

**THE NEW LABOR
RADICALISM AND
NEW YORK CITY'S
GARMENT INDUSTRY**
Progressive Labor Insurgents
in the 1960s

LEIGH DAVID BENIN



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Contents

Introduction	ix
Acknowledgments	xix
List of Abbreviations	xxi
Part I Reinventing American Communism:	
An Overview of Progressive Labor in the 1960s and 1970s	1
Chapter 1. Antirevisionism in Action:	
The Origin of the Progressive Labor Party, 1956–1965	3
Chapter 2. Purifying the Communist Movement and	
Searching for Utopia: Progressive Labor in Theory, 1965–1982	27
Chapter 3. Reform, Revolution, and the Search for the	
Working Class: Progressive Labor in Practice, 1962–1982	44
Part II New Communists in an Old Anticommunist Union:	
Progressive Labor and the International Ladies' Garment	
Workers' Union in the 1960s	69
Chapter 4. New Communists Challenge Old Socialists:	
Trespassing on "Dubinsky's Plantation," 1962–1966	71
Chapter 5. The Making of a Communist Trucker:	
The Political Apprenticeship of a Progressive Labor	
Colonizer in Garment Trucking, 1940–1966	99

Chapter 6. Communist Truckers Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Progressive Labor, Garment Trucking and Local 102, ILGWU, 1967–1970	122
Chapter 7. Anatomy of a Communist-Led Wildcat Strike: Progressive Labor, Figure Flattery and Local 32, ILGWU, 1968	147
Chapter 8. Anatomy of an Anticommunist Purge: Progressive Labor, Figure Flattery, and Local 32, ILGWU, 1968–1969	170
Conclusion	188
Notes	197
Selected Bibliography	299
Index	319

Introduction

THE FOCUS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This study examines how Progressive Labor, an antirevisionist offshoot of the Communist Party USA, attempted to revolutionize the labor front in New York City's garment industry during the 1960s. An ideologically driven group, whose founders were loyal to Stalinism and attracted by Maoism, Progressive Labor set out in 1962 to become the vanguard of the American working class. However, PL—most of whose several hundred members were students, intellectuals and professionals—is primarily known for the factional role that it played in Students for a Democratic Society, the largest radical organization in the United States during the 1960s. The Worker-Student Alliance, PL's caucus in SDS, championed the cause of working-class revolution. Although most SDSers, who identified with the New Left's reliance on students or minorities, never embraced PL's faith in the American working class as an agency of radical social change, PL gained enough supporters for its pro-worker strategy to precipitate a disastrous split in SDS in 1969.

Progressive Labor was not only the first of the newly organized radical groups in the 1960s to advocate a working-class strategy, but the first to turn its members into workplace organizers. Thus, while PL was vociferously urging students to support working-class revolution, it also sought to validate its pro-worker stance by winning workers at the point of production to communism. Therefore, although most large-scale radical actions in the 1960s were campus based and we primarily know PL as an important player in the factional wars that led to SDS's disintegration

at the end of the decade, this study focuses on PL's historical experience in the labor field, an arena in which PL's activities were not entirely insignificant, and which PL regarded as a proving ground for the theories it advanced within SDS. A historical analysis of PL's labor organizing, even in one venue, provides a useful vantage point from which we can reevaluate the theoretical debate within SDS over agency (the social basis for radical social change). To what extent did PL's experience with on-the-job organizing confirm its sanguine view of contemporary American workers' revolutionary potential? To what extent did PL's practice at the point of production justify the party's enormous self-confidence as an aspiring labor vanguard? By looking at PL's attempt to revolutionize the labor front, this study illuminates the seldom examined labor agitation of 1960s' radicals, as well as the little explored radical element in the labor movement of the period.

During the 1960s and 1970s, public and service sector unions were more dynamic than unions in the industrial sector, including the ILGWU, and PL's predominantly college-educated base generally played a greater role in public and service workers' unions than in unions of industrial workers, where PL had few members. However, PL relied primarily on the revolutionary potential of industrial workers, especially "super-exploited" Blacks, Hispanics, and, in feminized industries, women. Because PL was headquartered in New York City, this study focuses on PL's organizing efforts in the city's industrial heartland, the garment industry, whose large number of minority and female workers were represented by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the city's biggest and most influential labor union.

Progressive Labor's roots were in New York City, which had a strong union and radical tradition, including a history of labor radicalism. A labor town, New York was also the headquarters of the CP, whose internal disputes in the late 1950s and early 1960s led to the creation of PL. Progressive Labor's new communists partially rejected their CP training, but they also attempted to perpetuate the CP traditions that they valued, including a communist struggle to control the needle trades dating back to the 1920s. For the most part, Jewish men who were either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants led the city's garment industry, the ILGWU and PL. Their own responses to exploitation and anti-Semitism (capitalist enterprise, socialist unionism, and communist revolution, respectively) informed their approach—at a time of rising radical, labor, civil rights, and feminist ferment—to the city's newest garment workers, Black and Hispanic women. Examining the PL-led

insurgency in the ILGWU informs our understanding of New York City during the 1960s and the ILGWU's attempt to cope with changes in the garment workforce as the industry's decline in New York threatened to devastate the union.

