

## THE CROATIAN SECTION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE "UNITED FRONT": 1934-1939

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### Introduction

Immigrants dominated the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) during long periods of its existence.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, relatively little has been written concerning the activities of the score of organized foreign language or national groups within the CPUSA.<sup>2</sup> Whether due to lack of access to resources or language barriers, the failure to study the activities of these groups leaves a hole in the understanding of the activities of the CPUSA.

The South Slavs, and particularly the Croats, represented one of the largest ethnic groups in the CPUSA.<sup>3</sup> The South Slavic Language Federation of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) had been one of the seven major groups which established the Communist Party of America (CPA), one of the precursors of the CPUSA. During one of the CPUSA's nadirs in late 1920s, an estimated one-

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning the history of the CPUSA during the 1930s, see Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1984); and Fraser Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> On the Hungarians, see the memoirs of Sandor Voros, *American Commissar* (Philadelphia: Chilton Co., 1961). On the Finns, see Peter Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists in the United States: The case of Finns and the Left* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984). On the Italians, see Gerald Meyer, "Italian Americans and the American Communist Party," in Phillip V. Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, eds., *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism: Politics, Labor, and Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The history of the Croatian American community has been studied by a number of scholars, including: Gerald Gilbert Govorchin, *Americans From Yugoslavia* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1961); George J. Prpic, *The Croatian Immigrants in America* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971); and Ivan Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu Sjedinjenih američkih država* (Zagreb: Globus, 1982).

third to one-half of the Party's membership consisted of Yugoslav-Americans,<sup>4</sup> the great majority of them Croats.<sup>5</sup>

While Croatian-American Communists did not have such a large relative presence in the Party in the 1930s, during the later half of that decade they played an increasingly visible role within their own community. This period coincided with the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "New Deal," and unionization drives in, among others, the steel, mining and automobile industries where Croatian-Americans represented a measurable proportion of the workforce. Croatian-Americans and their most important organization, the Croatian Fraternal Union (CFU), played prominent parts in these ultimately successful union campaigns.

Croatian-American Communists were a driving force in these unionization drives in their community and became ubiquitous in political activities among Croatian-Americans generally. Importantly, their expansive work in this regard during the second half of the 1930s had been initiated not on their own accord but as a result of the implementation of decisions taken by the Communist International (Comintern) at its VIIth Congress in Moscow in August and September 1935.<sup>6</sup>

At that Congress, the Comintern determined to undertake a radical shift in tactics by adopting a revised version of the "United Front" and a new "Popular Front." The updated "United" and new "Popular Fronts" represented a marked break from the so-called "Third Period" tactics of prior years when the Comintern condemned coalitions with non-Communist leftists and declared western Social Democracy to be Communism's primary enemy.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Ivan Očak, *Jugoslavenski emigranti iz Amerike u Sovjetskom Savezu (između dva rata)* (Zagreb: Spektar, 1985), p. 17. At least one participant in the movement has noted, however, that these numbers did not necessarily reflect the strength of the movement within the immigrant community but of the weakness of the CPUSA. Srđan Prica, *Amerika (1937-1945)* (Sarajevo: NIŠRO Oslobođenje, 1988), p.18.

<sup>5</sup> Their influence extended into the ranks of the Party's leadership. One study of the ethnic composition of 212 Central Committee members found 6 born in the former Yugoslavia; only those born in Russia and Poland registered greater numbers. Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press), 1978, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> The Comintern had been created after the Bolshevik takeover of Russia as a means to coordinate the work of sister Communist Parties of Soviet Russia. However, soon after its creation, the Comintern became an instrument of control over these Parties by the Soviet Union.

<sup>7</sup> According to the Comintern, the "First Period" represented an era of revolutionary activism prompted by the Bolshevik Revolution. During the "Second Period," the capitalist world had stabilized itself after having withstood the onslaught of the Bolshevik takeover. The Comintern forecast that the "Third Period" would be a renewed revolutionary era with capitalism facing its greatest crises. In anticipation of this new revolutionary upsurge, Communists were to "ready the workers for the impending fight for power, for the dictatorship of the proletariat." Klehr, *The Heyday*, p. 12 (quoting from a resolution of the Comintern).

emergence of fascism, rather than posing a threat, represented an opportunity. "Since fascism was the last stage of capitalism, it was a transient society . . . [and] could be disregarded as a serious factor in the onward march of [C]ommunism."<sup>8</sup> But, Hitler's rise to power and his destruction of the Communist Party of Germany, the largest outside the Soviet Union, caused the Comintern to abandon these failed policies. The USSR now sought alliances with Great Britain and France while its satellite Communist Parties received directives to build coalitions with non-fascist parties within the Western democracies.

The Comintern's new tactics called upon Communist Parties to "take into consideration the changed circumstances and apply the [U]nited [F]ront tactics in a new manner, by seeking to reach agreements with the organizations of the toilers of various political trends [e.g., the Social Democrats] for joint action on a factory, local, district, national and international scale."<sup>9</sup>

The Comintern further promoted a new tactic, coalitions among non-leftist, but anti-fascist, parties. In contrast to the proletarian-based "United Front," this new "Popular Front," "People's Front" or "Democratic Front" was to include "peasants, petit bourgeoisie, intellectuals - all in fact who accepted the program of anti-fascism."<sup>10</sup>

These changes did not mark a turn by the Communists toward social democracy. Comintern head Georgi Dimitrov specifically denied at its VIIth Congress that "the [P]eople's [F]ront was a transitional form to socialism and Communism that would make unnecessary a 'proletarian' revolution."<sup>11</sup> The change instituted by the Congress, as enunciated by Dimitrov, merely redefined "the tactics and not the strategy of the Comintern. . . . [T]here was nothing in [Dimitrov's] address which challenged the universal applicability of the Bolshevik model of revolution."<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the Communists' changed tactics brought relief to many in the West who wanted Communist and Soviet support as a bulwark against Nazism and fascism. It also allowed the Communists to support left-leaning governments, as in France and in Spain.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Bell, "Marxian Socialism in the United States," in Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), vol. 1, p. 351.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919-1943 - Documents* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), vol. 3, pp. 361-62. The various Comintern changes on the "United Front" have been discussed in a number of works, including Kermit E. McKenzie, *Comintern and World Revolution 1928-1943: The Shaping of Doctrine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964); and Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism From Lenin to Stalin* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> McKenzie, *Comintern*, p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, pp. 132-33.

The CPUSA remained a minor political party during the second half of the 1930s. Still, the new “United Front” tactics led to an increase in its popularity. “After years in the political wilderness, Communists won respectability after 1935 by blending into the liberal mainstream. They were found in every sector of American life . . .”<sup>13</sup>

This article will examine the attempted implementation of the “United Front” within the Croatian-American community. After tracing the development of Socialist and Communist organizations in the community in the period until the mid-1930s, we will discuss vital changes which led to the establishment of a Croatian Section of the CPUSA and then we shall relate how the Section interacted with other, non-Communist Croatian-American groups in its efforts to create a “United Front.”

## **Croatian Immigrants and the Communist Party of the United States of America**

### **Activities Prior to 1934**

The Communist movement among Croatian-Americans has its roots in the pre-World War I period when radical influences permeated Croatian immigrant settlements in the factory and mining towns of Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Illinois.<sup>14</sup>

While Croats had established socialist clubs in Pittsburgh as early as 1903, the socialist movement among them began to gain ground starting in 1907 when Croatian-Serb Milan Glumac (1884-1914) began publication in Chicago of the bi-monthly and later weekly newspaper, *Radnička straža*.<sup>15</sup> That same year saw the establishment of a number of Croatian socialist clubs in Chicago

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<sup>13</sup> Klehr, *The Heyday*, p. xi.

<sup>14</sup> This discussion concerning the growth of Socialist influence among Croatian and other Yugoslav immigrants prior to the formation of the CPUSA is based on information found in the following sources: Stojan Kesić, “Odnosi između jugoslovenskih radničkih društava u inostranstvu do 1914. godine,” in *Iseljništvo naroda i narodnosti Jugoslavije i njegove uzajamne veze s domovinom* (Zagreb: Zavod za migracije i narodnosti, 1978), pp. 472-86; Ivan Čizmić, “Yugoslav Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Movement, 1880-1920,” in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 177-90; and David Montgomery, “Nationalism, American Patriotism and Class Consciousness Among Immigrant Workers in the United States in the Epoch of World War I,” in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *Struggle, A Hard Battle* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 327-51.

<sup>15</sup> Concerning Glumac, see generally Luka Marković, *Borba u iseljništvu za novu Jugoslaviju* (Beograd: Izdavački centar Komunist, 1975).

while another Croatian language socialist paper, *Radnička borba*, began publication in Cleveland.

At a conference on 3 and 4 July 1910, South Slavic socialists in the United States established the South Slavic Socialist Federation (SSSF). Under Glumac's influence, most delegates at the conference agreed to affiliate with the SPA, though a minority led by *Radnička borba* opted to follow Daniel DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party (SLP).<sup>16</sup>

World War I saw a further split in the SSSF, mostly along ethnic lines. While practically all Slovenian and most Serbian socialists generally supported the Allied war effort, Croatian-American and some Serbian-American socialists followed the SPA's anti-war line. As a result of this split, the SSSF came under Croat dominance. Following the end of the War, the Federation with approximately 2,200 members, came into the fold of the CPA.<sup>17</sup>

The CPA's legal arm, the Workers' Party of the USA, placed its Yugoslav immigrant members into a South Slavic Section which published its own newspaper, *Znanje*.<sup>18</sup> While the Section initially had some modicum of independence, the Party's 1925 reorganization (implemented under a policy known as "Bolshevization") eliminated its autonomy as well as those of other foreign-language sections. No longer did the foreign-born members belong and pay dues to ethnic sections. They, together with American-born members, were placed in factory or geographically determined "units." The CPUSA created "language fractions" within these units to ease communication among foreign-born members. The now memberless sections limited their activities to publishing newspapers in various foreign languages. A bureau headed

<sup>16</sup> Established in 1877, the SLP advocated the implementation of socialism through the electoral process while rejecting all compromises with the bourgeoisie. The SLP's South Slavic Socialist Labor Party Federation appears to have mainly consisted of Serbs from Vojvodina and Banat. Based in Cleveland, they published numerous brochures and two annual almanacs. Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu*, p. 181. They continued to publish *Radnička borba* until 1970 when the SLP eliminated its language federations. "Rastanak s Radničkom borbom," in *Radnička borba*, 8 October 1970, p. 2. A split of some kind occurred in the ranks of the SLP Federation in the late 1920s when a new organization was established, the *Industrijalni radnički savez* (Industrial Workers League). The author has not been able to determine the cause of the rupture but it gave rise to another leftist newspaper serving the Croatian and Serbian communities, *Industrijalist* (The Industrialist) which appeared in Detroit in 1928 and continued to publish until at least 1938 under the editorship of Svetislav Kontrin. One of the leaders of the organization (also known as the IRO) included Weselin (Veselin) Mijatov whose name appears in the Croatian-American press of the time. Ivan Mladineo, *Narodni adresar Hrvata-Slovenaca-Srba* (New York: Ivan Mladineo, 1937), pp. 32 & 317. See also Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu*, p. 226.

