quantity. My feelings about him were rather mixed. I was both repelled and fascinated by the excessive flamboyance of the man. But much later, I recalled overhearing a conversation between him and Minor during the preparations for the congress. Minor informed Fort-Whiteman that Ben Fletcher, the well-known Black IWW leader, had expressed a desire to participate in the congress. It was evident that Bob was pleased by the response of such an important Black labor leader. Fletcher, as an IWW organizer, had played a leading role in the successful organization of Philadelphia longshoremen. His attendance would undoubtedly have attracted other Blacks in the labor movement.

Fort-Whiteman, however, vehemently opposed the idea and exclaimed, "I don't want to work with him; I know him. He's the kind

of fellow who'll try to take over the whole show." That ended the discussion; Fletcher was not invited.

I didn't know Fletcher at the time, but as I reflected back on the incident some time later, it was clear to me that had he been allowed to participate, Fort-Whiteman would have been overshadowed. I was too new to pass judgment on Fort-Whiteman's qualifications, but I did wonder why he was chosen over such stalwarts as Moore and Huiswood. Huiswood, as a delegate to the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922, was the first Black American to attend a congress of that body. (Claude McKay was also a special fraternal delegate to that congress.) Together with other delegates, Huiswood visited Lenin and became the first Black man to meet the great Bolshevik. He later became the first Black to serve as a candidate member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International.

On the whole, I was very optimistic during my early years in the Party—confident we were building the kind of party that would eventually triumph over capitalism.

## NOTES

1. Frederick G. Detweiler, *The Negro Press in the U.S.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), p. 77.
2. *Amsterdam News*, September 5 and 19, 1917, quoted in Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), p. 323.
3. "Liberty For All!" *Amsterdam News*, 1918, quoted without full date in Draper, p. 323.
4. *The Crusader*, November 1921, quoted in Draper, pp. 505-06.
5. In 1946, while researching material for *Negro Liberation*, I had occasion to look over the file of *The Crusader* in the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library. It seemed at the time to be almost complete. I learned later from Briggs, who sought to consult these files in 1967, that they had disappeared. Theodore Draper, in preparation for his hatchet job on communism, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, was able to track down fourteen copies in the Howard University Library. For the present, pending my own research, I am relying partially on Draper's quotes, but not, of course, upon his interpretation.
6. *The Crusader*, April 1921, p. 9, quoted in Draper, p. 324.

7. The Bugs Club was a corner of Washington Park used for open-air speaking in the twenties and thirties. The Dill Pickle Forum gathered on the north side on Saturdays under the leadership of the anarchist, Jack Jones. A wide variety of radicals attended the meeting and spoke there, including Emma Goldman.
8. See Spear, *Black Chicago*, pp. 198-99.
9. Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1949), p. 260.
10. *International Socialist Review*, November 1903, pp. 258-59.
11. *Ibid.*, January 1904, p. 396.
12. In 1922, right-wing union leaders drove the Communist Party (then called the Workers Party) out of the Conference for Progressive Political Action. This was the organization which ran LaFollette for president in 1924 when he got one sixth of the vote. In 1923, the Farmer-Labor Party, led by “center” union leaders like Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Federation of Labor, split with the Workers Party. This marked the defeat of the Party’s early efforts to build a farmer-labor party. For Foster’s analysis, see William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party of the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1952), pp. 211-23. For Ruthenberg’s version, see Charles E. Ruthenberg, *From the Third Through the Fourth Convention of the Workers (Communist) Party of America* (Chicago: Daily Worker Publishing Co., 1925), pp. 10-14.
13. Ruthenberg, p. 18.
14. “Proceedings of the Fourth National Convention of the Workers (Communist) Party of America (1925),” p. 119.
15. *Ibid.*
16. The Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) was founded in 1920 to organize the “militant minority” in the trade unions. William Z. Foster and other TUEL leaders joined the Workers Party in 1921. The following year, the TUEL launched a successful campaign to win unions representing millions of workers to support its main demands: for a labor party; for amalgamation (industrial unionism); and for recognition of Soviet Russia.
17. Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 425.
18. James W. Ford, *The Negro and the Democratic Front* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), p. 82.