Thus, this study of PL's attempt to revolutionize the labor front in New York City's garment industry during the 1960s enhances our knowledge of Progressive Labor, contemporary student and labor radicalism, and New York City, especially its largest industry and major labor union.

PROGRESSIVE LABOR AND STUDENT RADICALISM

Progressive Labor emerged as an antirevisionist offshoot of the Communist Party USA in 1962. Progressive Labor's leaders expressed frustration with what they considered to be the CP's defensive stance during the anticommunist purge under Truman and Eisenhower, and bitterness at the party's anti-Stalinism following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956. They found the Communist Party of China's increasingly vociferous critique of Soviet revisionism persuasive. Over the course of twenty years, from 1962 to 1982, PL read international events and reflected on its own practice, and discovered what it considered to be the logical implications of antirevisionism. In attempting to progressively purify communism of revisionist errors, that is, concessions to capitalist ideology and power, it evolved a pure and simple communism that was utopian in character.

Progressive Labor believed that it could persuade the American working class to make a revolution for egalitarian communism. Indeed, unless PL could gain significant working-class support for its revolutionary communism, the egalitarian society it envisioned would remain a *utopia*. Its CP training and increasingly radical antirevisionism shaped PL's approach to labor organizing. Progressive Labor's leaders believed that American workers were more militant and much more open to communist ideas than the CP acknowledged, and they were determined to prove it in practice at the point of production by leading militant struggles and advocating communist politics. But PL's organizing within New York City's unions during the 1960s and 1970s is terra incognita to almost everyone except the relatively small number of people who were directly involved, that is, the new communist insurgents, the management and union officials whom they assailed, and the rank-and-file union members whom they aspired to lead.

However, scholarly works on the new radicalism of the 1960s,

which have focused almost exclusively on student radicalism, do discuss the role that PL played in the breakup and ultimate demise of SDS, the biggest and most influential mass organization produced by the New Left. Students for a Democratic Society, parented by the democratic socialist—and anticommunist—League for Industrial Democracy, and the Progressive Labor Movement, started by ex-CPers, were both founded in the summer of 1962. Although the emergence of SDS's new leftists and the PL's new communists reflected the demise of the CP as the most important center of American radicalism, they adopted divergent paths toward the renewal of American radicalism. While SDS's *Port Huron Statement* expressed hope that peace forces would permeate important decision making centers, PL's new communists advocated laying siege to the edifice of Cold War liberalism in the name of an anti-imperialist crusade.

However, between 1962 and 1965, SDS responded to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' escalation of the Vietnam War by becoming increasingly radical.¹ In April 1965 the two hundred delegates to the Progressive Labor Party's founding convention interrupted their proceedings to carry anti-imperialist banners in SDS's march in Washington, which attracted an unprecedented 25,000 anti-Vietnam War protesters. Students for a Democratic Society, which was not committed to a distinct ideology, was gaining a mass following. In 1966 Progressive Labor dissolved its small student antiwar front, the May Second Movement, and advised its members to join SDS to promote its own distinctly ideological approach to revolutionary politics.²

Students for a Democratic Society, influenced by contemporary leftist intellectuals who doubted the revolutionary potential of industrial workers in advanced capitalist countries, attempted to build a counter-vailing power from below by organizing the poor into "community unions."³ By contrast, PL differentiated between the labor establishment and rank-and-file workers. While PL ridiculed labor leaders as the junior partners of American capitalism, it argued that rank-and-file workers would become a revolutionary force if genuine communists provided them with leadership. Progressive Labor organized the WSA faction of SDS to counteract SDSers' antiworker biases and gain control of SDS. In 1968 the WSA organized the SDS Work-In, which sent SDSers into the workplace to politicize workers.⁴ The general strike in France that year lent credence to PL's pro-worker campaign, which was gaining adherents among radical students who were frustrated by their inability to end the Vietnam War and reshape American political culture. The WSA,

however, was “expelled” from SDS in 1969 by a temporary alliance of two other revolutionary SDS factions, the Revolutionary Youth Movement II and the Weathermen. The WSA claimed to be the “real” SDS and continued to operate as SDS until PL dissolved it in the early 1970s.

The fracturing of SDS was followed by two decades of post-mortem analyses, for the most part by PL’s New Left critics. They deplored the renewed currency in the latter half of the 1960s of the Old Left’s insistence on Marxist-Leninist discipline, belief in the imminence of revolution, and reliance on the working class; and they lamented the failed promise of New Left innovations, such as participatory democracy, cultural criticism, expressive politics and reliance on students or minorities. Within this general framework, these analysts differed about why SDS failed.⁵

However, all of them faulted PL for its allegedly destructive role in SDS. “PL helped to Marxize SDS,” former SDS leader Todd Gitlin wrote, “and PL fattened, parasitically, as Marxism and then Marxism-Leninism became SDS’s unofficial language.”⁶ The portrayal of PL as the scourge of the student movement (emerging from obscurity to achieve fifteen minutes of fame as SDS’s destroyer and then dwindling into an irrelevant fringe group) is far from adequate. The characterization of PL as Old Left, Stalinist and Maoist, even if substantially accurate, does not constitute a substantive analysis of the party’s ideas and actions; and noting that students became radicalized by the late 1960s, or that PL possessed disciplined cadres, does not fully explain what enabled PL to build a significant SDS caucus oriented toward working-class revolution, or why PL, rather than some other Old Left group, was able to do it. Progressive Labor’s importance in the story of SDS’s collapse suggests the need for a comprehensive examination of PL. A better understanding of PL would, undoubtedly, make the rise of revolutionary politics—and the rise of PL—in SDS more comprehensible.

