



PROJECT MUSE®

Red Scare

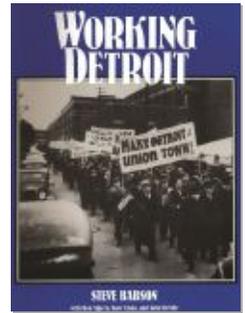
Published by

Babson, Steve, et al.

Working Detroit.

Wayne State University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.61472>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/61472>

RED SCARE



The people who support the New Deal this November,” the conservative *Chicago Tribune* editorialized in 1944, “are supporting the Communists and building up the day when they plan the Red Terror sweeping down upon America.”

In 1944, 25 million Americans ignored this kind of dire prophecy and

reelected President Franklin Roosevelt to an unprecedented fourth term. Two years later, as predicted, fear was indeed beginning to sweep across America—a fear generated by the Right, however, and not by the Left.

Right-wing resentment against the New Deal had been smoldering for over a decade as government regulation of business, taxes on the rich, pro-labor legislation, sitdown strikes, social securi-

ty, and demands for racial equality all followed one after another. Conservatives saw cause for alarm in all these breaks with tradition. America’s wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, the presence of Communists and Socialists in the CIO, and the huge post-war strike wave only deepened their conviction the New Deal was the entering wedge of Soviet-style subversion in America.

In 1946, conservative opponents of

the New Deal finally turned the corner. With less than 40 percent of eligible voters casting ballots, the Republican Party captured control of Congress for the first time in 16 years. Conservative anti-Communists like Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy wasted little time mobilizing their new power against supporters of liberal reform.

The old Dies Committee, revived in 1945 as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), immediately began a decade-long investigation into the allegedly subversive activities of trade unionists, government employees, teachers, and Hollywood film makers. With bipartisan backing from conservative Democrats like John Rankin of Mississippi (a man who once declared slavery “the greatest blessing the Negro

people ever had”), HUAC called over 3,000 witnesses to its hearings between 1945 and 1957. The Committee cited hundreds for “Contempt of Congress” when they refused to cooperate with the Red-Hunt.

Growing Soviet-American conflict and Communist victories in the Chinese civil war gave the Red Scare added urgency, since many conservatives saw the CIO and domestic radicalism as intimately linked with Moscow and Peking. As scattered cases of Soviet espionage were sensationalized by the press, publicity-conscious politicians spread the search for Red Agents across the country. If, as usually happened, none could be found, politicians stretched the definition of subversion to include progressive causes. “If someone

insists there is discrimination against Negroes in this country,” declared Albert Canwell, Chairman of Washington State’s inquisition, “there is every reason to believe that person is a Communist.”

As the political winds blew stronger from the right, President Truman and the majority of congressional Democrats trimmed their liberal sails and joined the conservative drift. Instead of defending or reinvigorating the New Deal, most Democrats abandoned their promised full-employment legislation and gutted price controls even as inflation soared. Faced with the 1945-1946 strikes, President Truman issued back-to-work orders and heavy fines against striking workers. When GM refused to cooperate with federal mediation efforts during these same strikes, Truman did nothing. One week after the GM strike ended, the President asked Congress for the authority to end future walkouts by drafting strikers into the armed forces.

Truman’s proposed labor draft, the UAW declared, would “make peacetime strikes illegal and impose a fascist system of involuntary servitude on American workers.” That spring, the union’s Executive Board advised “that we work towards the eventual formation of a broad third party.”

No such broad-based party was formed. Some left-liberals and New Dealers did launch the Progressive Party in 1948, with former Vice President and Commerce Secretary Henry Wallace as their Presidential candidate. Their efforts, however, were condemned by the UAW and most other unions, both because Wallace could not possibly win, and because Communists played a leading role in organizing his campaign. By 1948, the majority of AFL and CIO unions were also convinced that Truman, who had dropped his proposed labor draft, now deserved their support. Above all, the President had vetoed the Taft-Hartley Act.