<sup>17</sup> Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), pp. 158-59 and p. 189.

<sup>18</sup> Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu*, p. 211.

each section, led by a secretary responsible to the CPUSA's Central Executive Committee.<sup>19</sup> The Party's 1925 reorganization also resulted in a new organization: foreign-language workers' clubs which included non-Communists. The Communists assured their control over the clubs through "Party fractions," units which took unified positions on all issues of importance.<sup>20</sup>

The reorganized Yugoslav Section's newspaper now appeared under the name *Radnik* while Yugoslav Workers' Clubs were soon found in many South Slav immigrant communities and a first national conference of these Clubs took place in Cleveland in September 1933.<sup>21</sup>

The reasons Croatian-Americans joined and remained members of the CPUSA are varied and complex. Their social conditions may have caused receptiveness to radical ideas. "Crammed together in coal and mill towns, often boarding in groups of seven or eight to a house, these workers were mostly single men without much family responsibility, and they dared to join radical outfits that guys with big families hesitated to approach. It was especially among these young single Croatians that radicalism caught on. The presence of pro-labor Croatian leaders, including newspaper editors and even an occasional priest, also fostered a left-wing consciousness among the Croatians almost from the time that they arrived in this country. . . . Radicalism was less developed among the Serbs, who seemed to be more dominated by priests and other traditional leaders."<sup>22</sup>

The declining influence of the Catholic Church among Croatian immigrants may have also played a part in their radicalization. Immigration into a new land with few Croatian-speaking parishes caused a break with traditional institutions.<sup>23</sup> While the first Croatian-language Catholic parish in the United

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<sup>19</sup> Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), pp. 190-92; and Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), p.54.

<sup>20</sup> "Fractions" consisted of Party members in non-Communist organizations formed to maximize Communist influence "for whatever ends the [P]arty decrees, on the organization of which they are members." Nathan Glazer, *The Social Background of American Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu*, p. 241. The Communists viewed Yugoslav Workers' Clubs as "mass organizations," intended "to draw foreign born workers into the general stream of the . . . labour [and Communist] movement." William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> Steve Nelson, James R. Baret & Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), p. 283. Some observers claimed that peasant traditions rooted in the communal lifestyle known as the *zadruga* may have played a role in attracting Croatian immigrants to leftist movements, but the evidence for this is weak.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Zivich, *From Zadruga to Oil Refinery: Croatian Immigrants and Croatian Americans in Whiting, Indiana, 1890-1950* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), pp. 74-77.

States dated from 1894, these parishes could not cover the spiritual needs of all immigrant colonies. Thus, though the Church continued to play a role in the Croatian-American community, it did not have a pervasive presence.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, the decision of Croatian-Americans to join the SPA and later the CPUSA became a personal one, often motivated by individual contacts. Stjepan Lojen entered the movement as a result of reading *Radnička straža*.<sup>25</sup> Another immigrant recalled that he joined the movement as a result of learning to read using *Radnička straža*.<sup>26</sup> Stjepan Mesaroš, better known by his Americanized name, Steve Nelson, became a leftist through discussions with a Serbian-American co-worker.<sup>27</sup>

Beginning in the 1930s, a new, American-born generation came into the Party at least some of whom appear to have been influenced by their parents. The Gerlach and Fijan families offer an example. Anton Gerlach, born in Croatia of German descent, arrived in the United States in the early 1920s. He became an organizer in the Communist-controlled Auto Workers Union (AWU) and one of the leaders of the January 1933 Briggs strike.<sup>28</sup> After his work with the AWU, he served as an official with the International Workers Order (IWO), a Communist-controlled fraternal organization based in New York. His stepsons, John and Fred (born Runjević), came to the United States as young children from a village near Sisak. Through the influence of their stepfather and their mother, both John and Fred joined the Party. The Party sent John to Moscow in late 1934, where he studied at the Communist University for National Minorities from the West (KUNMZ), in the hope that his training would be useful in work among the Croatian-American community. John ultimately served as volunteer for the International Brigades in Spain.<sup>29</sup> His younger brother Fred became Carol Fijan's first husband.

<sup>24</sup> Croats counted only 33 Croatian-language Catholic parishes in the United States in 1937, compared with 46 Slovenian-language Catholic parishes and 38 Serbian Orthodox Church parishes. Mladineo, *Narodni adresar*, p. 895. In comparison, in 1918, 580 Italian churches and chapels served the needs of approximately 3,000,000 Italian immigrants, approximately one for every 5,000. Silvano M. Tomasi, *Piety and Power: The Role of the Italian Parishes in the New York Metropolitan Area, 1880-1930* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1975), p. 99. If we accept 500,000 as the total number of Croats in North America during the 1930s, a similar proportion would have required about 100 ethnic Croatian Catholic churches.

<sup>25</sup> Stjepan Lojen, *Uspomene jednog iseljenika* (Znanje: Zagreb, 1963), p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> P. B., "Petar Brčić," *Narodni glasnik* (Chicago), 1 March 1961, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Nelson, *American Radical*, p. 17. Nelson also notes that while he initially joined the SLP, he later switched to the CPUSA as the "SLPers I knew were nearly all Serbian, while all of the Croatian Radicals seemed to have gone with the Communists." *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> Očak, *Jugoslavenski emigranti*, p. 197 (quoting from a letter from Gerlach to Očak); Đuro Gajdek, *Španjolski borci Siska i Banije* (Sisak: Muzej Sisak, 1985), pp. 86-87 and p. 261; and telephonic discussion by author with John Gerlach, 18 March 1998. John Gerlach passed away in California on 12 August 2008.

Carol Fijan's father, Filip, had been born in the Hrvatsko zagorje region, north of Zagreb. Filip and his ethnic German wife initially lived in Milwaukee, a stronghold of German-speaking socialists prior to World War I, where he joined the SPA. He later moved to New York, became a member of the CPUSA and worked as a furrier, assisting in the building the Communist-dominated Furriers' Union. Filip's work among the Croatian-American community in New York focused on theatre productions in local Yugoslav and Croatian Workers' Clubs, a tradition followed by Carol.<sup>30</sup>

Croatian-American Communists sought to spread their influence among the "masses" through a variety of means. The press remained a key component of their work in an age when newspapers represented the dominant media. In addition to their newspaper, Croatian-American Communists published numerous books and pamphlets as well as an annual almanac under the *Radnička knjižara* label in Chicago.

The Communist-controlled Yugoslav Workers' Clubs and Halls also proved an important forum to influence the community at large. The Clubs sponsored an array of activities, such as dances, picnics, plays, movies and lectures, which afforded workers an opportunity to enjoy inexpensive entertainment and the Party an opportunity to spread their message and recruit new members.

During the 1930s, the IWO became another potential means to obtain Party members and supporters. Established in 1930 as a multi-ethnic, fraternal benefits organization,<sup>31</sup> the IWO had been divided into national groups, with a Croatian-Serbian one appearing in February 1935 with 800 members.<sup>32</sup> Anton Gerlach headed the Croatian-Serbian group after taking over the task from its initial secretary, George Radatović, a West Virginia miner.<sup>33</sup> Gerlach, a thin, bespeckled, somewhat balding man, oversaw the orderly split of the group into separate Croatian and Serbian branches in November 1937, when the IWO's Croatian section became formally known as the Croatian Benevolent Fraternity (*Hrvatsko potporno bratstvo* or HPB).<sup>34</sup> Though the HPB lost a small number of members to the Serbian section as a result of the division, the HPB under Gerlach's leadership saw steady growth. By the time of the IWO's fifth national convention in April 1940, the HPB numbered 5,981 adult members (a thirty-five percent increase over the number of the combined Croatian-

<sup>30</sup> Nenad Gol, "Slovo za Filipa, Juliju i Carol Fijan," *Matica*, January, 1984, pp. 12-13; and interview by author with Carol Fijan, 28 March 1999.

<sup>31</sup> On the IWO, see Thomas J. Walker, *Pluralistic Fraternity: The History of the International Worker's Order* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> Nacionalni odbor sekcije, "Od četvrte do pete konvencije," *Fraternal Outlook* (New York), vol. I, no. 1, June - July 1940, Hrvatske sekcije, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> "I.W.O Adds Serbian Section to its Family of Nations," *New Order* (New York), vol. VI, no. 1, November, 1937, p. 6.



Serbian Section at its fourth convention) and 2,341 youth members in eighty-two lodges throughout the United States.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the IWO figures, some other available figures give an indication of Communist support in the Croatian-American community at the time. In 1933, thirty-eight Yugoslav Workers' Clubs claimed 1,718 members and in 1934 sixty Clubs claimed approximately 3,000 members.<sup>36</sup> In the late 1930s, an estimated 1,800 to 2,000 Croatian-Americans belonged to the CPUSA.<sup>37</sup> These represented small amounts compared with the approximately half million Croatian-Americans in the United States in the 1930s. However, the political fanaticism and organizational skills of the Communists made their voices appear louder than their numbers would otherwise justify.

### Organizational Changes and Disputes

One of the dominant controversies underlying the work of Croatian-American Communists in the second half of the 1930s became the transformation of the CPUSA's Yugoslav Section into separate Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian Sections.

The reasons underlying the decision to reorganize the Yugoslav Section remains unclear in light of conflicting testimony. Stjepan Lojen, one of the leaders of the Section,<sup>38</sup> claims in his memoirs that the decision had been reached in 1934 after the arrival to the United States of Nikola Kovačević, a Montenegrin Serb, who appeared unannounced at the Second Conference of the Yugoslav Workers' Clubs in Pittsburgh on April 14, 1934.<sup>39</sup> Lojen claims that Kovačević questioned the existence of a Yugoslav Section when no supra-national Yugoslav groups of any significance existed among the immigrant

<sup>35</sup> "Od četvrte do pete konvencije," p. 51. The HPB also represented an import source of funding for *Radnik*. See *Report on the American Slav Congress and Related Organizations*, 81<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., H. Rep. No. 1951, 26 June 1949, p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> "Prva konferencija J.R. kluba u USA," *Borba* (Toronto) 1 March 1933, p. 5; and Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu*, p. 241

<sup>37</sup> An estimated 500 of these Party members lived in western Pennsylvania, 200 in California and on the West Coast, and 100 in New York. Croatians in America, Earl Browder Papers, Series II, Subject Files, microfilm reel 4, no. 65, R-2467, Tamiment Institute, New York University, New York. Another report cited to by Glazer shows 300 Croat members in May 1938 which Glazer accurately describes as appearing "small." Glazer, *The Social Basis*, p. 222 n.9.

