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# History of the American Socialist Youth Movement to 1929.

by Shirley Waller

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## The Socialist Party of America.

In 1907 young people's groups were organized on a local scale by the Socialist Party which started out as purely educational groups studying the elements of socialist theory. The 1912 convention of the Socialist Party recognized the fact that the spontaneous and uncoordinated growth of the Socialist youth movement was in itself sufficient proof of the need of such a movement on an organized basis. At first the problem of the youth was relegated to a special section of the Women's Department, but later a special Youth Department with a full-time director was organized.

This movement, the Young Peoples Socialist League, was formed in 1915; William Kruse was elected National Secretary and a paper, *Young Socialist Magazine*, was published.‡ Despite the valuable propaganda work, the League membership and activities were still closer to the earlier discussion groups than to a politicized youth movement. But the core of leading comrades were developing politically and were slowly raising the level of the movement.

In the meanwhile, the SP under its special Youth

Department organized Socialist Sunday Schools for the purpose of training children from the ages of 6 to 14, at which time they were ready to enter the YPSL. A book published by David Greenberg, *Socialist Sunday School Curriculum*, is particularly interesting in showing the methods employed in the training of younger children. In the primary class, children of 6 and 7 studied economics. The purpose was "to get the children to see that the source of all things is the earth which belongs to everybody and that it is labor that takes everything from the earth and turns it (1) into machinery and (2) the things that labor makes with machinery." Courses on music and poetry contained "simple revolutionary verse that emphasizes human rights."

When the US entered the war in 1917, the YPSL took a pacifist rather than a Marxian position and its organizational attempts to combat war fell through for lack of a stable machinery and a trained membership. The League was divided on the question of war. Kruse, despite his being a part of the SP machine, nevertheless took steps which later led to his imprisonment. Various SP members were sentenced to 20 years imprisonment on grounds of treason, but the case was finally quashed in 1920.§

†- The SPA's first Youth Department, approved by the National Committee in May 1913 and functional from Oct. 1 of that year, was actually a department of the National Office *akin to* the Women's Department, not an adjunct of the latter.

‡- *The Young Socialist's Magazine* actually began in January 1908 as *The Little Socialist Magazine for Boys and Girls*. It was produced in New York by the Cooperative Socialist Publishing Association, publisher of the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*. In July 1920, with the Young People's Socialist League having declared its organizational independence, this magazine was transformed into the official organ of the Socialist Party of America, published in Chicago under the new name *The Socialist World*.

§- Waller's assertion that the SPA's anti-war perspective was "pacifist rather than "Marxian" is, at a minimum, open to debate. YPSL National Secretary Bill Kruse (1891-?) was incidentally a founding member of the Workers Party of America in December 1921 and later served on the Central Executive Committee of that organization.

Kruse attempted to form an underground apparatus at the last minute by advising all secretaries to conceal duplicate lists of their membership and to “list all the dependable Socialist members of your League, and form them into an unofficial Executive Committee and pledge them to work for our movement and be true no matter what happens.”

The trials of the leading Party and YPSL members later revealed that the membership did not have the training necessary to effectively carry out underground work and such errors as keeping illegal literature in the homes of prominent members and carrying printers’ receipts for such literature about their persons led to a large number of arrests and convictions.†

The differences in opinion on the war within the SP aided the politicization of the League. This development received an even greater impetus with the advent of the Russian Revolution and the heated controversy it engendered in the ranks of the Party. The overwhelming majority of the YPSL in America declared its agreement with the program of the Communist International and in solidarity with the Left Wing of the Party demanded affiliation to the International of Lenin and Trotsky.

The National Executive Committee of the Party, seeing a split in the offing, tried to keep the YPSL intact by shielding it from the factional fight. They naively thought that this object could be achieved by granting the YPSL greater autonomy and removing it further from the Party machinery. However, the 1919 convention of the YPSL [Chicago, May 1-4, 1919] stood in solidarity with the Left Wing. Shortly afterwards these youth moved with increasing tempo towards the Young Communist International.

