

# Bryan D. Palmer on his new book, James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism

Posted on December 21, 2022 by Chad Pearson

Chad Pearson recently interviewed Bryan Palmer about this new book, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928-1938* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2020; Chicago: Haymarket, 2021).

**Why did you write this book?**

There are many levels on which one could answer such a question. At the most basic, somewhat apolitical, level, it is a question of curiosity about an intriguing life. Cannon, who has not really been studied in depth for reasons we will likely get into in later questions, is a fascinating figure on the left. Born in the heartland of the United States, in an industrial suburb of Kansas City, Kansas, Jim Cannon was the son of Irish immigrants, the mother a devout Catholic, the father an Irish Republican with an attachment to the cause of labor reform and Debsian socialism. How did someone raised as an altar boy end up as a hobo agitator for the Industrial Workers of the World, a leading figure in the Communist Party, USA, and founder of

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American Trotskyism?

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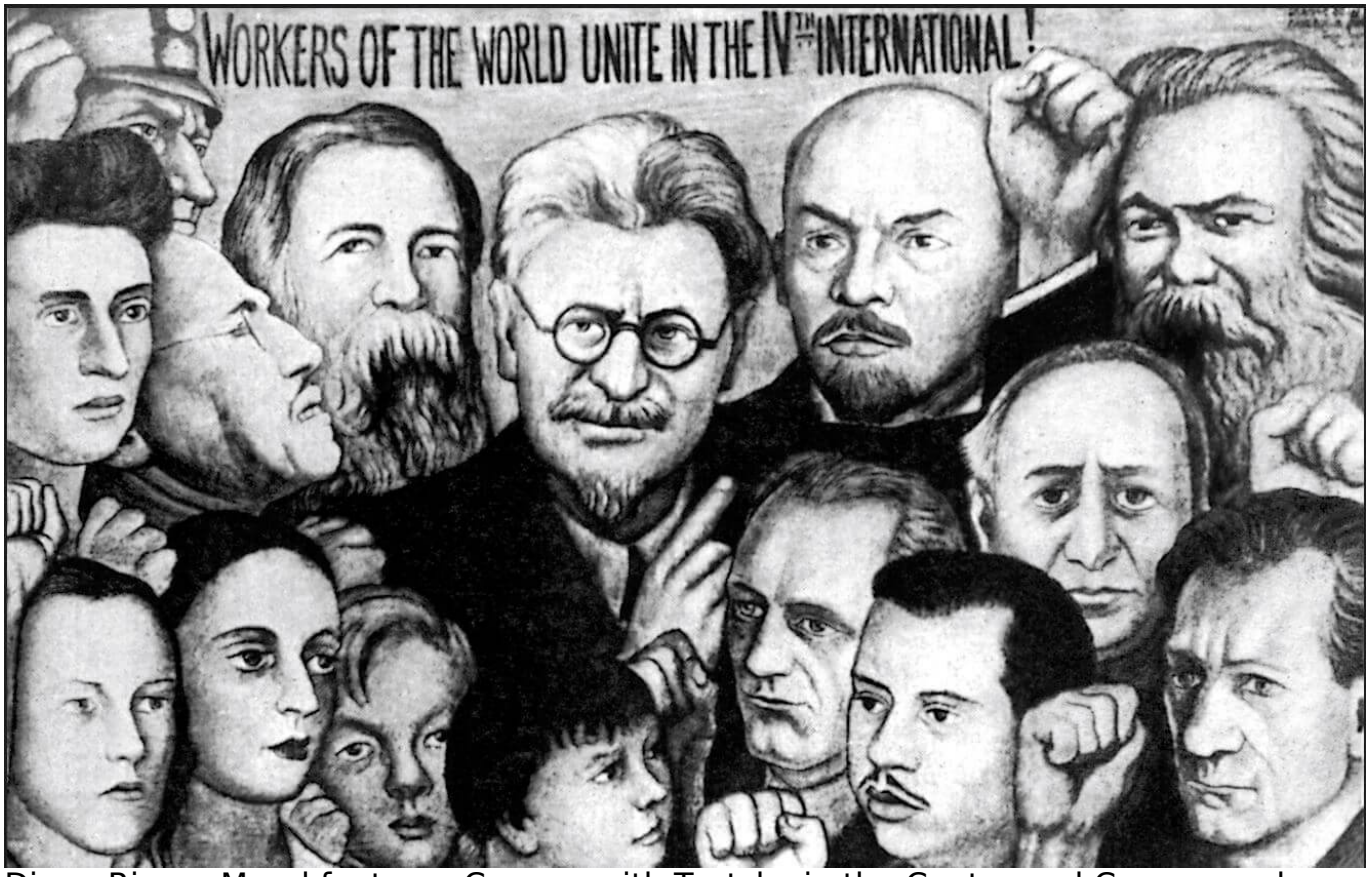
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James Cannon. Credit: Socialist Workers Party, Pathfinder Press