<sup>38</sup> Lojen (1894-1967), born in Kraljevac, Croatia, arrived in the United States prior to World War I. "Stjepan Lojen," *Narodni glasnik* (Chicago), 28 June 1967, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> On Kovačević see Đuro Đurašković, *Nikola Kovačević* (Beograd: Izdavačko poduzeće Rad, 1965). Kovačević had been sent to the U.S. to work among Yugoslav immigrants "to collect voluntary contributions for the [Communist Party of Yugoslavia] and to politically work along the line of our Party." Očak, *Jugoslavenski emigranti*, p. 210 (quoting from materials in the Archives of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia).

communities. Each of the Serbs, Slovenes and Croats had their own independent organizations, a situation which Kovačević believed the Communists should imitate. Kovačević supposedly found the adherence by Yugoslav-American Communists to supra-national Yugoslavism to be contrary to the Party's line on the national question.<sup>40</sup>

Lojen's testimony seems, however, questionable as the reorganization of the Yugoslav Section did not occur until 1936, almost two years later.<sup>41</sup> Indicatively, Lojen and many other works concerning this period which appeared in Communist Yugoslavia fail to mention the work undertaken on this issue by Mirko Marković, one of the most important Yugoslav-American Communists during this period (the virtual erasure of Marković from these texts no doubt stemmed from his subsequent support for Stalin during the Stalin-Tito dispute for which Marković later spent time in the notorious Goli otok prison).

Born in 1907, Marković, a Montenegrin like Kovačević, had strong ties to Moscow. His paternal uncle, Vukasin Marković, a colleague of Lenin's, came to the Soviet Union with Mirko in the 1920s. While there, Mirko completed his studies at KUNMZ in 1929 and obtained a doctorate in economics at the Red Prefecture in Moscow in the mid-1930s.<sup>42</sup>

Marković states that he received an offer to be sent abroad by the Comintern while in Moscow during its VIIth Congress. He obtained a mandate to reorganize the "troubled Yugoslav movement [then based] in Chicago" and to work on the implementation of the resolutions of the recent Congress.<sup>43</sup> Arriving in the latter half of 1935, the Central Committee of the CPUSA (CC CPUSA) gave Marković a month to complete a report and make recommendations. Marković went to Chicago and found that Kovačević had done nothing since he felt that he had neither the authority nor strength to carry out a reorganization and

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<sup>40</sup> Lojen, *Uspomene*, p. 160. Possibly under Kovačević's influence, the then on-going Yugoslav Workers' Club Conference renamed the organization as the Alliance of Clubs of Croat and Serb Workers. Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu*, p. 241.

<sup>41</sup> Moreover, some as yet unclarified troubles within the Yugoslav Section, apparently unrelated to the nationality question, required outside intervention.. Fred Brown (pseudonym of Mario Alpi), head of the CPUSA's national groups, wrote that many Yugoslav fractions had become inactive or showed open opportunism and sectarianism "as in the case of Farrell, [Pennsylvania], where the Party members have practically divorced themselves from the Yugoslav worker who constitute a large portion of the steel workers in Farrell . . ." F. Brown, "Improve Fraction Work in Mass Organization," *Party Organizer*, January 1934, vol. VII, no. 1, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> Marković returned to Yugoslavia in 1945, serving as dean of the Economics Faculty of Belgrade University before his political disgrace and imprisonment following the outbreak of the Cominform dispute. See *Jugoslovenski napredni pokret u SAD i Kanadi - Progressive Movement of Yugoslavs in the USA and Canada* (Toronto: Nordam Yugoslav Publishers, 1983), pp. 13-14; and Ivo Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 115-16, n. 173.

<sup>43</sup> Mirko Marković, "O razvoju naprednog pokreta kod Amerikanaca i Kanadana jugoslovenskog porijekla," in *Jugoslovenski napredni*, p. 28.

because, as Kovačević allegedly explained to Marković, he had been “sucked into the familiarity of the then-current leadership.”<sup>44</sup> Marković recommended three, far-reaching proposals: (1) the dismissal of the current leadership since it had become disconnected from other, non-Communist mass organizations with which it should work politically, (2) the reorganization of the Section into three separate Serb, Croat and Slovene national sections, and (3) the removal of the headquarters of the Section’s leadership from Chicago to Pittsburgh, the most important center of Yugoslav immigrant organizations in the U.S.<sup>45</sup> Marković claims that he read his recommendations to the South Slavic leaders in Chicago prior to sending them to the CC CPUSA in New York. “The atmosphere at that meeting was difficult and hard, but this could not be avoided.”<sup>46</sup>

According to Marković, the CC CPUSA accepted his proposals in their entirety and instructed that conferences for each national group be held where new leaderships for each would be chosen. The Croatian Section held its first conference in May 1936 where Leo Fisher, Frank Borich, Lojen (recently returned from a stint at the KUNMZ), Tony Minerich, and Stjepan Pleše (also known as Miroković) became the Section’s leaders, with Kovačević added on temporarily.<sup>47</sup> A Yugoslav Coordination Bureau containing three representatives of each national group and with Marković as its secretary, coordinated the activities of the three new Sections.<sup>48</sup> In addition, each national group obtained

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. However, Kovačević in a letter to the Comintern in 1934, wrote that he would not effectuate quick radical reforms. Among other problems, he noted the absence of a qualified editor for the new proposed Slovenian paper. Očak, *Jugoslavenski emigranti*, pp. 210-11 (quoting from a letter in the Comintern Archives).

<sup>45</sup> Marković, “O razvoju,” p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* Fisher (1897-1977), a Croatian Jew born in Kapan, Virovitica, Croatia, arrived in the United States in 1912. He was associated with and edited, with some breaks, the Croatian-language CPUSA newspaper until its demise in 1973. He served as Secretary for the CPUSA for Minnesota in 1930. Ivan Čizmić, “Leo Fisher,” in *Enciklopedija Jugoslavije* (Zagreb: Jugoslavenski leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 1986), vol. 4, p. 180. Borich had formerly led the Communist-controlled National Mine Workers’ Union (NMWU). He died in New York in 1965. Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu*, p. 222; and “Franjo Borić,” *Narodni glasnik* (Chicago), 7 July 1965, p. 3. Concerning Minerich (or Majnerich) (1905-1964), see “Vječna mu slava,” *Narodni glasnik* (Chicago), 17 February 1965, p. 1, and Prica, *Amerika*, p. 28. Concerning Pleše (1888-1977), born near Brod na Kupi in Croatia, see Tom Čuča, “Stevo Pleše (Miroković),” *Naše novine* (Toronto), 1 June 1977, p. 4. In his memoirs, Lojen often uses pseudonyms in describing some of the leaders of the Section in a laughable attempt to hide their identity from U.S. government persecution. Fisher, for example, is referred to in his work as Lujo Ribić (meaning “small fisherman”). Lojen, *Uspomene*, p. 106.

<sup>48</sup> Marković, “O razvoju,” p. 30. In his memoirs, Marković emphasizes that “every other description of the reorganization of the Yugoslav movement [in the CPUSA] does not reflect the truth, is tendentious, invented and a lie. I emphasize this because such attempts, unfortunately occurred more than once in the past. *Ibid.* Marković also levels other criticisms at Lojen’s memoirs. *Ibid.* at p. 50.

its own newspaper, the Croatian Communists inheriting *Radnik* (which soon thereafter changed its name to *Glas Radnika* and, later, *Radnički glasnik*), while the Serbs established *Slobodna reč* and the Slovenes *Naprej*.<sup>49</sup>

These changes did not go smoothly. At least two members of the Yugoslav Section, Šime Horzić and his wife Zlata, found themselves removed from the Bureau.<sup>50</sup> According to Lojen, opposition to the changes especially became noticeable among Croats in California. “For many years they worked as Yugoslavs together with some Herzegovinian and Dalmatian Serbs, and now, when the reorganization occurred, they did not see the need for it nor were they able to reorient themselves.”<sup>51</sup>

Section leaders sought to convince their comrades of the need for these changes. Thus, Leo Fisher, wrote in an article appearing at the time in *Radnički glasnik* that a “significant amount of misunderstanding” had arisen as a result of the reorganization. Fisher argued that Communists had to recognize that no Yugoslav nationality existed and that, while the conditions for its creation may be evident, the transformation of Croats, Serbs and Slovenes into Yugoslavs would take generations. More importantly, “Yugoslavism,” according to Fisher, acted as a dam to the growth of Communism as the “bourgeoisie” had successfully argued that the Communist movement was an anti-national one.<sup>52</sup>

Significantly, the reorganization of the Yugoslav Section, whether done under the auspices of Marković or Kovačević, had been orchestrated by

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<sup>49</sup> While Lojen became the secretary of the Croatian Bureau, one observer claims that Borich became the most dominant leader of the Section at this time. “By nature clearheaded, energetic, aggressive and eloquent, he knew how to impose himself on other people. He had no [respect] and placed no scruples [in the way of his] road to fulfilling his immeasurable ambitions. [He never tired] in creating various combinations in the battle for influence. He had something of a [leadership complex] in his character, identifying himself [with] the Party, his authority with the authority of the Party.” Prica, *Amerika*, p. 28. Prica described Lojen as typical of those who had been schooled in the Soviet Union and who returned from there as functionaries. “He struggled to be the type of Communist offered up as a model in the Party schools and courses in Moscow. He consciously presented and defended the Party’s positions, often dramatically and pathetically, not adding to any original ideas or even formulations.” *Ibid*.