PROGRESSIVE LABOR AND LABOR RADICALISM

The present study, however, does not propose to scrutinize PL to clarify matters that principally have to do with the student movement. The purpose here, rather, is to illuminate the least understood aspect of the new radicalism, that is, radicals organizing in the workplace. The schism in SDS centered on the debate over what stance students should take toward workers. Moreover, thousands of former student radicals of various po-

litical persuasions became workers during the 1960s and 1970s, entering a workforce that showed signs of renewed spirit.

The resurgence of student radicalism at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s coincided with an upsurge of labor ferment. The labor movement had been relatively quiescent for almost fifteen years after the immediate postwar strike wave subsided—in part, due to the anticommunist crusade that devastated labor's Left.⁷ Beginning in the early 1960s, a number of liberal and leftist labor intellectuals observed what they regarded as depressing signs of ossification in the labor movement.⁸ But there was also evidence that labor ferment was on the rise. A major spurt of new organizing among public, service and professional employees offset declining union membership rolls in the heavily organized manufacturing sector of the Northeast and Midwest. The worker militancy that facilitated union organizing also led to rank-and-file revolts against established union leaders. This wave of insurgency crested from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Moreover, radicals sometimes played a leading role in rank-and-file insurgencies, especially in unions of college-educated workers in health, education and welfare. This reinvigorating of the labor movement induced a sense of optimism in leftist labor intellectuals.⁹

However, by the end of the 1970s, the tide of worker militancy had subsided and the unions were clearly on the defensive vis-a-vis employers. Again, labor intellectuals attempted to explain, and suggested ways to reverse, organized labor's evident decline.¹⁰ To some extent, these writers addressed the resurgence of labor radicalism in the 1960s, but barely mentioned PL's role in this movement.¹¹

From its inception in the early 1960s, however, Progressive Labor aspired to be the vanguard party of the working class. To be sure, PL saw students and bourgeois intellectuals as potential allies of working-class revolution. But before, during and after its involvement in SDS, PL attempted to bring its revolutionary communist ideas to workers at the point of production. While PL never became the vanguard of the working class, it unquestionably was in the vanguard of the industrializing movement of the new radicals.

PROGRESSIVE LABOR IN NEW YORK CITY'S INDUSTRIAL HEARTLAND

Progressive Labor played an active role in labor unions across the United States, but PL was headquartered in New York, where this small Marxist-

Leninist party had its largest base. In view of PL's relative strength in New York, which had a strong radical tradition, a diverse workforce, a dynamic labor movement and national political importance, the city is a good focus for a study of PL's approach to winning the hearts and minds of American workers.

New York City deserved its reputation as a union town. By 1945, unions had organized much of New York's labor force and played an important role in the city's political life. Despite important exceptions, White working-class men dominated both the membership and leadership of New York's labor movement. However, changes in demography, patterns of employment and unionization in the postwar period altered the composition of the labor movement and, eventually, its leadership. The city's large number of Black and Hispanic immigrants found employment in unskilled and semiskilled occupations, women increasingly found employment at various levels, and the boom in higher education and public sector employment brought many college graduates into the workforce. Unions of public, service and professional employees in New York enjoyed a major growth spurt from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, bringing a large number of Blacks, Hispanics, women and the college-educated into the city's labor movement.¹² The diversity of New York and its labor movement raised issues of race, class and gender that both unions and labor radicals could not afford to neglect.¹³

New York City also has a strong radical tradition. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party's largest chapter was located in New York. The anticommunist crusade of the 1940s and 1950s devastated the CP, but New York became an important center of resurgent radicalism, including labor radicalism, in the 1960s and 1970s. Even though New Left students wrote off organized labor as a force for radical change, some new radicals—PLers not the least among them—did attempt to influence unionized workers, and student radicals' interest in labor rose in the late 1960s as worker militancy increased. Moreover, because college-trained workers in health, education and welfare unionized during the 1960s, New York's labor movement was peppered with radical intellectuals. They offered alternative visions of unionism and alternative solutions to New York's urban crisis, mobilizing rank-and-file militancy in support of their positions. They were not mere gadflies buzzing around the house of labor, but posed a threat to employers, union leaders and public officials, who often collaborated to defend the liberal consensus in labor relations and public policy. The labor radicals' struggle against en-

trenched institutional power ran like a red thread through the fabric of labor relations in New York during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴

College and university students, intellectuals and professionals, as well as a growing number of college-educated workers, such as case-workers, teachers and hospital technicians, comprised the vast majority of PL's membership. Not surprisingly, then, there were many more PLers in such New York unions as the Social Service Employees Union, the United Federation of Teachers, Hospital and Nursing Home Workers Local 1199 and the Committee of Interns and Residents than in any union of industrial workers in the city. Generally, PL had a more palpable impact on unions representing the college-educated than on unions in the city's industrial sector.