Passed in 1947 by the newly-elected Republican Congress, the Taft-Hartley Act outlawed sympathy strikes, mass picketing, union hiring halls, and “secondary” boycotts against stores selling non-union goods. Under this measure, states could pass so-called “Right-to-Work” laws banning Union-Shop agreements. Before Taft-Hartley, if a majority of workers voted for a Union Shop—and if management agreed to such a provision—then all workers had to pay union dues as a condition of employment. But under



Above: Sensationalized reporting made the Red Scare front-page copy in the 1940s and 1950s.

Preceding page: In the 1950s, pickets at Detroit’s Bushnell Congregational Church equated Communism with racial integration.



Hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, held in Detroit, March, 1952.

Taft-Hartley, the anti-union minority could now refuse to pay, even though they received all the rights and benefits won by the union. (By 1954, 17 southern and western states had banned the Union Shop.) Taft-Hartley also required all union officers to take a non-Communist oath, and unions which failed to enforce the oath on their elected leaders automatically lost the protection of federal labor law.

When Congress overrode Truman's veto and passed Taft-Hartley, most unions rallied to the President's 1948 reelection campaign. The CIO mobilized thousands of its members to ring doorbells, register voters, and distribute literature, and the AFL's newly formed League For Political Education launched similar activities in Wayne County and nationally. Defying all odds, the labor movement's efforts made Truman victorious in November.

Throughout the election, the Red Scare continued unabated. To quiet his right-wing critics, Truman had already joined the hunt in 1947 by establishing a "Loyalty Oath" program. As the President and HUAC competed for headlines, the grounds for political suspicion grew broader still. Those who had supported the Spanish Republic in the 1930s against its pro-Nazi opponents were now labeled "premature anti-Fascists." Critics of General Chiang Kai Shek's corrupt and authoritarian regime in

China were denounced as "Fifth Columnists" for the Chinese Communists. Branded as "subversives" for such politically tabooed beliefs, over 7,000 federal employees resigned or were fired between 1947 and 1952 as the result of Truman's Loyalty investigations.

In Michigan, the Red Scare generated an equally intense preoccupation with subversion—and subversion took on an equally broad meaning. In March, 1947, Governor Kim Sigler sounded the alarm by announcing that 15,000 Communists (seven times more than even the FBI estimated) were active in the state. Sigler even included the NAACP and the Detroit Council for Youth Services in his initial list of 20 "Communist-Front" groups.

The *Detroit News*, in a front-page series of articles entitled "Communist Plot Exposed," provided a daily diet of imagined scenarios for Communist subversion in Michigan. "As Petrograd Fell, So Detroit Can Fall," headlined one such scare story. "Blueprints Disclosed for Seizure of Detroit" warned another. The "blueprint," it turned out, was nothing more than a "what if" story about "foreign-born spies and . . . American-born traitor dupes" all working in an "iron-ruled Fifth Column disguised as the Communist Party of the United States." Readers were asked to

"Vision a City Paralyzed by Capture of Public Officials, Utilities, and Airports."

No evidence ever materialized, however, for such a plot. "So far," State Police Commissioner Donald Leonard publicly acknowledged in 1952, "we have never been able to prove that any person, even an admitted Communist, sought or advocated overthrow of the government. . . . Even our undercover agents who attended Communist meetings," Leonard admitted, "could get no such proof."

Proof or no proof, the imagined Red Menace provoked an ugly backlash in Detroit. The Book-Cadillac Hotel refused rooms to Communists and third-party politicians. The City Council banned the Communist Party newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, and warned over 100 ethnic halls and clubs they would lose their property-tax reduction if they rented space to "Communist-front" groups. Detroit's Police Chief, Harry Toy, issued hysterical warnings that "Soviet agents are coming into the U.S. disguised as Jewish rabbis."