Another level is historiographic: the writing on American communism has long been one of oppositional camps. Followers of Theodore Draper (with Harvey Klehr and John Haynes being his most prolific subsequent counterparts), known as traditionalists, have written studies of American communism that stress that it was a “foreign import,” imposed on the United States and its class struggles by the Comintern, which exercised an ironclad “Moscow domination.” A more New Left-inspirited school tilts against this interpretive orientation. These so-called revisionists stress instead that United States communists, while advocates of the Soviet Union and the Revolution of 1917, were also leading activists in the struggles against racism, unemployment, and exploitation, battling for industrial unions and civil rights. Of course, both sides tell us important things about the Communist Party in the United States. But in their oppositional stands they manage to each miss an important dimension of the communist experience.

Both sides wrestle with the issue of the Stalinization of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Communist International, and its affiliated national parties. They do so, however, quite differently. Traditionalists insist that Stalinism was an outgrowth of Leninism and reflected merely the authoritarianism of Soviet communism. Revisionists tend to regard Stalinism as a tragic flaw in a Communist project that American revolutionaries aligned with the national section of the Comintern managed to bypass in their struggles against capitalism.

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Diego Rivera Mural features Cannon with Trotsky in the Center and Cannon on lower right, just below Karl Marx. Credit: Prometheus Research Library

Cannon steps outside of these analytic schools, throwing a spanner into the interpretive works. If, as traditionalists argue, American communists were simply willing workers in Moscow's Soviet cause, how could one of their leading figures, a native son, to boot, embrace wholeheartedly the Revolution of 1917, learn from architects of Bolshevism like Lenin, Zinoviev, and Trotsky, and then reject the Stalinist leadership and turn away from the degeneration of revolutionary internationalism that was expressed in the Comintern with its Stalinization in the 1925-1929 years. And, if the history of American communism needs to be written, as revisionists so often suggest, as the chronicle of heroic struggles, often forged locally and outside of Communist Party obeisance to Moscow, how could someone as central to American communism as Jim Cannon manage to continue those struggles and the original commitments of 1917, but place so much stress on the necessity of winning United States communists and their Party back to their original purposes, going so far as to break from longstanding friendships and attachments to the International founded by Lenin but reconfigured by Stalin. Was it really

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possible for the secondary cadre of the Communist Party, USA, and its rank-and-file to express their allegiance to the Comintern, and to Stalin, and not take into their day-to-day activities some of what we know was a politics of a problematic nature?

So writing about Cannon offers an alternative to an historiographic impasse, one that in some ways reduces Communism in the United States to an either/or expression of foreign domination or progressive struggle. This bifurcation ultimately fails to deal with Stalinization and a dissident communist opposition to it.

**Cannon, to me was “the red thread of continuity” that links the revolutionary workers upheavals associated with the Industrial Workers of the World and the attraction of the Russian Revolution and the Marxism it espoused to native American radicals and immigrant workers alike, with the struggle for socialism in the world’s most powerful nation.**

Ultimately more is at stake than curiosity or historiography. The real reason to write this book, which of course encompasses the above issues as well, is that Cannon, to me was “the red thread of continuity” that links the revolutionary workers upheavals associated with the Industrial Workers of the World and the attraction of the Russian Revolution and the Marxism it espoused to native American radicals and immigrant workers alike, with the struggle for socialism in the world’s most powerful nation. Cannon’s political project, nothing less than the building of socialism in America, is what ultimately drew me to write this book. It explores Cannon’s role in the tumultuous decade of the 1930s, which witnessed Trotskyism’s emergence in the United States, an under-studied and unheralded political achievement, in which the Left Opposition of the early 1930s became the largest and most successful international section of a Trotskyist movement struggling to resuscitate world revolution. This entailed opposing the Stalinizing fixation on freezing revolutionary struggle in the cul-de-sac of the program of ‘socialism in one country’. Cannon is thus a vital red thread of continuity in the international, and American, revolutionary tradition.