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### **Formation of the YCL in the United States.**

In May 1919, the first national convention of the Young People’s Socialist League proclaimed a revolutionary policy and denounced the Second International. A special conference of the YPSL in Rochester, December 1919, overthrew the official Socialist Party group and declared itself “independent” of all existing parties. From this tactic, the Communists hoped to win over even more members of the YPSL to the communist movement.

However, the cruel Palmer raids of 1920 hindered this direction. Thousands of communists, young and old, were arrested, imprisoned, or deported. The entire movement was hit badly. Many who had never dreamt that communism would put them to such severe tasks dropped back into the comforts of private life. Others converted their groups into purely social clubs secluding themselves from rigors of the struggle. Only a few held on tenaciously and proceeded to build a youth movement. Although there were two communist parties (the Workers Party and the Communist Labor Party)‡ and although both maintained youth leagues, they were quite small.

During this period, the army of the unemployed steadily grew, in spite of the many attempts of state and national authorities to provide employment. Ex-soldiers (all of them young) often became thieves and beggars because they were given no work. The American Legion, organized by the ex-officers on behalf of the capitalists, sought to retain the militaristic spirit of war and to intimidate all workers and working class organizations which threatened to rouse the masses to action.

Because of the political situation at this time, the two communist parties had to function illegally;

†- The extent to which there existed any factual basis behind this melodramatic paragraph is unclear. One wonders what specific “illegal literature” existed in 1918-19 and which specific “large number of arrests and convictions” resulted from said literature and printers’ receipts. The conception of an “illegal” (explicitly revolutionary in violation of precise laws) American political literature emerged in January 1920 in the wake of the so-called Palmer Raids. Previous state repression of American radicals centered around purported violation of the so-called “Espionage Act” — hindering the draft or war effort by word or deed. The actions targeted by the state were public speeches and articles in the printed press, not secret caches of “illegal” literature cluelessly stowed in domiciles.

‡- The two communist parties from September 1919 to May 1920 were the Communist Party of America and the Communist Labor Party of America. Neither of these underground organizations had a functioning youth section. It was not until the 2nd Convention of the successor United Communist Party, held in Kingston, New York in January 1921, that communist youth organization proceeded past the stage of abstract planning and unfulfilled good intentions.

hence their minute youth organizations also were underground. The unity of the two parties in 1920 gave a new impetus to the revival of the revolutionary youth movement.† However, it, like the Party continued underground. In the meantime, through the medium of two Young Workers League delegates to Moscow, Gus Schulenberg and Oliver Carlson, connections were established with the Young Communist International.

The legalization of the Communist Party at the December 1921 convention (after a bitter internal dispute — the minority desired to remain underground) helped to make the Young Workers League a reality.‡ The convention set up an organization committee to call the conference of the Young Workers League and to help organize it. *Youth*, the organ of the New York “Independent” Young People’s Socialist League (which was in communist hands) was taken over by the organization committee and renamed *The Young Worker*.

Youth memorial meetings were held under the banner of International Youth Day from coast to coast. By the time the first convention met [New York: May 13-15, 1922] there were already in existence between 30 and 50 groups in the country ready to participate in launching the new organization....

### **Organizational Structure of the Young Communist League.**

On November 1, 1920, the Russian Young Communist League proposed to the Executive Committee of the YCI a change in the relation between the youth leagues and the parties. The proposal called for the **political subordination of each national league to the respective party organization, while each league would retain its organizational independence.** The Party in each country would determine the general politics of the entire communist movement, its strat-

egy, tactics (in agreement with the line and leadership of the Communist International) and the youth leagues would be guided by these decisions. However, the Party could not interfere in the internal organizational problems of the youth league except in an advisory capacity. Hence, the youth league would enjoy organizational autonomy.