The anti-Communist mania reached its peak when HUAC visited Detroit during the Korean war. Against the backdrop of American troops fighting the Chinese and North Korean Communists, a succession of government spies and informers called by HUAC in February and March, 1952, named over 200 alleged Communists active in



Above: During a key strike in the fall of 1954, the Square D Company denounced the United Electrical Workers (UE) as Communist dominated and called on police to protect 300 strikebreakers entering the plant. Though the left-leaning UE had previously been forced out of the CIO for refusing to purge alleged Communists from its leadership, local unions of the UAW-CIO, seeing the union-busting attack on UE as a precedent endangering them all, came to the beleaguered union's aid. That September, over a thousand UAW members massed at the company's gates to block the strikebreakers. After a series of violent confrontations, the strike was settled on compromise terms. A year later, Square D workers voted to switch from the UE to the UAW.

Inset: A leaflet calling for support of the Square D strikers.



Detroit, many of them trade unionists. The names of the accused were immediately printed in the press, with predictable results: several were evicted from the city's public housing projects; a violinist for the Detroit Symphony who refused to cooperate with HUAC was expelled from the Musicians' Union and fired by the orchestra; teachers in Detroit's public schools and students at Wayne University were dismissed or suspended for alleged Communist ties.

The purges soon took a turn towards vigilantism. On March 3, sitdowns and walkouts by anti-Communist workers at Dodge Main and Chrysler's Mound Road engine plant forced several workers named by HUAC out of the

factories. Within a week of the HUAC hearings, the disturbances spread to a dozen plants, with 18 UAW members either fired by management or "run out" of their workplaces by angry co-workers.

The UAW, while condemning Communists in the union and barring them from elected office, opposed the "runouts" and filed grievances to restore discharged workers to their jobs. "We have no alternative under the union rules and the United States Constitution," said Zygmunt Mizejeski, President of UAW Local 410 at Midland Steel. The real target in these Red Scares, the UAW argued, was not the handful of alleged Communist trade unionists named by Governor Sigler and HUAC, but the union movement itself.

There was ample evidence for the UAW's claim. In 1952, the National Industrial Conference Board explicitly advised managers that "even if you don't have a trained saboteur [in the workplace], industrial security can... help you rid your plant of agitators who

create labor unrest." HUAC was eager to help, providing data on over 60,000 people to inquiring employers between 1949 and 1959. At Ford, "industrial security" and the Red Scare were merged in the person of John Bugas, former director of the FBI's Detroit Bureau and, after World War II, head of Ford's Labor Relations department.

Backed by this combination of government authority, corporate power, and public hysteria, the Red Scare overwhelmed individual workers and entire unions.

The United Public Workers (UPW) was the Red Scare's principal victim in Detroit. This CIO-affiliated union had drawn the attention of news editors and city officials for at least two reasons. In 1946, workers in the city's Department of Public Works voted to keep the UPW as their collective-bargaining agent, defeating the AFL's bid to win recognition for its public-employee union. The following year, after passage of the

Taft-Hartley Act, the local UPW's top officers also refused to sign the non-Communist oaths favored by their federal and municipal employers.

In the supercharged atmosphere of the Red Scare, the daily press leapt on the UPW. What was, in fact, a left-liberal union with a handful of Communists in its ranks and leadership became, in the eyes of the media, a hotbed of treason. Even a UPW demonstration for higher wages, said the *Detroit News*, was actually a "Commie 'rehearsal'... aimed at familiarizing Commies themselves and their dupes with parts they will play on 'Take Over Day.' "

In 1950, the city's Loyalty Commission launched a frontal attack on the union by charging Thomas Coleman, a 50-year-old garbage collector, with disloyalty. Coleman's background hardly seemed subversive. A 32nd-degree Mason, the President of the NAACP's Romulus chapter, and the co-founder of the first black American Legion Post in Michigan, Coleman also had a son fighting in Korea. Yet, with no proof that Coleman had even contemplated illegal activity, the Loyalty Commission suspended him from his job. Coleman was unfit for employment, the Commissioners ruled, primarily because he had supported the Progressive Party in 1948.