<sup>50</sup> Born in Ruča, Croatia, Šime Horzić (1898-1937) became well-known in the community after participating in a six-man “international amnesty delegation” sent to Yugoslavia in July 1935 under the auspices of a supposedly ad hoc “International Committee for Amnesty in Yugoslavia,” a group actually sponsored by the Communists. He subsequently died as a volunteer for Spanish Republican forces. S. Horzich, “Što je vidjela međunarodna istražna komisija u Jugoslaviji?” *Radnički kalendar* (Chicago), 1936, pp. 89-93; and “Kratki opis burnog života druga Šime Horzić,” *Radnički glasnik* (Chicago), 28 April 1937, sec. 2, p. 2. Zlata later left the Party and testified against Frank Borich in the ultimately unsuccessful deportation proceedings brought against him. “Tko su svjedoci protiv Franje Borića,” *Jedinstvo* (Toronto), 31 August 1950, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Lojen, *Uspomene*, p. 161.

<sup>52</sup> “Zašto zasebni pokret?” *Borba* (Toronto), 28 May 1936, p. 2, and 30 May 1936, p. 2 (reprint from *Radnički glasnik*).

Comintern functionaries sent to the United States, not as a result of demands made by Croatian-American Communists. The change in structure had been forced through as the existence of the Yugoslav Section in the CPUSA failed to reflect the views of the Comintern and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) on the national question in Yugoslavia.

The CPY initially downplayed national differences among Yugoslavia's ethnic groups after the CPY's formation, later arguing that constitutional changes granting autonomy to the country's various regions would solve these "bourgeois" concerns. But, after being subjected to criticism from Stalin, the CPY modified its position in the mid-1920s and advocated Yugoslavia's break-up into separate states. The CPY changed its stance on the national question again in 1934, arguing that, while the Party would support the right of each nationality to exercise its right of self-determination, it would no longer advocate Yugoslavia's dissolution. In keeping with this policy, the CPY began to undertake the formation of separate but subordinate Communist Parties for Slovenia and Croatia (which would be formed several years later in 1937).

While it may appear odd that the Comintern would take a such a keen interest in the workings of a foreign language section of the CPUSA, in fact the Yugoslav Section represented an important moral and financial pillar of support for the CPY. The CPY itself had become a predominately emigrant political organization by the early 1930s and the number of members of the Yugoslav Section at times rivaled the number of members in the CPY.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the Comintern needed to exercise control over Croatian-American Communists in order to assure continuity in policies which it forced the CPY to adopt.

Whatever the reasons for the establishment of a new Croatian Section, its formation proved to be fortuitous. While its founding had not been connected with the change in the Comintern's "United" and "Popular Front" tactics, its newly discovered "nationalism" expressed the desires of many Croatian-Americans which made the Communists' propaganda concerning the "United Front" more agreeable to those wanting to believe it.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Published figures concerning CPY membership at the time provide varying estimates. One source claims 2,000 members in 1932. Pero Morača, Dr. Dušan Bilandžić and Dr. Stanislav Stojanović, *Istorija Saveza Komunističke Jugoslavije (kratak pregled)* (Beograd: Izdavačko poduzeće Rad, 1977, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), p. 60. Another source claims that CPY membership doubled to 1,300 members during the period from mid-1932 to the end of that year. M. Sentić, S. Sigetlija and M. Potočki, *Kronologija SKJ 1919-1969* (Zagreb: Stvarnost, 1970), p. 65.

<sup>54</sup> While outside the scope of the current work, one should note that the establishment of separate national sections among the Yugoslav Communists led to friction between the Croatian and Serbian Sections. Croatian-American Communist leaders apparently claimed that the Serbian Section's "United Front" organization, the Vidovdan Congress, came under the sway of reactionaries. Ultimately, they supposedly assisted Marković after the latter had returned from Spain in 1939 in re-imposing order over the Serbian Section. See generally Prica, *Amerika*. See also Marković, "O razvoju," p. 41; and Josip Broz Tito, *Sabrana djela* (Belgrade & Zagreb: Izdavački centar Komunist BIGZ and Naprijed, 1983), vol. 3, p. 113 and vol. 4, p. 80 and p. 233.

## The Attempted Implementation of the “United Front” in the Croatian-American Community

Croatian-Americans could choose from a wide-variety of organizations having a range of political views, running the gamut from pro-Yugoslav to Communist. However, in addition to the Communists, three other organizations dominated the political discourse in the Croatian-American community during the 1930s: the Croatian Circle, the Domobranci and the Croatian Peasant Party (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*) (HSS).

Established in 1928, the Croatian Circle (*Hrvatsko kolo*) espoused a liberal policy which strongly advocated Croatian independence. It started with high hopes and established branches throughout the United States and had as its main journalistic advocate *Hrvatski list i Danica hrvatska*, published in New York by Ivan Krešić.<sup>55</sup>

However, by the mid-1930s, internal tensions wracked the organization. The right wing within the Circle began to advocate a policy supportive of Ante Pavelić and his revolutionary organization, the Ustashe. The Circle's leadership, however, by and large, viewed Pavelić with anathema, not only because of his openly fascist, anti-democratic views, but also because they regarded Pavelić's greatest supporter, Mussolini, with great trepidation on account of his pretensions to the Croatian coast. The right wing broke off, established a rival organization, the *Domobranci* (the Home Guards) and their own weekly newspaper, *Nezavisna Hrvatska Država*, in Pittsburgh.<sup>56</sup>

While the HSS had a political organization in the United States (centered in Cleveland), its base of support in North America lied in Canada. Allegedly at the request of the HSS's leaders, Petar Stanković moved to Canada and established a pro-Croatian Peasant Party newspaper, *Kanadski glas* (later renamed *Hrvatski glas*), in Winnipeg in March 1929. The newspaper provided the impetus to establish Peasant Party organizations among Croatian immigrant communities in Canada and the United States during the next several years. In cooperation with one of the Peasant Party's leaders, August Košutić, then visiting Canada, an organizing convention for the Croatian Peasant Organization took place in Toronto in January 1932.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Concerning the work of the Croatian Circle, see Joseph Kraja, “The Croatian Circle, 1928-1946: Chronology and Reminiscences,” *Journal of Croatian Studies*, vol. 5-6, 1964-65, pp. 145-204. Kraja, who served a prominent leader of the Croatian Circle, had previously been a member of the SLP.

<sup>56</sup> James Sadkovich, *Italian Support for Croatian Separatism 1927-1937* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), pp. 266-69. On the Domobranci see, Mario Jareb, *Ustaško-domobranski pokret: od nastanka do travnja 1941. godine* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Petar Stanković, “Radi čega novine?,” in Stjepan Gaži, ed., *Spomenica na dvadeset godina Hrvatskih seljačkih organizacija u Kanadi* (Winnipeg: Hrvatske seljačke organizacije u Kanadi, 1952), pp. 79-80. Stanković had previously been in the United States where he had been involved

Don Ivan Gršković represented another prominent political force in the Croatian-American community during this period. Gršković published the New York-based *Svijet*, the only non-Communist Croatian language daily in the United States for a period during the 1930s. A former Catholic priest, he became the recognized leader of the Croatian community during World War I and a prominent advocate of the formation of Yugoslavia. For a time, he served as editor of the CFU's newspaper. Following the War, Gršković became disillusioned with the Yugoslav regime (though not with the concept of South Slavic unity) and advocated what can best be described as a leftist, pro-Soviet policy, though one not tied to the Communist Party.<sup>58</sup>

The CFU almost acted as an umbrella organization within the Croatian community, encompassing partisans of all political views. Established in Pittsburgh in 1894, the CFU grew dramatically through expansion and mergers with other Croatian fraternal organizations.<sup>59</sup> In an age without any government safety net, the CFU filled a pressing need by making available death benefits and health insurance at low cost, while, at the same time, through the activities of its lodges, providing a social outlet for its members.

The Communists could not ignore the CFU which became the largest and richest Croatian-American organization. They early on established an organized, fractional presence within the CFU. "Communists were able to work openly within the CFU lodges and were often respected as good members of the organization. We were seen not as guys who would just get up and talk, but as men who would recruit for the lodge, attend to the funerals, and help with the social functions. We didn't skirt the dirty work necessary to keep the lodge going. After all, we were Croatians and needed the lodge as much as anybody else."<sup>60</sup>

The Workers' Party, the then legal arm of the Communist Party, directed its national group members to work and develop fractions in fraternal organizations at its 1925 convention. However, Croatian-American Communists already recognized the need to do this in 1924, with *Radnik* devoting significant space to agitating for work within the CFU (then known as the National Croatian Society (NCS)). *Radnik* recognized that the NCS, unlike the unions, was not a revolutionary organization. Nevertheless, *Radnik* argued that the NCS's

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with some leftist political groups. Bogdan Radica, "O Petru Stankoviću i o njegovoj ulozi u iseljeničkom tisku," *Hrvatska revija*, vol. 23, 1973, p. 425.

<sup>58</sup> There is no critical biography of Niko Gršković. See Ivan Čizmić, "Prilog za životpis Nika Grškovića," *Krčki zbornik*, vol. 1, 1970, pp. 371-83.

<sup>59</sup> There are a number of general histories of the CFU: Croatian Fraternal Union, *Kratki pregled povijesti Hrvatske bratske zajednice 1894-1949* (Pittsburgh: Croatian Fraternal Union, 1949); and Ivan Čizmić, *Hrvatska bratska zajednica 1894-1994* (Zagreb: Golden Marketing, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Nelson, *American Radical*, p. 45.

predominately working class members necessarily had to participate in the class struggle, as a result of which both unions and fraternal groups need to work together to benefit the proletariat.<sup>61</sup>

The Communists faced stiff opposition in their efforts to exercise influence over the NCS and, later, the CFU. In 1921, the NCS elected as its President Tomo Benešić, one of the founders of *Radnička straža*.<sup>62</sup> Benešić and his collaborators had come under the influence of the Educationalists or *Prosvjetaši*. The Educationalists had been formed by Đuro Kutuzović and Teodor Cvetkov. Cvetkov, an ethnic Bulgarian born in Serbia, had been the editor of Communist Party newspaper *Znanje* in the early 1920s. He and Kutuzović argued that “the workers” class could not take power until it had freed itself of religion and until it became familiar with the natural and social sciences.”<sup>63</sup> Cvetkov and Kutuzović ultimately broke with the Party, establishing a new newspaper, *Novi svijet*, and, in 1924, a new organization, *Jugoslavenski prosvjetni savez* (Yugoslav Educational Association).<sup>64</sup> Benešić and most of the remaining leadership in the NCS backed Cvetkov and Kutuzović.