**You write that Cannon has “hardly been embraced by the students of the American labor and revolutionary movements” (46). Why do you think this is the case?**

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There has always been an interest in Cannon, of course, with his writings published by the Trotskyist movement. And Draper considered Cannon an exemplary source on the early history of communism, relying on interviews with Cannon in his two-volume history of the origins of the American movement, insisting that for Cannon the cause of revolutionary communism remained alive into his later years in the 1950s, and this meant that he, above all of those Draper interviewed, was able to provide insights and tell the truth about the movement. Still, interest in Cannon in academic circles has been relatively muted, and up to the publication of my first volume in 2007 the best account of American Trotskyism and its leading figure remained that of a literary scholar of the New York intellectuals, Alan Wald's 1987 book. Constance Ashton Myers' *The Prophet's Army: Trotskyists in America, 1928-1941* (1977) was weakly researched and, at its worst, condescendingly dismissive about Cannon, indeed about the anti-Stalinist left. There were important essays on Trotskyism, written by advocates such as Wald, Paul LeBlanc, and George Breitman, of which this trio's 1996 edited volume, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations,* is undoubtedly the best example, but such writings were no substitute for an archivally-based, fully-researched treatment, one that put Cannon as the preeminent leader of the movement at its center.

Most labor historians were simply uninterested in Cannon, largely because the Trotskyist organizations he led, compared to the Communist Party, were always quite small. They did not register in the same way that the Communists did in terms of overall impact and involvement in major mobilizations. The CP, its membership, and large activist periphery, were especially visible in the union campaigns that gave rise to the Congress of Industrial Organizations and major anti-racist struggles, such as the protests against the legal lynching of the Scottsboro Boys. Trotskyists, for much of the 1930s, were fighting a rearguard battle to win the Communist Party back to its revolutionary principles, and few labor historians seemed interested in this, preferring to chronicle the epic struggles of organizing campaigns, strikes, and movements for social justice in which the larger CP was immersed.

**"How ironic that New Leftists, dedicated to building an alternative politics in their 1960s practice, turned their historical inquiries into American labor and the left in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, back to the Stalinized Communist Party that they in good part rejected politically."**

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In addition, I cannot help but think that age-old bigotries, in which Trotskyists were caricatured as "splitters and wreckers," influenced many New Left historians drawn to the study of labor; they simply did not think that the kind of history they wanted to write, and in which Communists clearly were both active participants and willing subsequent sources, had much of a place for Trotskyists, with whom they may have crossed contentious paths in the days of student radicalism and the anti-war movement of the 1960s. So Cannon and the movement he invested his life in building tended to languish. How ironic that New Leftists, dedicated to building an alternative politics in their 1960s practice, turned their historical inquiries into American labor and the left in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, back to the Stalinized Communist Party that they in good part rejected politically. In their oral histories, for instance, they tended to venerate Communist Party members, and rarely, if ever, questioned their adherence to the Stalinized Comintern, its policy zig-zags from the Third Period to the Popular Front to the Hitler-Stalin Pact. The ridiculousness of the allegations about Trotskyism being a Fifth Column for Hitler and aligned, conspiratorially, with capitalism, that were the stock in trade of the Moscow Trials, went largely unchallenged by many historians of labor and the left. Much more could be said. The point is that Cannon was indeed a marginal figure in the proliferating texts of histories of workers and revolutionaries that appeared in the late 20th century and into the 21st.

**You offer a very critical analysis of the American Communist Party. After producing a rich introduction, you treat us to many examples of CP attacks on Trotskyists. Why should labor historians care about this factionalism?**

I do indeed offer a critical analysis of the American Communist Party. I believe, deeply, that the Stalinization of the Communist International and its various national sections, including that of the United States, has much to atone for, souring socialism in the mouths of millions, as this process of political degeneration has done globally. From the 1920s abandonment of Chinese revolutionaries to the murderous outcomes of the Moscow Trials inside the Soviet Union and the deadly consequences of sectarian Stalinism in the Spanish Civil War to the disastrous policies that led to the evisceration of the powerful Indonesian Communist Party in the 1960s, the record is a terrible one. This had its impact in the United States, and included the active role of the United States Communist Party in the imprisonment of Trotskyists like Cannon under the Smith Act in the war hysteria of the 1940s.

If I am insistent on this record being called out for what it was – which was a

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shameful repudiation of revolutionary solidarity – I do also recognize that in parties like the CP, USA militants could and did do wonderful work in organizing the unorganized, in fighting unemployment and racism, and in mobilizing workers to resist capital and the state. I make this clear in what I have written, not only in my studies of Cannon, but also in other publications.