The Executive Committee of the YCI could not at that time agree with the proposal. It held the view of the independence of the leagues and the cooperation on a basis of equality between each party and league.

The political subordination of the Young Communist League to the Communist Party was finally adopted at the Second Congress of the YCI after a long struggle which was later carried on in the Leagues. At that time (1921) such a decision appeared to be absolutely necessary although it met with great resistance from many leaders of the YCL, who were still swayed by the “vanguard” ideology.

The “vanguard” ideology was a carry over of the former role of the revolutionary youth. While in the imperialist war of 1914-18 practically all of the social democratic parties went over to the side of the bourgeoisie, most of the socialist youth organizations and the youth international remained true to the principles of the revolutionary class struggle. By the very nature of the situation, the youth international played a vanguard role. There were in most places no revolutionary parties; those parties that did exist, for the most part, betrayed the working class. The youth organizations were converted into **young parties**, which attempted to lead the entire working class, carry on independent struggles against the boss class, against the imperialist war, etc. Thus, the youth, to a large extent, paved the way for the formation of the revolutionary working class parties. This vanguard role, that is, the

†- The Communist Labor Party and an insurgent minority faction of the Communist Party of America amalgamated at a “Joint Unity Convention” held May 26-31, 1920 at Bridgman, Michigan, establishing the United Communist Party. The majority faction of the Communist Party of America — which was numerically larger than the UCP — continued its separate existence for another year, finally amalgamating with the UCP to establish a new unified Communist Party of America at a “Joint Unity Convention” held May 15-28, 1921 at Woodstock, New York.

‡- The December 23-26, 1921 convention to which reference is made actually was called to found The Workers Party of America, a parallel “legal political party” which acted in concert and under the control of the “illegal” and “underground” Communist Party of America. Over the next 16 months, under the savvy guidance of Executive Secretary C.E. Ruthenberg the legal WPA grew in size and influence, while the cloistered underground CPA withered. The parallel underground organization was liquidated by a final “3rd National Convention” of the organization, held in New York City on April 7, 1923. Thereafter, organizational dualism was at last terminated and the modern American Communist Party was effectively born.

leadership of the working class, existed as far along as 1919. Even in the early stages of the communist movement, the youth groups were acting like young parties. Therefore, at the 2nd Congress of the YCI [Moscow: June 9-23, 1921], with the political subordination of the YCL to the CP, the youth recognized that the Party was to become the leader of the toiling youth.

The organizational structure of the communist youth movements were arranged so as to correspond to their revolutionary role in the class struggle. The social democratic organizations, which gave up the revolutionary method of class struggle, created an organizational structure adapted to the reformist standpoint and particularly to parliamentary elections. The fact that the structure of the social democratic organizations was not based on centralism and discipline and at the same time did not further intra-party democracy was in accordance with the whole reformist conception of organization. The YCL discarded these obsolete forms and attempted to create an organization capable of rallying the widest masses of toiling youth, capable of leading them in the class struggle, and capable of preserving the League (or Party) despite the repressions from the capitalists.

The YCL was based on the principles of democratic centralism. It combined the maximum independence and activity of the members of the organization with strict discipline. On the basis of internal democracy, all members participated in the life of the League and had a share in determining the League's policy. This is achieved (which strict illegality doesn't prevent it) through the election of leading bodies, the organization of League conferences on a large scale, and the holding of internal discussions for the purpose of preparing the League's decisions on various questions. The lower bodies were subordinate to the higher, the leadership was centralized, and all members were under obligation to carry out the decisions of the organization and do their duty towards it. It was only as a strictly centralized organization that the YCL in conjunction with the CP could carry out a revolutionary struggle for the interests of the working youth and the general communist aims.