The changing political viewpoints of the NCS's leadership in the early 1920s gave rise to two contrary political groupings in the organization. One group, which coalesced into the so-called “National Bloc,” argued that Benešić and his supporters were nothing better than stooges of the Communist Party.<sup>65</sup> Benešić's subsequent support for the Educationalists drove the Communists to form their own “Workers' Progressive Bloc” in 1926.<sup>66</sup> These opposition groups led to Benešić's humiliating defeat in his run to become CFU President at its first convention in 1926. The “National Bloc,” led by Ivan D. Butković (1890-1980), ultimately succeeded in wresting control of the CFU when Butković became its President in 1932.<sup>67</sup>

Other than Butković, the most prominent leader of the CFU during his tenure was Milan Petrak, the Croatian-language editor of the CFU's weekly

<sup>61</sup> Čizmić, *Hrvatska bratska*, pp. 129-30. See also S. M. Loyen, “Potporne organizacije i radnički pokret,” *Crveni kalendar* (Chicago), 1925, pp. 68-69.

<sup>62</sup> Čizmić, *Hrvatska bratska*, p. 181.

<sup>63</sup> Lojen, *Uspomene*, p. 111.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-15 and Čizmić, *Hrvati u životu*, p. 201 and 211-18. Concerning Cvetkov, see “Teodor Cvetkov,” *Narodni glasnik* (Chicago), 28 April 1965, p. 5. Kutuzović soon left *Novi svijet* while the paper, later known as *Znanje*, continued to appear until 1939. Cvetkov later became the head of the CFU's orphanage. “Raketirstvo i licemjerstvo ‘hrvatskih’ komunista u Americi,” in *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* (Pittsburgh), 4 May 1940, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Čizmić, *Hrvatska bratska*, p. 184-86. A splinter group led by Catholic priests denounced the radicalism of the NCS's leaders and formed the Croatian Catholic Union (CCU). The CCU grew to less than 9,000 members on the eve of World War II, paling in comparison to the CFU's then 100,000 members. The CCU only merged back into the CFU in 2006.

<sup>66</sup> Lojen, *Uspomene*, p. 129.

<sup>67</sup> Concerning Butković, see Tihomir Telišman, “Butković, Ivan,” in *Hrvatski biografski leksikon* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod “Miroslav Krleža”, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 533-34.



newspaper, the *Zajedničar*. Together, Butković and Petrak led the CFU through the tumultuous 1930s. In addition to facing steep declines in membership in the organization due to the Depression, the CFU had to contend with generational changes which caused the CFU to establish English-speaking lodges and to introduce an English-language page in its newspaper.<sup>68</sup>

During the early half of the 1930s, the Communists in the CFU, who at this point described themselves as the “Left Wing within the CFU,” scathingly attacked the “National Bloc’s” leadership despite the latter’s strong support of the union movement and the New Deal.<sup>69</sup>

The anti-Communists had a number of trump cards which they used to discredit the Communists. Among other things, they noted that Communist promotion of the IWO came at the expense of the CFU.<sup>70</sup> The Communists justified the establishment of the IWO by arguing that other fraternal groups had been supposedly bourgeois based, which prevented “workers in the fraternal movement [from] an understanding of the economic and political causes of their economic insecurity . . .”<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the Communists argued that the IWO more accurately reflected American values, ones which, while respecting multi-ethnicity also encouraged inter-ethnic relations, something which an ethnically-based CFU could not offer its membership.<sup>72</sup> However,

<sup>68</sup> Peter Rachleff, “Class, Ethnicity and the New Deal: The Croatian Fraternal Union in the 1930s,” in Peter Kivisto, *The Ethnic Enigma: The Salience of Ethnicity for European Origin Groups* (Philadelphia: The Balch Institute Press, 1989), p. 93.

<sup>69</sup> Partly, this criticism stemmed from Butković’s and Petrak’s flirtation with the Domobrans. The Communists attacked the CFU leadership on other grounds as well, arguing for a drastic reduction of insurance rates for unemployed members. However, in December 1930, the CFU’s Supreme Board allowed unemployed members to draw down on their insurance policies in order to keep up payments on their dues. “By late in the winter of 1933, an estimated twenty-thousand men and women - nearly one-third of the adult membership - were doing so. Clearly, this was no solution, since it salvaged the individual’s membership by imperiling the organization’s overall solvency. . . . Over the course of the early 1930s, the CFU’s national leadership reached the limits of its ability to help members survive the hard times. No amount of manipulation of dues and expenditures, or special fund raising efforts, could produce the required money.” Rachleff, “Class Ethnicity,” p. 93.

<sup>70</sup> “International Workers Order,” *Svijet* (New York), 4 October 1934, p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> “Build the I.W.O. Into a Mass Organization,” *Daily Worker* (New York), 27 January 1934, p. 8. See also *Zapisnik pete konvencije Hrvatske Bratske Zajednice u Sjedinjenim državama Amerike*, CFU: Pittsburgh, 1939, p. 197 (statement of Petrak).

<sup>72</sup> “Our enemies attempt [to convince] workers that individual language sections lose their national uniqueness since they are united within one fraternal union with other peoples. . . . [However, we] cannot walk with our feet on American soil, and live with our heads in the old homeland. . . . Unity and the fraternal work of our various national units proves that we can remain American Croats, Serbs, etc., while becoming good Americans at the same time. Nationality, religion or political beliefs do not bother us in the factories, in the mines or in the unions. Why should they then bother us in the fraternal benevolent movement?” “Od četvrte do pete konvencije,” p. 51.

by being active in the CFU while promoting the IWO, the Communists put themselves in a position where they clearly had conflicts of interests.

The Left Wing, on the other hand, used the negative effects of the Great Depression on the financial health of the CFU to criticize its leadership.<sup>73</sup> Beginning in April 1933, *Radnik* called for a national conference to discuss solvency issues.<sup>74</sup>

These attacks ultimately caused Butković to respond at a Supreme Board meeting in March 1934 where he bitterly attacked the Communists for trying to take over the CFU and claiming that their questions concerning the CFU's fiscal solvency caused many members to leave the organization. He also argued that many Communist-controlled lodges ignored lodge business, focusing instead on passing resolutions critical of the Board.<sup>75</sup> In April 1934, the Board passed a resolution calling the Left Wing illegal and warning its leaders that they faced expulsion.<sup>76</sup> In response, the Left Wing went on a counteroffensive, culminating in a challenge to appear for a debate on 29 July 1934 in Pittsburgh before 2,500 spectators organized by the Left Wing's leaders, Stjepan Lojen, Petar Muselin and Nikola Bušić.

Lojen delivered a long speech at the meeting, arguing that Butković and the CFU leadership advocated bourgeois policies and supported the Yugoslav "fascist" regime.<sup>77</sup> He specifically attacked them for their support of the "New Deal" and the National Recovery Administration (NRA) which he claimed supported large capitalists "against the position of the working class."<sup>78</sup> Lojen noted that the CFU leadership attacked the Left Wing for propagating Communism. But, Lojen retorted, "Communism is the only hope of working humanity! Not only that, but Communism is the only escape that the working people of the world have from today's capitalist chaos and the only future which would benefit mankind."<sup>79</sup> Chillingly, Lojen noted that some of the CFU's own leaders had formerly been members of the Party. "Today they foam at their mouths shouting against the danger of Communism. Yes, for them Communism is truly a danger because they know that the time will come when

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<sup>73</sup> Lojen, *Uspomene*, p. 163.

<sup>74</sup> Čizmić, *Hrvatska bratska*, p. 241-41.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Lojen, *Uspomene*, p. 164.

<sup>77</sup> S. M. Loyen, *Tko gradi i tko razara HBZ?*, NP: Lijevo krilo H.B. Zajednica, 1934, p. 12.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22. The NRA had been created as part of the National Industrial Recovery Act which, among other things, promoted industrial cooperation to regulate prices and production while, at the same time, provided for the right to collective bargaining. Lojen's attack on the NRA reflected the CPUSA's then "pessimistic and shrill . . . view of the NRA." Klehr, *The Heyday*, p. 123.

<sup>79</sup> Loyen, *Tko gradi.*, p. 35.

they will be unable to sleep in the farthest deserts from fear of the unstoppable workers' courts."<sup>80</sup>

The Board sent no representatives to the meeting, but took administrative action instead. In early October 1934, the Board ordered the commencement of an internal jury proceeding against Lojen, Muselin and Bušić for taking actions contrary to the interests of the CFU.<sup>81</sup>

The Left Wing issued a response in late October which claimed that not only did the Board seek to "introduce a fascist dictatorship over the members of the [CFU]," but that it also wanted to introduce priests into the CFU's orphanage in Des Plaines, Illinois.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, Leo Fisher sued Petrak and the CFU for defamation for an article which appeared in the *Zajedničar* which apparently charged that Fisher had engaged in white slavery.<sup>83</sup>

In early 1935, the Left Wing formally adopted a program in preparation for the CFU's Fourth Convention later that year. Claiming that the Communists did not seek to turn the CFU into a Communist organization but only into one which served the interests of its working class members, the Left Wing proposed the continuation of the struggle against Pavelić and the unitarist Yugoslav fascists and the removal of a portion of the then current leadership of the CFU. Unlike the new "United Front" tactic which the Comintern would proclaim later that year, the Left Wing advocated the implementation of the old "United Front" policy of the "Third Period" which rejected coalitions with the leaders of other organizations and sought to take over such organizations "from below" through Communist "fractions" by "boring from within."<sup>84</sup> In preparation for the CFU's 1935 Convention, certain Left Wing delegates attended regional meetings,<sup>85</sup> while the leadership established their own news sheet, the *Borbeni Zajedničar*, to advocate their program.

The Left Wing's official program, issued by its secretary Nikola Bušić on 1 June 1935, continued to be confrontational, demanding the removal of all Board members "guilty for the current state" of the organization. The platform also called for, among other things: (i) a resolution condemning the Greater

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>81</sup> "Priprava za konvenciju H.B. Zajednice," *Svijet* (New York), 10 October 1934, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> Glavni odbor lijevog krila u HBZ, "Na obranu pravila H.B. Zajednice," *Svijet* (New York), 30 October 1934, p. 2. The Supreme Board soon thereafter withdrew its proposal concerning the placement of priests in the orphanage. "Mjesto dvije poslanice, kratka poruka," *Svijet* (New York), 4 November 1934.

<sup>83</sup> Fisher subsequently dropped his lawsuit after the *Zajedničar* published a retraction. "Jedan dopis koji ne spada u službeno glasilo," *Svijet* (New York), 9 June 1936, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> "Zajednica pred konvenciju," *Svijet* (New York), 4 April 1935, p. 2 (quoting from *Radnik*, 29 March 1935).