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"It is necessary that every member of the Party should study calmly and with the greatest objectivity, first the substance of the differences of opinion, and then the development of the struggles within the Party. Neither the one nor the other can be done unless the documents of both sides are published. He who takes somebody's word for it is a hopeless idiot, who can be disposed of with a simple gesture of the hand."—Lenin

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# The Results of the Party Convention

By James P. Cannon

The Party Convention which was to "end the factional struggle and unify the Party" ended with a free-for-all fist fight, the sharpening of the internal strife, the wide distribution of new caucus documents and a race to Moscow by representatives of both factions. It could not be otherwise. This bankruptcy is only the reflection of the political and ideological collapse of the Stalinist regime in the Communist International, a regime which stultifies revolutionary thought, suppresses discussion and undertakes to solve all difficulties which arise from its barren policy with organizational manipulations. The unanimous endorsement of the Stalin leadership by the Convention was an appropriate act.

The convention sessions themselves were an empty formality. The real activity consisted of a long series of caucuses by the two factions and was confined almost exclusively to the paltry struggle over the office of Party Secretary. The mechanical exclusion of the Opposition prevented a discussion of the great principle questions which confront the Communist International and which lie at the bottom of the fierce factional struggles in all the parties. The convention delegates, carefully selected from the standpoint of their indifference to these questions, naturally could not touch them—they do not even understand them—and this failure doomed the convention to ignominious futility from the start. Without facing these issues, which are the determining factor in the whole Comintern, and taking part in the effort to solve them on the right basis of principle, there can be no "liquidation of the factional struggle" no matter how often the "unprincipledness" of this struggle is proclaimed.

### THE "ISSUE" AT THE CONVENTION

Almost the entire activity of the two caucuses—which met in joint session occasionally as the Sixth Convention of the Party—was devoted to the manoeuvre of Stalin which was presented by the two representatives of the Executive Committee of the Communist International: the proposal that Foster should be appointed Secretary of the Party. The fact that a secondary organization question of this kind should become the central problem of the convention is in itself a significant characterization of the gathering. The motive behind this Stalin strategy is quite obvious. In the first place it was a form of pressure on the Lovestone faction to make a complete break with Bucharin. It was also designed to graft Foster onto the Lovestone faction as its "American" expression and decoy for the proletarian communists who are fighting it under the banner of the Communist Opposition. It was easy to accomplish the first aim, for here it was a question of dealing with people without definite principles or loyalties. The second aim had no chance to succeed. It failed to consider the principle motives that animate the proletarian supporters of the Opposition and it underestimated their political intelligence.

The reactions of the two groups in the Convention to this proposal regarding the secretaryship throw an interesting light on their actual character. The Bittleman group went into convulsions of enthusiasm over it and regarded it as, almost, the "final victory." For it they completely forgot their "political line," they scrapped their Convention theses, they declared a still more "merciless" struggle against the Communist Opposition and howled for "unity" with the "Right Wing"—with Lovestone, Pepper, Wicks, Stachel, Wolfe, Minor, Olgin or anyone else of a similar stripe who would accept it. How can such an attitude be explained? It is only a few weeks ago that Bittleman issued a statement, signed also by a number of lieutenants and new recruits, repudiating Foster's position on very important questions from a principle standpoint. Foster himself stated in his article that Bittleman had denounced his position as "liquidating everything connected with Communism." Foster' articles reaffirmed his stand as against that of Bittleman and all the rest of the group. How then can the appointment of Foster be regarded as such a great "concession" to the Bittleman faction that everything else can be cheerfully sacrificed? The incident demonstrates quite clearly that organization positions play the main role in this case and that the "theses" (cast aside so soon and so lightly) and the big talk about "political line" (forgotten already) were merely trimmings. What kind of a group is this which divides over political questions and reunites over organization questions?

### THE MOBILIZATION AGAINST FOSTER

The attitude of the Lovestone group to the Stalin Manoeuvre was more business-like, practical and "political" in the Stalinist sense. They took away its main motive by introducing a resolution for Stalin and against Bucharin,—thus refuting at the same time the accusation that they are purely and simply a "Right Wing." They can also be "Center" or "Left" if occasion demands. Their next step was to discredit the proposal to make Foster Secretary of the Party. For this they put forward their "proletarian" delegations to attack Foster's war record openly in the Convention. The article signed by W. J. White in the Daily Worker of March 4th was part of this campaign and Poor White of course did not write the article. It is quite obvious that Bedacht and Lovestone wrote it. "Where was the 'leader' of the opposition during the past war?" asks the article. "Does his record in the past war assure reliability in the coming war? It does not." With words like these and others even more blunt and outspoken on the convention floor the carefully coached "proletarians" hammered at the candidacy of Foster for the secretaryship. Thus the Lovestone caucus was solidified against the "War Danger" and Foster. They finished by electing three secretaries with equal rights, one of whom is Foster in the same position he held before the Convention and with even less prestige.