The democracy which reigned in the early period of the YCL was in glaring contrast to the bureaucratic rule in the social democratic organizations. In the YPSL since the various leaders and the various com-

mittees were not responsible to any particular group, each leader was permitted to carry out his own political line (even though it contradicted the political line of his fellow members on the Executive Committee and the opinion of the rank and file). Like its parties, the social democratic youth organizations were somewhat bureaucratized.

Although the YCL was **organizationally independent**, the closest connections existed between it and the CP. This connection was effected through the mutual representation on all rungs of the organizational ladder. To secure the political oneness of the League and Party, there were cadres composed of dual members, i.e. members of both the Party and the youth.

The YCL did not limit its activity to the framework of "legality" as ordained by the boss class. In its struggle against capitalism, the YCL was continually compelled to combine its open legal activity with illegal and semi-legal work, and therefore, often overstepped the limits laid down for it by capitalist legality. Since it recognized that it was surrounded on all sides by its class enemies and that it must expect to be driven to illegality at any time, it formed an underground apparatus through which it could be able to continue its work in case of enforced illegality. The main thing was to ensure the leadership and development of the YCL and preserve its existence.

### **Role of the YCL and Differences with the Social Democratic Youth.**

The Young Communist League was a training ground for the Communist Party. The CP needed a reserve which would assure a new cadre of young forces for its ranks. The YCL was to serve as a preparatory school which would train the young generation of workers for the Communist Party.

There were fundamental differences in the concepts of the role of the youth and youth organization between the social democrats and the communists. Social democracy, for the most part, declare that the role of the youth organizations should be "purely" educational or cultural. It said that youth were not capable of participating in the class struggle. Since the social democrats often placed class collaboration in the place of the class struggle, it sought to train the youth

also in class peace. They didn't want the young workers to acquaint themselves with the real conditions in class society and with the facts of the class struggle. In conformity with this, the social democracy indulged in talk about "youth in general" without regard to class differences. Hence, they set the youth organizations the utopian task of creating the "new men" by means of cultural work within the youth organizations to be undertaken in the conditions of capitalist society, that is, divorce from all relation to class society and reality itself.

The Young Communist League repudiated the hypocritical slogan of the social democracy to the effect that the youth must not participate in politics. The energetic participation of the young workers, who are an important factor in social production, in the political struggle of their class, signified an increase of forces for the working class struggle and served as a medium for training young workers to communism. The YCL was a political organization which trained young people for the class struggle. It based itself on the Leninist concept that stated theory could not be separated from practice. Hence, its educational work was of a dual nature: education through studying theory and education through struggle.

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### **The First Year of the Young Workers League in the United States.**

On May 13, 1922, the first convention of the Young Workers League met in Brooklyn to formally unite the revolutionary youth organizations throughout the country, to affiliate to the Young Communist International, and to acknowledge the political leadership of the Workers Party (CP). However, the principle struggle at the conventions, with its more than 40 delegates representing more than 20 cities, was the question of "independence." The genuine party ele-

ments were for political subordination of the youth to the Workers Party. The supporters of "independence" came from two camps: remnants of the Independent YPSL who found it more convenient to stand aloof from the genuine communist movement, and the ultra-leftists, organized into the United Toilers of America, who had opposed the formation of the legal party (they wanted to continue functioning underground) and advocated "independence" as a maneuver to prevent the youth from affiliating with the party. The delegations voted overwhelmingly against the "independence" advocates. A manifesto and program was adopted together with a constitution and a resolution on relations with the Workers Party. A National Committee was elected with Martin Abern as National Secretary.†

The year between the 1st and the 2nd conventions was marked by functioning based on propagandistic activity. The "independents" disappeared completely from the scene, particularly after the United Toilers liquidated their organization and joined the Workers Party. In this period a number of new groups were organized and a functioning League was established as a distinct organization. But it was only at the 2nd Convention (Chicago: May 20-22, 1923) that the League's attention was directed away from the purely propagandistic activity of spreading the general ideas of communism amongst youth, and more in the direction of winning the young worker to the communist movement by organizing them on the basis of their daily struggles and their immediate interests. This turn, which has always come [to be regarded] as the second stage in the development of the movement, was achieved with the assistance of the YCI, but not without some internal dispute. The swing towards active participation in the daily struggles of the working youth and the adoption of the organizational forms best suited for such activity was resisted by many of the middle class students. This turn to the masses was introduced at the 2nd and 3rd Congresses of the YCI.