Though Coleman was later reinstated, his union could not survive the drumbeat of constant accusation. Members either quit the union or were absorbed by AFL rivals, and by 1955, Detroit's UPW had been destroyed.

Communists in the labor movement would have had a tough time surviving the Red Scare even if their Party had been able to fall back on a mass base of support. By 1946, however, this was no longer even conceivable. Unlike its European counterparts, the Communist Party of the United States had only a small following in the industrial working class.

Ten years before, the Party had committed itself to a Popular Front with non-Communists in the hope of gaining a broader base among supporters of the New Deal. Communist membership grew slowly among workers as well as intellectuals, but many of these new adherents owed their primary loyalty to the New Deal or the new industrial unions of the CIO, not the Party. Individual Communists usually downplayed their Party membership, and while many won support as reformers and popular trade-union leaders, the Communist Party, as an organization,

won little lasting support among workers.

Whatever following the Party could claim was also undermined by its erratic policy changes. Too often, these sudden shifts seemed motivated by a primary allegiance to the Soviet Union, as American Communists continually recast their Party line to conform to Soviet initiatives. Between 1939 and 1941, such parroting of Soviet foreign policy had American Communists first supporting, then opposing, and then once again supporting a military alliance

against Nazi Germany. When the U.S. later entered World War II as an ally of the Soviets, the C.P. dropped its militant line and became a zealous supporter of any measure that maximized war production—with little apparent regard for the unequal sacrifices demanded of American workers. Ironically, this sometimes put the Communists in the CIO on the right wing of the American labor movement.

In Detroit, even the most patriotic UAW members could not match the Communist Party's war boosters, who



Above: Members registering to vote in union elections at UAW Local 900, Ford Lincoln, in 1947.

Inset: Walter Reuther and supporters celebrate his election as UAW President at the union's 1946 convention.

advocated incentive-pay plans to spur arms production for the American and Soviet armies. Most union activists opposed incentive pay as a speed-up scheme, under which management gave workers only a fraction of the income gained from higher production. As a result, the Communists' incentive-pay proposal was derisively shouted down by UAW and CIO convention delegates in 1943, and Communist-backed candidates for union office were defeated in Detroit's Chrysler and Packard plants.

After the war, the Communist Party shifted once again to a policy of trade union militancy. Its prestige among union activists, however, had been irreparably damaged by its wartime speed-up drive. Unlike European Communists, the American Party had no heroic legacy of underground resistance to fascism to fall back on. Post-war prosperity undermined the Party's renewed call for anti-capitalist politics, and the continuing decline of ethnic consciousness and associations eroded the Party's base among the foreign born. The Party's support for Stalin's authoritarian rule alienated some workers, particularly after Stalin installed a pro-Soviet regime in Poland. Nationalist sentiment in Detroit's enormous Polish-American community thereafter fueled the already intense anti-Communism ignited by the Red Scare.

Communists in the UAW were especially hard-pressed. In this case, they faced an opposition that was not hampered by the pro-business, "sell-out" image that characterized many anti-Communists.

Walter Reuther's anti-Communist caucus within the UAW, while often described as the right wing of the union, was actually a broad coalition of socialists, liberals, and members of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists. Opposing this Reuther Caucus was a group led by George Addes, the union's popular Secretary Treasurer. Most of his followers were, like Addes himself, non-Communist, but the Addes Caucus did rely (with some misgivings) on Communist Party backing in its frequent tussles with the Reuther coalition.

The factional fighting between these two groups, as it came to dominate the internal life of the UAW between 1944 and 1947, often centered on issues that had little to do with Communism or anti-Communism. Much of the infighting over staff appointments and leadership positions was shaped instead by long-standing personal ties and local

issues. "You get in a factional fight," recalled Doug Fraser, a former member of the Addes Caucus, "and sometimes you wonder what the hell the differences are. It becomes personalities and loyalty. . . . That happened to me. With Dick Leonard, I left the Reuther Caucus because we thought we were getting the short end. . . . It wasn't philosophical or ideological or anything like that."