<sup>85</sup> E.g., those of Northern California met in Mountain View on April 28, 1935. "Dobri zaključci i preporuka," *Svijet* (New York), 4 June 1935, p. 2.

Serbian regime in Yugoslavia and the Ustashe; (ii) greater democratization in the CFU by revising the CFU's bylaws to allow members at lodge meetings to discuss all issues which they believe affect their lives and the CFU as a whole, to allow members to vote by referendum without any restrictions by the Supreme Board, to prohibit the expulsion of members on the basis of religious or political beliefs, and to open the pages of the *Zajedničar* to pieces reflecting the interests of the members and the struggle of the working people; (iii) support for measures against the deportation of immigrants; and (iv) adoption of cost saving measures by the CFU.<sup>86</sup>

At the opening of the Convention, the Communists received a prompt blow as delegates approved a motion supported by Butković which expelled Fisher from the Convention hall as a result of his then pending law suit.<sup>87</sup> During the Convention, however, the Left Wing made moves to enter into a coalition with a newly coalesced group known as the "Independent Delegates." They agreed to work together to modify the membership of the Supreme Board and to support a resolution calling for the freedom of Croatia from Belgrade and condemning interference in the region by Mussolini and Hitler. They further agreed to seek allies among delegates supporting the Croatian Circle, the HSS, the Educationalists and even individual Domobrans.<sup>88</sup> The Left Wing also sought to modify its image, adopting a new name, the *Napredni Zajedničari* - the Progressive Fraternalists.<sup>89</sup> In a post-mortem issued a month after the close of the Convention, the Progressives found that their coalition with the Independent Delegates brought noticeable results, despite the left's minority position at the Convention. While the Convention re-elected Butković, the left's candidate, Vinko Vuk, lost by only twelve votes. Vuk himself succeeded in winning the treasury post and the Progressives also obtained a number of other high offices in the organization.<sup>90</sup> The Convention also saw the successful adoption of a resolution which not only condemned the policies of Pavelić and Mussolini but also opposed "any type of fascism in the ranks of the CFU, to change it into an agent of terrorist attacks against the . . . membership of the [CFU] and against other workers."<sup>91</sup> The Progressives called on leftists to continue to work in their lodges and increase membership in preparation for the next Convention, scheduled for 1939.

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<sup>86</sup> "Za očuvanje i napredak H.B. Zajednice," *Svijet* (New York), 5 June 1935, p. 2 (reprinted from *Radnik*, June 1, 1935).

<sup>87</sup> Ivan Senica, "Početak rada konvencije pokazuje promjene," *Svijet* (New York), 14 June 1935, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> Ivan Senica, "Za suradnju naprednih članova H.B.Z. i osuda nasilja," *Svijet* (New York), 20 June 1935, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> "Napredni zajedničari," *Svijet* (New York), 23 July 1935, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Kratki pregled*, p. 60-61. Apparently, the leadership of the Convention tried to overturn the resolution, but to no avail. *Ibid.*, at pp. 61-62.

The transformation of the Left Wing into Progressives and their coalition work with the Independents presaged the implementation of the Communists' new "United Front" tactic in the Croatian-American community.

The Croatian Section of the CPUSA formally set forth its new strategy at the Section's First Conference in May 1936. In the proclamation issued by the Conference,<sup>92</sup> the Section first recognized the past struggles of Croats for national independence. "We Croatian Communists with complete justification see ourselves as the successors of all those glorious and heroic struggles of the Croatian people and are proud that history has allowed us to be the inheritors of these struggles in our own times . . ." The Section claimed that the past showed that to be victorious in this battle, Croats had to be united. This especially had to be the stance in the present. "Although there are varied political viewpoints and organizations with different policies among us, there are issues with which we can unite for a joint struggle in the defense of our interests."

The proclamation listed these issues as equal rights and protection of the foreign-born, better pay and social security, the fight against fascism and war, and support for a Farmer-Labor Party<sup>93</sup> and for the struggle of the Croatian people for freedom. The proclamation said that an initial step toward the latter goal was the release of all "national and workers' prisoners" from jails in Royalist Yugoslavia.<sup>94</sup> "At the same time, we must give moral, material and all other assistance to the Croatian people so that they can . . . exercise their rights as they determine, so that they are masters of their own house [and] can rule themselves."

The proclamation called upon the CFU, the CCU, the Croatian Circle, Workers' Clubs, the HSS and independent Croatian educational, cultural and other groups to "participate in the creation of a popular Croatian Front." The Conference specifically directed that conferences and meetings be held in various localities where issues could be discussed and agreements forged. "From these meetings and discussions, a movement to call an All-Croatian Popular Congress needs to develop, which Congress will consist of representatives of all Croatian organizations which represent our entire emigrant people."

<sup>92</sup> The text of the proclamation is found in "Za jedinstvo hrvatskog naroda," *Radnički kalendar* (Chicago), 1937, pp. 97-103. All quotations from the proclamation set forth in this article are from the same source.

<sup>93</sup> The CPUSA promoted the creation of a Farmer-Labor Party during this period as "the American version of the Popular Front . . ." Ottanelli, *The Communist Party*, p. 101.

<sup>94</sup> The "national" prisoners actually represented Ustashe supporters. See "Lepoglava," *Radnički kalendar* (Chicago), 1937, pp. 82-96, which features photos of CPY leader Moše Pijade and Stjepan Javor, a prominent member in the 1920s of the Party of (State) Rights, from which the Ustashe obtained many of their leaders and supporters.

At first glance, Croatian Communists appear to have had a number of potential allies with which a “United Front” could be formed in the community.<sup>95</sup> As noted above, other than the CCU and the Ustashe supporters among the Domobrans, all major Croatian organizations in the United States and Canada can be characterized as having had a left of center political viewpoint, with many supportive of the “New Deal” (even members of the CCU and the Domobrans supported “New Deal”).

But, Croatian-American Communists remained subject to Party discipline which could not stomach any potential rivals on the left. Thus, the older Educationalist leaders of the CFU remained to the Communists “traitors to the workers’ movement, who carry out within the CFU divisive policies of the same nature as the Trotskyites and Lovestonites carry out in worker unions.”<sup>96</sup>

More importantly, many Croatian-American leaders and organizations greeted the pronouncement of the “United Front” by their Communist nationals with skepticism, perhaps primarily because the Communists’ prior dealings with these persons and groups had poisoned the atmosphere in their relations. For example, only a few months before, Nikola Bušić had written that Gršković had never been a friend of the CFU’s “Left Wing.”<sup>97</sup> The Communists previously described the Croatian Circle as a “fascist” organization,<sup>98</sup> and labeled the Peasant Party’s leaders as “kulaks” and “bourgeois.”<sup>99</sup> Now, the Croatian Communists eagerly sought to bring together not only Gršković but other groups and individuals with whom they had been at loggerheads.

Gršković refused to enter into any formal arrangement with the Communists, noting that he will “continue to work as we hold is best and

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<sup>95</sup> It should be noted that throughout this period Croatian Communists in the U.S. described their efforts to forge alliances with non-Communists as one concerning the proletariat based “United Front” rather than the class-based “Popular Front.” No doubt this occurred because of the predominantly working class membership of most Croatian organizations in the United States.

<sup>96</sup> S. M. Loyal, “Za jedinstvo i napredak HBZ,” *Radnički kalendar* (Pittsburgh), 1939, p. 83. The Lovestonites took their name from Jay Lovestone, a former CPUSA leader expelled for his support of Bukharin.

<sup>97</sup> “I ovo je previše,” *Svijet* (New York), 26 July 1934, p. 2. In an editorial the following month, *Radnik* claimed that Gršković wanted to remove the working class “from the political struggle between the fascist reaction and the working class in the [CFU], to separate it from the . . . the Left Wing, to separate it even from the Communist Party. This is the cowardly policy of an old cunning capitalist.” Quoted in “Traži svoj čast,” *Svijet* (New York), 9 August 1934, p. 2. In another pamphlet, Lojen sarcastically labeled Gršković as a “friend” of the working man,” implying that he was no such thing. Loyal, *Tko gradi*, p. 13.

<sup>98</sup> See, e.g., “Da li je jedan Srbin iz Hrvatske ‘pravoslavni Hrvat’ ili Srbin?,” *Borba* (Toronto), p. 2; and J. Čičić, “Oni će krasti ako im se ne poviše plaće,” *Radnik* (Chicago), 15 February 1935, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup> See, e.g., “Da li je hrvatski seljak svjestan kuda ga vodi kulačko-gospodska HSS,” *Borba* (Toronto), 21 December 1932, p. 2.

most beneficial for the working people generally, and, thus, for our Croatian [people] in particular.”<sup>100</sup> The Communists, however, found Gršković’s stand unsatisfactory. Writing in *Radnik*, Frank Borich argued that the Front could not be implemented through comradeship and friendship, but only through a specific program which, while not causing each organization to lose its independence, would obligate all to bring the program to fruition.<sup>101</sup>

Gršković, though, noted the impossibility of overcoming differences between various groups overnight to form a healthy organization. He believed that such a formal “United Front” would quickly dissolve since the Front would merely cause thousands of politically unconscious people to be bound together, not knowing what they wanted. “For these and other reasons, we remain at our previously stated position: that we previously had a united front which expressed itself and appeared when necessary through words and deeds to help the weak [and those] persecuted by hunger and lack of rights. Such a united front of consciousness and determination and sacrifice of our immigrants exists today as well . . . .”<sup>102</sup> Gršković’s refusal to join with the Communists prompted a reaction from Stjepan Lojen, who asked, “Which road is the editor of *Svijet* taking? Is it the road of establishing a Croatian, popular anti-fascist front or the road of the leaders of the “Domobrans” who are against this movement?”<sup>103</sup> Gršković angrily responded that Lojen’s question obviously implied that if one did not favor the “United Front,” then one supported the Domobrans.<sup>104</sup> He argued that the Communists wanted the exclusive right to “enlighten and free the Croatian people, using in [their] efforts, means and methods which we have never approved of . . . . We will rather be called enemies of the unity of the Croats than puppets in the hands of those using Croatia as a bargaining chip.”<sup>105</sup>

The HSS leaders had their own reasons for refusing the Communists’ offers to join their “United Front.” The Peasant Party could find some points of agreement with the Communists. However, the Peasant Party viewed itself as already constituting a “United Front” of the Croatian people and argued that the “United Front” represented a creature of the Soviet Union formed for the sole purpose of defending it against the rising power of the Nazis.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>100</sup> “Čisti računi - dobri prijatelji,” *Svijet* (New York), 30 July 1936, p. 2.