†- Martin Abern (née Abramowitz, 1898-1946) was born in Romania, the son of a peddler who brought his family to America in 1902. Abern attended the University of Minnesota for 2 years, before being expelled for his communist views in 1920. During the underground period he used the pseudonyms "Parnell," "Marty," and "Harry Stone." In June 1921 he was a delegate of the Young Communist League of America to the Young Communist International, and was elected to the Executive Committee of the latter organization. Abern was Secretary of the Young Workers League from 1922 to 1924 and on the Central Executive Committee of the Workers (Communist) Party from 1923 to 1928. Abern was expelled for "Trotskyism" in 1928 and was thereafter one of the primary leaders of the organized Trotskyist movement in America.

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### **The Third Congress of the YCI and the Turn “To the Masses.”**

At the 3rd Congress of the YCI (Dec. 4-12, 1922) in Moscow, little progress could be recorded in the growth of the leagues. As against about 600,000 claimed at the previous congress [2nd: June 9-23, 1921], it was now reported that the YCI had 750,000 members. This was primarily a result of the increase of the Russian League, which had 38 YCL sections as against 36 at the previous congress. While some of the leagues had been engaged in economic activities of the young workers and in anti-militarist work, the resolutions record: “Education work was limited mostly to the members” [and] “The Young Communist Leagues have not yet become mass organizations.”

The Congress adopted a draft program for the YCI and a program of economic demands for young workers “up to 18 years of age.”

After an analysis of the work accomplished since the 2nd Congress it became clear to the 3rd Congress that

the Young Communists Leagues have not yet become mass organizations in the sense of having close contact with the masses of young workers; of the participation of their branches and individual members in the daily struggle of the young workers for the betterment of their conditions and in the sense of the improved revolutionary enlightenment of the masses by means of an interesting communist educational work conducted on a mass scale. †

Hence the YCI proceeded to change further the organizational structure of the YCLs. The basis of organization prior to the 3rd Congress was a territorial one and it is just in this that its main weakness existed. The new form of organization adapted itself to the demands of modern industry. Wherever there were a number of young YCL workers in a factory, they formed a shop nuclei. The object was to build up an organization which, acting as a compliment to the Party, would place the YCL in the strongest position to struggle for the revolution. The shop nuclei would combine the young communists at their place of work and would be in direct contact with the masses of the

working youth in their daily struggles. Hence, it could recruit them, guide them, and persuade them to participate in all the fields of the League work.

In the schools, the members of the YCL were combined into fractions. These, like the shop nuclei, were basic organizational units and were combined into branches with the shop nuclei of the particular district in which the school was situated. As the economic activities of the school are by their very nature limited, it was necessary to establish a definite connection between members in their places of work and the branches in the districts in which the shops were situated. The unemployed members entered the branch at their place of living. At the labor exchanges, the unemployed League members formed into fractions to work among their fellow unemployed.

The League nuclei were to work in the closest contact with the Party nuclei. Representatives between nuclei were mutually exchanged.

The purpose of the cry “To the Masses!” and the change in organizational structure was both to increase the strength of the League and to build the social composition of the League in the working class elements. This form of organization, based on the Russian YCL and CP, was accepted in theory by all the leagues, but was never completely carried out by the non-Russian organizations.

In the United States, with this turn the face of the League was directed towards the young workers and every effort was made to win them. In the two main centers, New York and Chicago, the League began to participate in strikes and other struggles as a distinct youth organization. Campaigns were begun to reach into industries where the young workers were concentrated. *The Young Worker*, under Max Shachtman’s editorship, was changed from a “refined” magazine into a fighting newspaper which sought to reflect the life of the members and to educate them in the struggle.