None of the unions representing public and service employees, however, were as important to PL as the imperious ILGWU, which represented the bulk of the garment workforce. In order for tiny PL, which had only a few hundred members in New York, to win garment workers to its brand of communism, it would have to take on not only the garment industry but the staunchly anticommunist ILGWU, the largest institution in New York City's garment center and one of the most politically influential organizations in the city. This was a case of David going forth to slay Goliath.

However, PL saw chinks in the ILGWU's armor. The defeat of New York's labor leftists occurred at a time when garment, still the city's major industry, was employing an increasing number of Blacks and Hispanics, especially women, in low-paid positions. Liberals and radicals faulted the ILGWU for failing to adequately defend the interests of its newest members, whose marginalization in a declining industry contributed to the emergence of New York as an increasingly divided city. By contrast, in health care, which was replacing garment as the city's major industry, Local 1199's CP-trained leadership, which had survived the anticommunist crusade, won significant gains for egregiously exploited minority women by merging the crusading spirit of the contemporary civil rights movement with militant unionism.

Filled with revolutionary optimism, PL attempted to turn the ILGWU, which faced daunting challenges, into a school for communism. This was an expression of PL's confidence in the industrial working class and a crucial test of its class analysis. Progressive Labor believed that winning industrial workers to communism was a vital component of its revolutionary mission. From its inception in 1962, when PL set out to rebuild a labor Left, initially in New York City, it focused on the

garment industry and the ILGWU's alleged racism. The auto and steel industries might be more important nationally, but in New York City, where PL was headquartered, garment was still the key industry. Progressive Labor aspired to be a working-class party, but especially a party of, by, and for the industrial workers, whom PL envisaged as the backbone of the coming social revolution and new social order; and PL saw low-paid Black, Hispanic, and female garment workers as potentially the key revolutionary force in New York City because they suffered from racism and sexism, as well as economic exploitation.

If PL could not organize a communist base among oppressed Black and Hispanic industrial workers in New York City, where the party had its biggest chapter, and where party leaders could give close supervision to on-the-job organizers, then where could PL expect to succeed? Even when PL's activities in other New York industries looked promising (for example, in the hospitals during the 1970s), PL continually renewed its commitment to building a communist base in the garment industry. Moreover, despite the breadth of PL's labor organizing over two decades, and the periodic changes in PL's line and practice during that period, the experience of the party's garment organizers in New York during the late 1960s was, in most important respects, representative of the experience of PL's labor organizers generally. Therefore, New York's garment industry during the 1960s is a good focus for a study of PL's attempt to revolutionize the American labor front.

Historical accounts of radicalism and labor in the 1960s and 1970s have largely left unexplored the struggles waged by the new generation of labor radicals, including PLers, who became politically active during these decades. Because New York City was a center of resurgent labor radicalism and served as PL's center, it offers abundant material for a study of the new labor radicalism and PL. Focusing on PL's labor activities in New York City's garment center, where PL hoped to build a communist base among workers in the city's largest industry, is a useful vantage point from which to assess PL's theory and practice in the labor field. This study provides: (1) a needed survey of PL's development during the 1960s and 1970s; (2) an opportunity to reassess PL and its pro-worker stance based on the labor organizing that the party regarded as crucial to its development as the vanguard of the American working class; (3) a picture of PL's part in the resurgence of labor radicalism during the 1960s and 1970s, especially in New York City; (4) a view of the ILGWU from the vantage point of its PL critics at a time when the union was confronted by ethnic, racial and gender changes in the garment

workforce, and the industry's decline in New York City; and (5) instructive case studies of new communist labor insurgencies in the industrial field.

STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

Considering the fact that there is no scholarly history of the Progressive Labor Party, this study begins with a survey of PL (Part I), which examines the origin of PL (Chapter 1), the development of its antirevisionist theory (Chapter 2) and its labor organizing practices during the 1960s and 1970s (Chapter 3).

Part II considers PL's organizing activities in New York City's industrial heartland, examining the party's critique of the ILGWU (Chapter 4); the political apprenticeship of one of PL's leading organizers in garment trucking (Chapter 5); the PL-led work stoppages in garment trucking, involving members of Local 102, ILGWU (Chapter 6); the PL-led wildcat strike at Figure Flattery, which involved members of Local 32, ILGWU (Chapter 7); and the anticommunist purge that followed the Figure Flattery strike (Chapter 8).