<sup>101</sup> “Da se razumijemo,” *Svijet* (New York), 20 August 1935, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> “Odgovor na pitanje,” *Svijet* (New York), 19 September 1936, p. 2 (quoting from *Radnik*, 11 September 1936).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> “Tko je za jedinstvo hrvatskog naroda?” - Part II, *Svijet* (New York), 29 September 1936, p. 2.

<sup>106</sup> “Kakav ujedinjeni front?” *Borba* (Toronto), 17 March 1936, p. 2 (citing to *Hrvatski glas*); and S.K.M., “Još o ujedinjenom front,” *Borba* (Toronto), 31 March 1936, p. 2 (citing to *Hrvatski glas*). See also Anthony Rasporich, *For a Better Life: A History of the Croats in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., 1982), p. 159.

A further blow at the efforts of Croatian Communists to effectuate the “United Front” came from the Croatian Circle. The Circle initially appeared enthusiastic. As early as December 1935, Milan Biljčević (also known as Billich and Bilić), a prominent Circlist and head of its National Croatian Bureau, responded to Communist overtures in an article in *Hrvatski list i Danica hrvatska*, by calling for a united front against tyranny, reaction, fascism and all other forms of oppression and exploitation of the masses, particularly the Croatian masses.<sup>107</sup> Ivan Krešić, editor of *Hrvatski list i Danica hrvatska*, also attended a February 1936 conference in Pittsburgh which established a “Patronate Committee” (*Patronatski odbor*) to assist political prisoners and minority groups in Yugoslavia.<sup>108</sup> The Circle subsequently participated in a September 1936 conference in Pittsburgh which brought together representatives of fifteen “United Committees” which had been established among various Croatian organizations in a number of cities in response to the call for a “United Front” (as further discussed below). However, at its Sixth Congress (or *Zbor*) on 12 and 13 October 1936, the Circle’s leadership determined not to go forward. While its Congress simultaneously issued condemnations of Mussolini, Pavelić and Pavelić’s followers, the Circle determined that past attempts at forcing unity on disparate Croatian organizations merely led to disputes as each organization struggled to maintain its independence. The Circle did, however, recognize that its branches and members could come to specific understandings with other organizations concerning specific issues.<sup>109</sup> As Josip Kraja, a Circle leader, subsequently noted, while domestically Croatia had created unity in its political struggles against Belgrade, “he who speaks of a United Front of Croats in Emigrant Croatia does not know either our circumstances or our people. Emigrant Croatia is thousands of miles away from unified Croatia [in the homeland]; if we can at times achieve unity [on certain issues and in certain locations,] we have achieved much.”<sup>110</sup> Gršković could not conceal his glee calling the Circle’s decision the “end of the comedy” of the United Front.<sup>111</sup>

The biggest blow to Communist hopes, however, came in September 1936 when the CFU’s Supreme Board, by a vote of nine to three, rejected a motion to call an All-Croatian Congress, bringing charges in the pages of *Radnik* that the CFU leadership was pro-fascist.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> “Raketirstvo i licemjerstvo “hrvatskih komunista u Americi,” *Nezavisna Hrvatska Država* (Pittsburgh), 11 May 1940, p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> “Izjave VI Glavnog zbora Hrvatskog kola,” *Hrvatski list i Danica Hrvatska* (New York), 17 October 1936, p. 1.

<sup>110</sup> Josip Kraja, “Hrvatsko kolo i Ujedinjeni front,” *Hrvatski list i Danica Hrvatska* (New York), 15 December 1936, p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> “Žalosni svršetak jedne komedije,” *Svijet* (New York), 21 October 1936, p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> “Žalosni svršetak,” p. 2. *Kratki pregled*, p. 73, contains the text of the proposed resolution.



The Communists, however, remained unbowed by these defeats. Whether through their efforts or not, the CFU Supreme Board in March 1937 adopted a series of resolutions which the Communists argued placed the CFU on the “progressive” side of the struggle against fascism. The resolutions included ones supportive of the Croatian people’s struggle for their freedom, of industrial unionization and of the Republican cause in the on-going civil war in Spain.<sup>113</sup> The Communists hailed these resolutions, noting that they represented a break in the decades long opposition of the organization to undertaking any political or religious discussions by its members. If carried out, the Communists argued that the resolutions would put the CFU “in the vanguard of those popular forces which are carrying out the battle against the fascist reaction and war mongers, for freedom and democratic rights of peoples [and] for peace.”<sup>114</sup>

The Communists further achieved some success in working with individual branches and members of the Croatian Circle in creating local United Front organizations known as “United Committees.” The Communists established these Committees in several localities, the most important of which included Detroit, with 26 participating organizations, Milwaukee, with 23, Chicago, with 26, and New York with 21.<sup>115</sup> In addition, forty CFU lodges in the Pittsburgh area formed a “United Lodges” committee.<sup>116</sup> Milan Biljčević, who also presided over the local New York Committee, headed a national central committee established to unite these city-based Committees.<sup>117</sup> These Committees did little of importance on a national scale but rather focused their energies on such matters as fund raising for various causes as well as socializing, seen as a means of increasing political participation. The United Committees proved instrumental in organizing the celebration of “Croatian Days.” These celebrations had initially been promoted by the CFU Supreme Board which urged its lodges to choose a day over the summer on which immigrants could

<sup>113</sup> “Rezolucije usvojene na polugodišnjem zasjedanje mjeseca ožujka 1937,” *Zajedničar* (Pittsburgh), 31 March 1937, pp. 2-3.

<sup>114</sup> “Odlukoma Glavnog odbora Hrvatske bratske zajednice,” *Radnički glasnik* (Chicago), 7 April 1937, Section 1, pp. 2 and 4.

<sup>115</sup> One needs to approach these numbers with caution as many of these organizations probably had been under Communist control (as an example, the number of organizations could have included multiple IWO lodges, CFU lodges under Party control or influence, Workers’ Clubs etc.).

<sup>116</sup> “Barjaktari jedinstva hrvatskog naroda,” *Svijet* (New York), 24 April 1937. Gršković saw the links brought about by these various Committees as a backhanded way for the Communists to organize an alternative to the All-Croatian Congress which they had previously failed to establish. “Tko nebi poznao, skup bi ih prodao,” *Svijet* (New York), 4 July 1937, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> On Biljčević, see Mato Batorović, “Biljčević, Milan,” in *Hrvatski biografski leksikon* (Zagreb: Jugoslavenski leksikografski zavod, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 772-73. See also “Financijalno izvješće središnjeg odbora Hrvatskih društva New Yorku,” *Svijet* (New York), 26 June 1937, p. 2.

publicly celebrate their Croatian heritage. The United Committees seized on the proposal, and, thanks to their efforts, organized many Croatian Days in the United States.<sup>118</sup>

These successes proved limited. Despite Biljčević's support for the United Front, only one branch of the Circle, Circle No. 1 Eugen Kvaternik based in New York City, joined a "United Front" grouping with the Communists. Even that success turned out to be short-lived as that branch withdrew from the "Front" by October 1937.<sup>119</sup>

Over the 4 July 1937 Independence Day holiday, the Croatian Section held its Second Conference, this one in Chicago.<sup>120</sup> Lojen delivered a long analysis of the work of the Section since its last Conference, one which remained upbeat. He noted that for the first time "brotherly" relations had been established among different Croatian groups and organizations who in the past had seen one another as enemies. "Today we see the beginnings of unity in all larger communities in the form of unifying Croatian Days and in other brotherly cooperation."<sup>121</sup> Lojen noted that the CFU was no longer fraught with internal squabbling and described its support of the industrial unionization drives as a positive turning point.

Lojen responded to some of those who rejected the Communists' calls to join the "United Front." Lojen viewed the HSS's claims to already be a front of the Croatian people as silly in light of the HSS's weak organizational strength in North America and the HSS's own policies in the homeland where the HSS had joined with other opposition political parties in a Peasant-Democratic Opposition (*Seljačka-demokratska opozicija*). Lojen noted that Gršković argued in favor of unity but he did nothing about it, making criticisms from his pedestal. As for the Domobranci, while one could not work with their organization, Lojen pointed to the fact that its members remained potential recruits to the "United Front" as they had been engaged in actions and strikes with other workers; approaching them could lead them to "shake off" their

<sup>118</sup> Milan Biljčević, "Iseljenici za slobodu stare domovine," *Matica iseljenički kalendar*, 1961, p. 97.

<sup>119</sup> See "Tko su sve u komunističkom frontu," *Hrvatski list i Danica Hrvatska* (New York), 19 October 1937, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> This Conference saw yet another foreign emissary attend, Stjepan Cvijić, the former General Secretary of the Communist Youth International. Cvijić had been sent to the U.S. to assist in the recruitment of Croatian-American volunteers for the International Brigades in Spain. On Cvijić's work in the U.S., see Ivan Očak, *Braća Cvijići* (Zagreb: Spektar-Globus, 1982), pp. 427-50. Cvijić was known under the pseudonym Stjepan Livadić. During his stay in the U.S., Cvijić worked closely with Lojen, in preparing Lojen's three hour report opening the Conference. Andrija Josipović, "Uspomene na Stjepana Lojen," *Narodni glasnik* (Chicago), 31 January 1968, p. 6. Josipović attended the Conference as a representative of the Croatian Educational Alliance, the Communist-led movement among Croatian-Canadians.

<sup>121</sup> S.M. Loyal, *Komunisti i jedinstvo Hrvata u Americi* (Chicago: Hrvatska radnička knjižara, 1937), p. 36.

fascist leadership.<sup>122</sup>

In moving the “United Front” forward, Lojen urged that the work of the Communists needed to go beyond the organization of Croatian Days. Their greatest weakness remained the lack of strong ties with the American progressive movement and of concrete proposals for everyday activities.<sup>123</sup> But the CFU remained the most important issue. “Without the CFU, one cannot create unity among American-Croatians.”<sup>124</sup> Lojen remained hopeful of bringing the CFU on board due to its March 1937 resolutions and its support of unionization which caused the organization to place “itself on the side of progress [and] against reaction.”<sup>125</sup>

But many non-Communists remained unconvinced, some being particularly irked at the Communists’ adoption of the Croatian label. The right-wing Domobrants sarcastically commented that:

the Communists, when they [cover themselves] with the Croatian name, do not do so because they hold Croatianism dear, but because, under the Croatian name, they can more easily trick and lead on a byway every true Croat whom they catch in their web. Some Communists, who now hide under the Croatian label, until recently called themselves Yugoslavs and hated and threw all sorts of curses at all Croats who [with pride and spirit spoke the Croatian name]. For the Communists, it does not matter what name they call themselves. Yesterday they called themselves Yugoslavs, today they call themselves Croats, and tomorrow they may call themselves Japanese, Chinese, etc.<sup>126</sup>

The Circlist paper, *Hrvatski list i Danica hrvatska*, argued that the Communists had been nothing more than international racketeers, who operated under the cover of Croatianism to exploit the Croatian worker, reminding its readers that only a few years before one Croatian-American Communist (Mary Mrnjec of Chicago) publicly sat on a Croatian flag while Stjepan Lojen was quoted as saying that “he couldn’t give a damn about Croatianism.”<sup>127</sup> Gršković also viewed the Communists’ transformation on the national question as hypocritical:

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Luka Grbić, “Poruka od novog urednika,” *Nezavisna hrvatska država* (Pittsburgh), 31 December 1938, p. 4.