This period, in the US, was one of the League’s soundest and healthiest growth. It was free from the corrupting factional and clique strife which undermined it later on, and hence reached a membership of more than 3,000. It did not fail, however, to participate in the inner life of the Party.

†- *Resolutions and Thesis of the Third Congress of the YCI.*

### The Beginning of the End — Degeneration.

From late 1923 onward, the beginning of the degeneration of the YCL began to take place, until in 1925 the organic process of the youth movement was brought to an abrupt halt. The youth became a factional pawn, first by the Zinoviev-Stalin faction against Trotsky and then by Stalin against Zinoviev and Trotsky.

In late 1923, Leon Trotsky wrote in his *New Course*:

It is entirely insufficient for our youth to repeat our formulae. It must conquer the revolutionary formulae, it must assimilate them, work out its own opinions, its own physiognomy; it must be capable of fighting for its views with the courage which arises out of the depths of conviction and independence of character. Out of the party with passive obedience, with mechanical levelling by the authorities, with suppression of personality, with servility, with careerism! †

Trotsky was accused of “pitting the youth against the Old Bolsheviks.” Young workers who accepted Trotsky’s advice (or his political criticisms of the ruling regime) were treated as opponents of Bolshevism and later expelled from the YCLs (in Russia, the treatment was much more severe).

The Young Communist League in Russia in 1921 adopted the position that Russia “can arrive at socialism only through the proletarian revolution, which epoch of development we have now entered.” However, after 1924, when Stalin first introduced the theory of “socialism in one country,” it was not long before this was also adopted by the league.

On July 13 to 25, 1924, the 4th Congress of the YCI opened up the international campaign for “Bolshevization” (simultaneous with the campaign of the 5th Congress of the Comintern). Since Trotsky was the outstanding spokesman against the bureaucratization of the CP and the theory of “socialism in one country,” the YCL in every country was made the tool of the dominant faction in the party in the struggle

against “Trotskyism” or alleged “Trotskyites.” The slogan of “Bolshevization” was used to effectuate the struggle against the Left Wing. In every country, critical education of the young communists became impossible; factional obedience and loyalty were the tests of youth leaders, who in turn transmitted these traits to the ranks.

In the United States, the American party had been handed over to Ruthenberg and Lovestone. Their youth supporters were presented with the leadership of the League in the face of the overwhelming opposition of the membership of at the 1925 convention. That marked the retrogression of the League, the degeneration of its leading elements, its conversion into a factional instrument, the mistraiding of its membership, its bureaucratization.

And outstanding leader of the 3rd Congress of the YCI, a follower of Zinoviev, Vuyo Vuyovitch, was removed from the international leadership and later expelled and exiled to Siberia because of his support to the United Opposition of Trotsky and Zinoviev.

At the 5th Congress of the YCI, August 20 to September 18, 1928, (following the 6th Congress of the Comintern) the old formula on the character of the YCL was repeated in resolutions and in the program: Trotskyism was condemned and Stalinism endorsed. No real progress could be noted in the development of strength or influence of the League.

From the growth of the bureaucratic seed to the warped monolithic movement today, the YCL had gone through many changes, not only at the top where leaders were manufactured and smashed, but in the ranks where the terrific fluctuation of the membership expressed the failure of the YCL to fulfill its purpose of training revolutionists for the Party. At a time when the Party was distorted and undermined by Stalinism, the official youth movement, untrue to the traditions that were incorporated into it at its foundation, simply went along with the stream.

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†- L. Trotsky circular letter to party meetings of Dec. 8, 1923, included as an appendix to *Novyi Kurs* [The New Course] (1924). From Leon Trotsky, *The New Course*. Max Shachtman, trans. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), pg. 94.

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