Underlying these personal battles, however, was the issue of Communist Party involvement in the union. For some members of the Reuther Caucus, this question of "Communist infiltration" was primarily a rhetorical weapon for defeating factional rivals: by charging that left-leaning opponents were "agents of Moscow," they could easily gain notoriety and a certain degree of support. But for many others in the Reuther Caucus, Communist activity in the union was a matter of legitimate concern. In the eyes of these Reutherites, Communists sought only to use the union as a weapon on behalf of Soviet and Communist Party initiatives.

The Addes Caucus responded by targeting its opponents as reactionary sell-outs. Reuther, his opponents claimed in one rhetorical flourish, was simply "The Bosses' Boy," doing the bidding of anti-union employers by splitting the UAW. Such characterizations carried little weight among those who recalled the Addes Caucus' wartime record of shop-floor conservatism. Reuther, they recalled, had advocated greater militancy—not less—between 1944 and 1946. As Nat Ganley, a leading Communist in the UAW, later acknowledged, Reuther's wartime opposition to incentive pay had "won him a strong rank-and-file support within the UAW." The added prestige of leading the post-war GM strike made it possible for Reuther "to ride in as the great hero on the white horse," as Ganley put it, "leading the crusade of the downtrodden masses, which he did and did very successfully."

Reuther's militancy and high-profile leadership proved decisive. Less than two weeks after the end of the 1945-1946 GM strike, he won the UAW Presidency by defeating the pro-Addes incumbent, R.J. Thomas, in a closely fought convention battle. Over the next two years, Reuther's caucus consolidated its hold on the union, winning a series of elections that drove the Addes Caucus and its supporters from all but a handful of leadership positions.

Popular support for the Red hunt varied widely during and after these

faction fights inside the UAW. In most cases, only a small minority of people participated in the violent "runouts" of Communist and other left-wing workers from Detroit's factories. A far larger proportion, however, endorsed the Red Scare at the polls. Detroit's voters, for example, supported the 1949 proposal for a municipal Loyalty Commission 264,000 to 78,000. But Red-baiting wasn't always successful. When Carl Stellato, President of UAW Local 600 at Ford Rouge, attempted to dismiss five local officers for refusing to sign non-Communist oaths, the membership reelected all five to their posts in 1951. Stellato, an anti-Communist and former Reuther supporter, abandoned the purge and later attacked Reuther for raising dues. In 1952, shortly after the HUAC hearings in Detroit, Reuther removed Stellato from office for failing to dismiss the five dissidents. When elections were held for new officers, Local 600's members reelected Stellato and his running mates by a wide margin.

Within five years of this incident, the Red Scare was losing public support. U.S.-Soviet relations were improving, and right-wingers like Senator Joseph McCarthy, by accusing even President Eisenhower of "coddling Communists," finally alienated many conservatives. The Communist Party had also shriveled to a fraction of its former size as thousands of disillusioned members dropped out or were driven into political retirement by government repression. From its peak of roughly 80,000 members in the early 1940s, the Party's ranks had thinned to no more than 10,000 in 1957.

By then, the search for subversives had already scarred the labor movement. In 1949-1950, the CIO expelled eleven unions (including the UPW) whose officers refused to purge elected Communists from their leadership positions. Government prosecutions and membership raiding by other unions subsequently destroyed most of these maverick organizations. Thousands of trade unionists—Communists and non-Communists alike—were denied their civil liberties, fired from their jobs, or driven into early retirement because of their unpopular beliefs. In Detroit, the police Red Squad began collecting political files that eventually included 110,000 "suspected" subversives. Most had done little more than attend political meetings, sign a petition, or walk a picket line.

Thirty years after the Palmer Raids, dissent was once again "Un-American."