<sup>127</sup> “Klasno svjesni Hrvati,” *Hrvatski list i Danica Hrvatska* (New York), 29 August 1940, p. 2.

For over twenty years, they raised a world revolution using paper bombs and [attacked] everyone who did not nod their heads [in agreement] and applaud with them. [T]hey called this consciousness and the awakening of the revolutionary spirit of the working masses. [N]ow, after they became over night greater Croats than all dead and living Croats, they want to give opinions and express condemnations from a high pedestal of what one can and cannot say and write about anything which concerns our people's life here and in the Old Country.<sup>128</sup>

The Communists clearly failed in their work to create a "United Front" in accordance with Comintern directives. Not one Croatian-American organization agreed to join hands with the Communists as they disagreed with both their political ideology and distrusted their motives.

Despite this, the period after the VIIth Comintern Congress saw a steady increase in Communist influence in the Croatian-American community. One can hypothesize that by discarding the dogmatism of the "Third Period" the Communists made themselves more accessible to working class Croatian-Americans who did not understand or did not want to engage in the minutiae of Stalinist doctrine concerning a supposed pending revolution. Their concerns were more immediate, focused on keeping their jobs and increasing their living standards.

The Communists' work on unionization drives during the second half of the 1930s clearly helped in bridging the prior gap between Party members and the workers they claimed to lead. During the "Third Period," the Comintern advocated "dual unionism" in which the Communists established their own "revolutionary" unions in opposition to established, reformist unions. As noted above, Croatian-American Communist leaders such as Frank Borich and Anton Gerlach played important roles in these unions. But these unions proved to be utter failures.

The Comintern's turn to the new "United Front" in the mid-1930s brought a change in tactics on union matters. The Communists disbanded their unions and began to work within mainstream unions, especially for the Conference

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<sup>128</sup> "U svijetlu istine," *Svijet* (New York), 23 January 1938, p. 2. The Communists also alienated the then small Croatian-American intellectual community when they came out forcefully against proposals for the CFU to establish a Croatian university chair and a higher school for education of Croatian-American children. The Communists argued that this would not benefit the masses but only a privileged few. F. Preveden, "Zločin komunista nad hrvatskom omladinom," *Hrvatski list i Danica hrvatska* (New York), 23 November 1940, p. 3. That Francis Preveden made this proposal may have caused the Communists to automatically raise opposition as Preveden had previously been a Party member and an editor of *Radnik* for a short period in 1924. Lojen, *Uspomene*, p. 120.

(later Congress) of Industrial Organizations (CIO).<sup>129</sup> The opportunity for collective bargaining and unionization provided by “New Deal” legislation (which the Communists ironically had previously condemned) allowed the Communists to apply their honed organizational skills to the mass unionization drives which swept through the Croatian-American community in the latter part of the decade.

Whatever the opinions Croatian-Americans had on the “United Front,” their leaders practically all enthusiastically endorsed unionization. Thus, when the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) decided to turn to the ethnic fraternal groups for support in their drive to unionize the steel industry, Butković took the lead and became head of the fraternal section of the SWOC.<sup>130</sup> These actions and their continued work within CFU lodges showed results - by March 1938, the Communists claimed control over approximately forty percent of all CFU lodges.<sup>131</sup>

The CFU leadership must have been aware of this rising Communist presence and appear to have made efforts to win support from members who had been influenced by the Communists. Thus, Butković agreed to attend a number of speaking events organized by the Communists during the latter 1930s, something that would have been unheard of earlier in the decade. Butković also agreed with the Communists to participate in the establishment of an All-Slavic Congress (the forerunner of the American Slav Congress formed during World War II) and Butković acted as president of its organizing committee.<sup>132</sup>

The approaching CFU’s Fifth Convention scheduled for September 1939 must have weighed on Butković’s mind in taking such actions. Indeed, in March 1939, a full six months prior to the convention, the CFU’s leadership announced the formation a bloc in preparation for assembly.<sup>133</sup> The Communists came well-prepared, their “Progressive” Bloc now rechristened as the “New Deal National Bloc.” While Butković succeeded in being reelected as President during the Convention, the shift toward the left was perceptible as the leftists obtained an increased presence on the CFU’s Supreme Board.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>129</sup> The CIO, originally a part of the American Federation of Labor, had been established to encourage unionization on an industry-wide rather than on a craft-basis.

<sup>130</sup> Rachleff, “Class, Ethnicity,” p. 95.

<sup>131</sup> Glazer, *The Social Background*, p. 232, n. 78, citing to materials found in the papers of Earl Browder in Syracuse University.

<sup>132</sup> Serbian-American Communist Stevan Dedijer headed the press committee for the Committee. “Pripreme za Nacionalni Sve-Slavenski Kongres u toku,” *Svijet* (New York), 17 January 1939, p. 2.

<sup>133</sup> “Pred petu konvenciju Hrvatske bratske zajednice,” *Hrvatski svijet* (New York), 16 May 1939, p. 1.

<sup>134</sup> Ivan Senica, “Tko je iznio pobjedu na konvenciji H.B.Z.,” *Hrvatski svijet* (New York), 26 September 1939, p. 2.

## Conclusion

The next two years marked a tumultuous time in the activities of Croatian-American Communists. The 1939 Stalin-Hitler Pact destroyed overnight the “United Front.” Mimicking Moscow’s new propaganda line, Croatian-American Communists (and their comrades in the CPY) no longer viewed fascism and Nazism as an immediate threat. The Nazi invasion of Poland and the declaration of war against Germany by France and Great Britain became an “imperialist war” that the workers needed to oppose, not one where the working people had to continue the struggle against the expansion of fascism. Obviously, the exigencies of Soviet foreign policy outweighed all sense of maintaining political constancy in one’s views. While we have not investigated to what extent these turn-arounds in Party tactics may have had on Croatian-American members, their leadership clearly had no problem in mirroring the new Party-line.<sup>135</sup>

The invasion of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and the entry of the U.S. in World War II no doubt saved Croatian-American Communists from the oblivion they faced had they been forced to remain wedded to their opposition to entry into the new “imperialist war.”

During World War II the prestige of Croatian Communists” increased as a result of their work in Croatian and Slavic American organizations in the United States and as a result of the advent of Marshall Tito in Yugoslavia. Immediately following World War II they had their greatest successes: a newly installed, seemingly popular government in their homeland, a daily newspaper in the United States (at that time called the *Narodni glasnik*) with a circulation of over 12,000, and, in 1947, the takeover by their allies of the CFU.

To a certain extent, their ultimate success had its roots in their work in the Croatian-American community in the late 1930s. True, Croatian-American Communists failed to implement the “United Front” tactics as then dictated by the Comintern. Their failure particularly comes into focus when compared to their Serbian-American colleagues whose Vidovdan Congress included a number of prominent non-Communists.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>135</sup> See, e.g., Leo Fisher, “Imperijalistički rat,” *Radnički kalendar* (Pittsburgh), 1940, pp. 17-31; and Franjo Borić, “Potreba jedinstva radničke klase u borbi protiv rata,” *Radnički kalendar* (Pittsburgh), 1940, pp. 33-39.

<sup>136</sup> Though the major Serbian-American fraternal organization, the Serbian National Federation, kept its distance from the Communists. Koča Jončić, “Iseljništvo – Srbija, SR,” in *Enciklopedija Jugoslavije* (Zagreb: Jugoslavenski leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 1988), vol. 5, pp. 603-08. Importantly, the Communists continued to retain majority control over the Vidovdan Congress. Prica, *Amerika*, p. 19. Their failure may not have only been ideological, as Don Niko Gršković, who shared many of their ideals, simply could not work with people who wrote in such disparaging tones in their newspaper. Gršković pointed to the writings of *Slobodni misao*, the Croatian Communist paper in Canada, as a marked contrast with the writings one found

Nevertheless, Communist tactics ultimately succeeded. By concentrating their work on the CFU and its individual, autonomous lodges, they in practice implemented the old, discarded "United Front" tactic of the "Third Period" of "boring from within." While this may not have been a conscious or even necessarily a desirable choice, they ultimately succeeded in having their allies obtain control of the largest Croatian-American organization and, indeed, one of the largest Croatian organizations in the world.

### **Kroatische Abteilung der Kommunistischen Partei der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika und "Vereinigte Front" (1934-1939)**

#### **Zusammenfassung**

In diesem Artikel wird Versuch der Implementierung der "Vereinigten Front" in den Rahmen kroatisch-amerikanischer Gemeinschaft dargestellt. Der Verfasser beschreibt die Entwicklung sozialistischer und kommunistischer Organisation innerhalb der kroatisch-amerikanischen Gemeinschaft bis zu Mitte der 1930-er Jahre und bespricht wichtige Veränderungen, die zur Gründung der Kroatischen Abteilung der Kommunistischen Partei der Vereinigten Staaten geführt haben. Er erörtert auch die Zusammenarbeit der genannten Abteilung mit anderen nicht kommunistisch orientierten kroatisch-amerikanischen Gruppen in ihrem Trachten nach Bildung der "Vereinigten Front".

Während kroatisch-amerikanische Kommunisten nicht sehr zahlreich in der Kommunistischen Partei der Vereinigten Staaten in 1930-er Jahren waren, spielten sie in der zweiten Hälfte dieses Jahrzehntes eine bedeutende Rolle innerhalb eigener kroatischer Gemeinschaft.

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in *Radnički glasnik*, arguing that perhaps this reflected the fact the writers of the former were young men, while those of the latter had their political and class education in what he called the "Chicago School." "Pozdrav i odgovor," *Svijet* (New York), 15 February 1938, p. 2.