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List of Abbreviations

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations
APU	Acion Patriotica Unitaria
CCNY	City College of New York
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CPUSA or CP	Communist Party of the United States
CUNY	City University of New York
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FOUR	Federation of Union Representatives
FUPI	Federacion de Universitarios Pro Independencia
GPCR	Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
ICC	Interstate Commerce Commission
ILGWU	International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
InCAR	International Committee Against Racism
KKK	Klu Klux Klan
M2M	May Second Movement
MYAC	Monroe Youth Action Committee
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NEP	New Economic Policy
NLR	<i>New Left Review</i>

OEO	Office of Economic Opportunity
PL	Progressive Labor
<i>PL</i>	<i>Progressive Labor Magazine</i>
PLM	Progressive Labor Movement
PLP	Progressive Labor Party
<i>RR I</i>	<i>Road to Revolution</i>
<i>RR II</i>	<i>Road to Revolution II</i>
<i>RR III</i>	<i>Road to Revolution III</i>
<i>RR IV</i>	<i>Road to Revolution IV</i>
SBI	State Bureau of Investigation
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SDS-LP	Students for a Democratic Society–Labor Project
SNCC	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
SWP	Socialist Workers Party
UAW	United Automobile Workers
WAC	Workers Action Committee
WAM	Workers Action Movement
WPA	Works Progress Administration
WSA	Worker–Student Alliance

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PART I

Reinventing American Communism

An Overview of Progressive Labor
in the 1960s and 1970s



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CHAPTER 1

Antirevisionism in Action

The Origin of the Progressive Labor Party, 1956–1965

This chapter discusses Progressive Labor's formative period, from the late 1950s and early 1960s, when PL's future leaders were dissident members of the Communist Party USA, to the creation of the loosely organized Progressive Labor Movement in 1962, and finally to the formation in 1965 of the Progressive Labor Party, a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party organized along democratic-centralist lines.¹

COMMUNIST PARTY DISSIDENTS

Progressive Labor, which quickly transformed itself between January 1962 and April 1965 from a magazine into a political party, emerged from the acrimonious internal disputes that plagued the embattled and disintegrating Communist Party USA of the late 1950s.² In August 1961 the CPUSA removed Milton Rosen and Mortimer Scheer from party leadership, as New York State labor secretary and Erie County chairman, respectively, because of their disagreements with the party's strategy and tactics. Four months later, the party expelled them for engaging in "secret factional activities." They had, the CP alleged, "crassly violated the Leninist principles of democratic centralism" and become a "center of disruption."³ After being expelled from the CP, they founded *Progressive Labor*, which subsequently justified their actions as "strictly within the guidelines of democratic centralism," and accused the CP's national leadership of having feared "inner-party ideological struggle."⁴

This quarrel about which side had violated mutually accepted rules of engagement governing inner-party warfare reflected deep political

divisions between the belligerents. The CP leadership accused the "handful of disrupters in New York headed by Milt Rosen" of having a "sectarian and dogmatic outlook."⁵ Contrarily, PL portrayed its founders as former leaders of the CP's "new Left" who had been expelled by the CP's "revisionist" national leadership.⁶ In the charged language of party polemics, where adversaries quickly became enemies, combatants wielded epithets such as *revisionist* and *sectarian* like knives in a street brawl.⁷ This may seem like a tempest in a teapot, but the belligerents believed, as did Lenin, that the fate of the world's working class depended on the outcome of such disputes in obscure revolutionary circles.⁸

Progressive Labor traced the roots of this rancor to the "grave internal crisis" that rocked the CPUSA following the repudiation of Stalinism by the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956.⁹ In the principal dispute that divided the CPUSA, the defenders of ideological orthodoxy, led by Eugene Dennis, the general secretary, and especially William Z. Foster, the chairman, defeated the reformers, led by John Gates, editor of the *Daily Worker*.¹⁰ Progressive Labor regarded the defeated reformers, who criticized the CPUSA for being sectarian, as "right-wingers." However, from PL's pro-Stalin perspective, the victorious Foster-Dennis forces were "centrists," rather than genuine leftists, because they "never defeated the revisionists' class collaborationist program" and "never repudiated the 20th Congress of the CPSU."¹¹ Ironically, PL's future leaders had developed their political ideas during the Cold War, when Foster's policies, which he later characterized as "left-sectarian," guided the CPUSA.¹² In important respects, PL reenacted in the 1960s and 1970s Cold War imperatives initiated by the Foster leadership in the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹³

Progressive Labor self-importantly characterized the CP's "leading industrial cadres in Buffalo, New York," who later founded PL, as the "the Left."¹⁴ Progressive Labor was proud of its working-class origin. Within communist circles, belonging to the proletariat bestowed social status and political authority.¹⁵ However, the CP, unwilling to concede this advantage to PL's future leaders, accused them of being tainted by petit bourgeois backgrounds or influences—a stinging rebuke.¹⁶ For its part, PL disparaged as "petit bourgeois sectors" the disappointed reformers who left the CP "in droves," especially in New York State, where 50% of the party's membership lived.