The Bittleman-Foster caucus document accuses the Lovestone faction, because of its rejection of Foster as Secretary, of placing the Convention "in the position of open hostility to the C.I."—that is, to the Stalin faction. But that doesn't follow at all—the wish probably influences the thought that thereby they would receive the favors that come only to the "loyal" ones. They didn't understand Lovestone's manoeuvre any more than they understood Stalin's. It is absurd to think the Lovestone-

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# *New York Workers Protest Trotsky's Exile*
# *Stalinites Plan Pogrom -- and Stage Fizzle*

The protest meeting of the Communist workers of New York against the banishment of Trotsky was held with a packed hall at Labor Temple Tuesday night and ended with great enthusiasm and loud cheers for Trotsky and the Communist Opposition at 11.20. A collection of $60.50 for the Weekly Militant was taken after an admission fee of 25 cents at the door. Cannon, Abern and Shachtman were the speakers. The names of the Workers Guard who protected the meeting are too numerous to mention. Those who attempted to disrupt the meeting from the inside left so quickly that their names could not be learned. Those who were known to have come to carry out the instructions of the Stalin bureaucrats to break up the meeting—mainly paid functionaries—were refused admission by the Workers Guard at the door and were given the opportunity to denounce "Trotskyism" to their hearts' content in the wide open spaces of 14th Street.

A committee from the I.W.W. sat on the platform with the speakers and Fellow Worker Edelman spoke in their name, pledging the support of the I.W.W. workers to maintain the right of Free Speech for the Communist Opposition notwithstanding their disagreement with its program. A number of I.W.W. workers also served on the Workers Guard which defended the meeting. Dr. Edmund Chaffee of the American Civil Liberties Union also spoke, pointing out that the A.C.L.U. had always defended the right of the Party to hold public meetings and would do the same for the Communist Opposition.

Shortly after the meeting began, while comrade Abern was speaking, a group of Lovestone scouts attempted to force entrance at the rear door and rush the platform. They ran into a strong detachment of the Workers Guard which was concentrated at that point and were soon thrown out. The leader of this raid, one Gomez, had foolishly bumped his head against the door and seemed to be under the illusion that Trotsky was in the hall in the act of betraying the Soviet Union. He was allowed to remain and to wander around the room at will, but after a few feeble heckles, he left the meeting of his own accord.

The class struggle had been declared off for the night by the Stalin officialdom of the Party and instructions were sent to all Party units to mobilize the entire Party membership to break up our meeting. Preparations were made to stage a pogrom against the Opposition, but it was a pitiful fiasco. Its net result was to demonstrate the futility of these methods and the weakness of their sponsors, to strengthen the fighting spirit of the Opposition workers and to create the beginning of a united front of all progressive workers against fascist methods in the labor movement—from the side of Lovestone and Foster as well as from the side of Sigman and Lewis.

The subsidized liars of the Daily Worker and Freiheit, striving to win the Brass Check medal for 1929, give an account of the meeting that will not be recognized by anyone who attended it. Among other things they say that we (we!) brought police to the meeting and "gave orders" to them. These people whose leader, Lovestone, testified in a capitalist court against a Communist and helped to send him to the penitentiary, cannot imagine why we should not call the police. Their accusation, therefore, is perhaps as much instinctive reaction as conscious falsehood.

The director of the Labor Temple announced from the platform that he had called the police against our protest and said he had done so because of the riot at the previous meeting. The police wanted to let the hoodlums into the hall, but our Workers Guard at the door refused. It is very important to establish the facts about such questions, and for that reason we asked representatives of the I.W.W. and the A.C.L.U. to attend the meeting to observe and give an opinion of the conduct of all concerned. Lies against us in general are too numerous to answer but lies about the police business will be checked down to their roots and the real facts clearly established to the satisfaction of all honest workers.