These defections created a leadership vacuum that allowed Milt Rosen, a relatively young steel worker and leftist industrial leader in the Buffalo CP, to become the CP's Upstate New York organizer. When the

House Un-American Activities Committee attacked the CP's industrial base in Buffalo in 1957, anticommunist union leaders, according to PL, initiated numerous firings. Progressive Labor claimed that co-workers usually defended CPers who were open communists, enabling them to retain their jobs. In any case, the CP organization in Buffalo survived and Rosen was elected labor secretary of the New York State CPUSA. This promotion apparently emboldened Rosen, who now had an opportunity to implement his ideas statewide in the CP's most important state.¹⁷

Rosen's revival of CP street rallies in New York City's garment district, "for the first time in many years," was emblematic, PL later reflected, of its future leaders' determination to "openly bring the banner of socialism into the working-class movement." They were just as determined to oppose what they considered to be fundamental concessions to capitalist hegemony in the United States and internationally. For example, they sat out the 1960 presidential election, refusing to back John F. Kennedy even though the CP supported him as the lesser-evil candidate.¹⁸ After Kennedy's election, they concentrated on fighting his administration rather than the "Ultra-Right," which the CP regarded as representing the "most dangerous elements" in American society.¹⁹ Rosen and Scheer believed that the CP's preoccupation with right-wing extremists diverted workers from fighting the "main sources of monopoly power which control the state apparatus."²⁰ They also rejected the CPUSA's contention, which conformed to the line of Khrushchev's CPSU, that "war is not inevitable and that peaceful coexistence is possible." The CPUSA retorted that Rosen's group was in accord with the Albanian party, whose leaders "support the methods and practices of the Stalin cult."²¹

The relative political strength of these opposing outlooks within the CP was decisively tested at the party's 17th national convention in 1959. Milt Rosen and Mort Scheer failed to win seats on the party's national committee.²² As PL subsequently saw it, the newly elected general secretary, Gus Hall, had "maneuvered" to put "well known revisionists" from New York into national leadership. The Hall leadership's victory over the "political delinquents" in New York set the stage, PL believed, for their expulsion.²³

According to the CP, following the defeat of his national committee candidacy at the CP's 17th convention, Milt Rosen "organized and continued an active opposition to the basic policy decisions of that convention." As a result, he was removed from "all his posts" by the New York State party committee. His response, the CP charged, was to engage in

factionalism.²⁴ In December 1961 the CP leadership accused Rosen's group of having held an "anti-party faction meeting." According to the CP, the "disrupters" did not deny the charge, but refused to "recognize the authority of the party to inquire into the matter" and "disavowed the party." They were "unanimously expelled" by the CP's New York State leadership.²⁵ PL later surmised that Gus Hall had expelled the "new Left cadres" because he, unlike his "ideologically weak" left-wing opponents, who were unaware of the international roots of the CPUSA's "revisionism," was cognizant of the developing Sino-Soviet split and fearful of "large-scale defections" to the Chinese side. Whatever the merit of this supposition, PL affirmed that twelve "comrades," representing thirty-five communist workers, and fifteen communist students who were influenced by the Cuban Revolution, met under Rosen's leadership that December and made the fateful decision to build a new communist party.²⁶

It is unlikely that Gus Hall was excessively disturbed by the defection (or expulsion) of Rosen's group. In view of the collapse of the CP, whose membership declined from 20,000 to 5,000 in the late 1950s, the loss of thirty-five Stalinist workers and fifteen pro-Castro students did not significantly reduce the party's forces.²⁷ On the contrary, from the Hall leadership's point of view, the removal of Rosen, Scheer and other incorrigible Stalinists, who allegedly had formed a disruptive and potentially dangerous faction, strengthened party unity, enabling the CP to defend itself against government attacks and pursue its policies unhindered by internal dissension.²⁸ For his part, Rosen undoubtedly agreed with the sentiment expressed by Foster that "It is better to have fifty true members than 50,000 people who are not genuine communists." Rosen forfeited only five thousand CP "revisionists" to preserve a core of fifty "revolutionary" communists. However, Rosen would have to demonstrate in practice that this sacrifice was justified.²⁹

While Progressive Labor never made the "absurd claim" that it was the "first true communist party in history," it did consider itself to be the CP's successor as the standard-bearer of communism in the United States.³⁰ As the CP's self-appointed heir, PL intended to preserve all that was truly revolutionary in the CP's past, while expunging the elements of revisionism that it had inherited from its CP training. However, when PL's future leaders resolved to build a new communist party, admittedly an "enormous" task, the CP was still around and, although greatly diminished in size, was still much larger than the diminutive group that coalesced around Milt Rosen. Clearly, PL and the CP would be competing

for recruits and influence in the same political market. However, PL's future leaders, who had, while still members of the CP, sharply criticized its "revisionist" policies, now decided to remain mute on the subject of the CP. They argued that "concentrating on fighting the old communist party" was a "sectarian trap" that had destroyed other groups of ex-CPers. They decided to use all their meager resources to "get off the ground" by developing a "revolutionary program with a mass line" and building a "new working class base."³¹

PROGRESSIVE LABOR AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

To begin the process of building a new working-class base for their brand of revolutionary politics, Rosen's small band of ex-CPers published *Progressive Labor* in January 1962. The new magazine's editors wanted to reach workers new to communist ideas, rather than engage in polemics with the CP. They avoided communist jargon in favor of a language familiar to trade unionists. From its inception, PL's editors identified themselves as trade unionists "at present or in the recent past" and proclaimed that PL's "main purpose" was to "assist, in whatever way it can, the forward progress of the American labor movement." Hence, they chose the name *Progressive Labor*. By emphasizing their common identity and commonality of interest with other trade unionists, by placing themselves, in other words, squarely within the trade union camp, PL's editors attempted to gain a hearing for their more heterodox views—principally, their advocacy of socialism. Not surprisingly, they presented socialism as the culmination of trade-union aspirations.³²

The new PL magazine began its lead article, modestly entitled *For An Alternative Labor Policy*, by declaring, "The trade union is the only instrument the American worker has with which to protect his job, his working conditions, and his general welfare."³³ The CP ridiculed this formulation as flatly "anarcho-syndicalist," and an indication of how far Rosen's group had "already traveled from the party and Marxism-Leninism." The CP affirmed that trade unions were the "elementary organizations of the working class—their most important mass bodies," but warned workers to be mindful of "the political party of the working class—its vanguard—which is the highest type of working class organization—an indispensable instrument for labor's advance on immediate issues and for the achievement of socialism."³⁴

Progressive Labor's editors believed in the essential role of a vanguard party, but found themselves in an awkward and, presumably,

frustrating position.³⁵ The CP had expelled them, but they were not yet able to form a new party. While still members of the CP, they had rejected "Hall's political line," which, in their view, was to "bury the party in the labor movement."³⁶ Now, with no party of their own to promote, and hoping that the labor movement would provide fertile ground for building a new party, they rhetorically buried their not-yet-dead former party, the CPUSA, and praised labor as a mass movement. *Progressive Labor* lauded organized labor for its "historic role" as a "force for progress" and asserted that "any serious progress" required the "positive role of the labor movement," which *PL* regarded as the "pivotal force in American society."³⁷

After assessing the labor movement's past accomplishments and intrinsic importance to the struggle for social progress, *Progressive Labor* identified "one of its basic weaknesses" as the "virtual absence of a socialist outlook." *Progressive Labor* recalled the anticommunist witch hunts of the late 1940s and 1950s, which saw "thousands of progressive and socialist-minded individuals" driven out of the labor movement, "labeled, smeared and vilified" for opposing the labor leadership's "support for the Cold War abroad and collaboration with big business at home."³⁸ While blaming the Cold War crusade against communism for depriving organized labor of socialist leadership, *PL*'s editors were unwilling to explicitly credit the CP, their former party, with having been, as the CP claimed, in the "forefront of the struggle to build the modern labor movement." They also refrained from mentioning their own commitment to communism and considerable record as CP trade-union cadres.³⁹

If they were reticent about their political backgrounds, they were unreserved in their criticism of the labor establishment. *Progressive Labor* accused AFL-CIO leaders of adhering to the policies of big business, and estimated that there were "no more vocal or enthusiastic supporters of the status quo than these junior partners of mid-century American capitalism." Under their leadership, *PL* thought, the labor movement, despite the "fondest hopes of millions," awakened by the AFL-CIO merger in 1955, had "stagnated to the point of retrogression" and was in a "state of crisis."⁴⁰

Progressive Labor was optimistic, however, that in a "world moving rapidly to Socialism," the American worker would "fight for his due, making radical changes in his union, in government, and in the economy, to guarantee a life of security." *Progressive Labor* was confident because, it observed, American workers respond to "good militant leadership" and have often "taken on the companies, their own union leaders and the government all at once to preserve their economic standards and

working conditions.”⁴¹ For *PL*, the remarkable militancy exhibited by American workers in innumerable reform struggles revealed their capacity to fight for a radical transformation of American society. *Progressive Labor* implied that if workers were willing to fight so hard for even a small slice of the capitalist pie, they would fight even harder for the whole pie—but only if they were enlightened by socialists. *Progressive Labor*’s policy statement recognized that labor required socialist leaders, but glossed over the qualitative difference between an extremely militant struggle for economic demands and a revolutionary struggle for state power. Even so, *PL*’s editors offered to provide the labor movement with the socialist leadership that it was lacking. *Progressive Labor* suggested that although reformist trade unions had won partial and temporary gains for workers, rank-and-file trade unionists could, ultimately, realize their aspirations for a decent life only through socialism. Striving for socialism was the essence of the “alternative labor policy” that *PL*’s editors offered to organized labor. Implicitly, *PL*’s editors also offered themselves as an alternative to the AFL-CIO’s reformist leadership.⁴²

In this first major policy statement, *PL* presented its Marxist-Leninist vision of the symbiotic relationship between communists and trade unionists in a trade-union language that it primarily aimed at organized workers, but which addressed communists as well. *Progressive Labor*’s editors, who subscribed to Lenin’s belief that workers were incapable of arriving at socialist consciousness without help from communists, and who viewed themselves as the nucleus of a new communist party, offered to serve the interests of American workers by leading them to socialism.⁴³ However, if workers needed communist leadership, as *PL* claimed, albeit in veiled language at this juncture, communists certainly needed a substantial working-class following to accomplish their goals. *Progressive Labor*’s editors believed that they could not lead a socialist revolution in the United States without the support of millions of workers, especially rank-and-file trade unionists in the nation’s highly organized basic industries.⁴⁴ Thus, if *PL*’s editors claimed that trade unionists needed socialists, they also implied the converse—that socialists needed trade unionists.⁴⁵ This was the subtext of *PL*’s praise for organized labor as a “force for progress.” If no serious progress could occur, as *PL* argued, without the “positive role of the labor movement,” then socialism, the embodiment of progress, could certainly not be achieved without labor support. *Progressive Labor* aimed this correlative message in its appeal for an alternative labor policy at communists who disdained organizing for socialism within reformist labor unions.⁴⁶

There was asymmetry as well as symmetry in *PL*'s envisioned symbiosis between communists and trade unionists. While *PL*'s editors were acutely aware that they needed support from organized workers, there is little evidence that rank-and-file union members were searching for socialist leadership. Nevertheless, *PL* insisted that many workers responded positively to such leadership when they came across it. So, *PL* thought that even if workers were not socialists, they were open to the overtures of socialists. *Progressive Labor* believed that workers' essential willingness to struggle for self-improvement would draw them toward *PL*'s militant leadership and socialist program.⁴⁷

However, *PL* still had the burden of selling itself and socialism to organized workers. It was not at all certain that unionized workers, in pursuing their rational self-interest, would necessarily ally with *PL* and confront their employers, union leaders and government, as *PL* suggested. *Progressive Labor* was sanguine about the future of socialism in America, and confident about its own future as well. Whether *PL*'s optimism was well-founded, and whether its idealizing of working-class people and demonizing of AFL-CIO leaders would strike a responsive chord in unionized workers, remained to be seen. *Progressive Labor*'s analyses and leadership remained to be tested.

THE PROGRESSIVE LABOR MOVEMENT

Progressive Labor's clarion call for a socialist solution to labor's problems and sweeping attack on the AFL-CIO leadership was as bold as its refusal to discuss openly its communist orientation was timid, at least in view of *PL*'s subsequent insistence on broadcasting its communist identity. However, there was no good reason to suppose that any policy statement by *PL*, a new publication whose editors were relatively obscure, would have an impact on the labor movement, or even be noticed beyond a limited circle of leftists. Talk was cheap, but action required organization. To begin their journey out of the political wilderness and toward the promised land of egalitarian socialism, *PL*'s editors gathered their modest forces. Fifty delegates from eleven cities met in New York City's Hotel Diplomat in July 1962 to form the Progressive Labor Movement.⁴⁸

At this meeting, according to *PL*, the "Right" proposed creating an educational association and the "Left" called for founding a Leninist party immediately. The leadership argued that while the working class needed a democratic-centralist vanguard, the foundations for building a new revolutionary communist party were lacking. Milt Rosen's political

report called for the achievement of four key tasks: developing a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist program; initiating militant mass struggles; building a base of support among “young workers and students”; and establishing a network of clubs and a collective leadership. The Progressive Labor Movement, as the name implied, would be “loose in form” and would use the principles of “flexibility and persuasion to develop united action and policies.” Rosen concluded his report by urging PLMers to “Organize, organize, organize.”⁴⁹

THE TRADE UNION SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE FOR HAZARD MINERS

The newly formed Progressive Labor Movement, eager to emerge from its obscurity, participated in four “nationally significant struggles,” which focused a surprising degree of attention on the small organization (and formed the basis of PLP’s narrative of its prehistory as an activist movement). The first was on behalf of coal miners, members of the United Mine Workers of America, in the Appalachian Mountain Region of Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia. In the winter of 1962–1963 the miners were engaged in what PL described as a “bitter all-out strike” against “inhuman working conditions and starvation wages.” According to PL, the sight of “black and white miners united side by side and armed had sent the local bosses and politicians into a frantic rage.” When PLM’s leaders learned of the strike, several months after it began, they sent one of PLM’s southern organizers to Hazard, Kentucky, the strike’s center. There, he interviewed Berman Gibson, a rank-and-file leader of the strike. A cable from Hazard to PLM headquarters in New York City read, “RELIEF NEEDED DESPERATELY . . . HUNGRY BABIES CRYING. . . .” In response, PLM’s Wally Linder, an ex-CPer who was president of his local union’s railroad lodge, organized the Trade Union Solidarity Committee for Hazard Miners, which collected food, clothing and funds for the striking miners. This committee also raised funds for a mimeograph machine that enabled striking miners to publicize their views, and it organized a mass meeting in New York City that enabled Gibson to address a sympathetic audience of more than one thousand people. While PLM praised and supported rank-and-file miners, it disparaged United Mine Workers of America leaders, whom it accused of trying to “break the strike.”⁵⁰

Progressive Labor, which saw itself as the conscience of the working class, regarded strike support as an essential ingredient of working-class