One final lie of the Stalinite press. We are accused of having had gangsters and thugs at the meeting to protect us. These "gangsters and thugs" were, every one of them, fighters in the revolutionary movement and fresh from the picket line in the needle trades Left Wing fight and other battles where their only connection with gangsters was to be beaten and slashed by the thugs employed by the Right Wing. The day after they are cheered for their courage on the picket line, the Daily Worker and Freiheit denounce them as "thugs." The Stalinite scribblers have lost all sense of shame.

* * *

A successful meeting was also held in Philadelphia on St. Patrick's Day with James P. Cannon speaking. The meeting was under the auspices of the Open Forum of the Friendship Liberal League, where Party representatives have often spoken. There was a "mobilization of the Party" to break up the meeting which ended in a fizzle and brought discredit on the Stalinites. The disruption was organized by Benjamin, the district organizer of the Party, but only a dozen or so Party members could be mustered for the job. (This is true in all cities; the working class core of the Party has no heart for these reactionary methods.) Benjamin, who is as yellow as the yolk of an egg, remained two miles behind the lines like a real general. There he eventually received reports that his hoodlums had hit the sidewalk a few minutes after the trouble began. The meeting continued, with questions and discussion, till midnight.

* * *

Two smashing defeats for Stalinism in three days! The Opposition will be heard!

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The Militant, published by the Communist League of Ameirca, was edited by James P. Cannon and others. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

That said, yes, there were atrocities committed by both leaders and rank-and-file members of the Communist Party, directed against their Trotskyist counterparts. Trotskyists insisted on open debate, discussion among rival wings of the revolutionary movement. They wanted a dialogue on policies followed by the Comintern, and they demanded, as should all revolutionaries, that when policies led to failures and worse, then those policies should be critically examined. This was the basis on which Cannon, Max Shachtman, and Martin Abern were originally expelled from the American Party in 1928, which sets the stage on which my book develops. As these dissident communists organized followers into a Communist League of America, Opposition (CLA) and published a newspaper, *The Militant,* that sought to make clear to revolutionaries in the United States how Trotsky's critique of Comintern policies of the late 1920s, in which Stalin was orchestrating a shift away from advocacy of world revolution to the protection and entrenchment of Soviet power, to building "socialism in one country" rather than extending revolution internationally, the discussion Cannon and his allies wanted was shut down.

Trotskyists selling their newspaper were attacked, Trotskyists holding public forums were heckled and physically assaulted, necessitating the organization of labor defense guards (composed of Cannon's former comrades in the IWW among others) to defend the right of free speech in the movement. Furriers knives and brass knuckles and lead pipes became weapons silencing Trotskyists. There was an ugliness to this gangsterism and thuggery that was entirely new to the revolutionary movement. In some ways it was the American equivalent to the Moscow Trials that began in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, and culminated in the coerced confessions and murderous judicial execution of many old Bolsheviks. The difference was that in Moscow, Stalinists had a state and its power to effect their violence, while in the US Communists had only the capacity of their members to terrorize political opponents on the revolutionary left.

This violence brought into the revolutionary left was new. It had often infected trade unions, as revolutionaries were assailed by goons working on behalf of degenerate officialdoms, but it had never, before the attacks by Communists on Trotskyists in the late 1920s and early 1930s, been commonplace in gatherings of the revolutionary left, where heated debates, even acrimonious, sectarian, challenges were not uncommon, but where physical violence was virtually unheard of.

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**“My attention to the detail of this gangsterism on the part of the Communist Party, a thuggery orchestrated by CP leaders, but often carried out by secondary cadre and rank and file members, was purposeful. It is meant to challenge historians who have evaded this sordid history, even written articles suggesting the treatment of Trotskyists was rather benign, to look at what was done to revolutionary leftists whose active pursuit of tactical and strategic ways forward led to physical attacks on them as well as slanderous verbal denunciation.”**

There are really two reasons labor historians should care about this, and they are different, but related. First, labor historians who inevitably address the left should care about the issue of factionalism, and many do, because it is an expression of ideas and programmatic orientations on the left and that are being implemented in the unions and social movements, because such ideas matter. They are the substance that animates activism, and an activism that is not driven forward by ideas, policies, and programs, is acutely compromised. So factionalism, often scorned as divisive, matters. Not all factional disputes are sectarian, and how one conducts a struggle to implement particular politics inside a revolutionary organization or, indeed, inside a union or social movement, is critical. This is where labor historians attentive to the violence that was perpetrated on the nascent Trotskyist movement by the Communist Party must draw a line, indicating that such resort to physical assault, premised on the view that ideas cannot be discussed, demands repudiation. My attention to the detail of this gangsterism on the part of the Communist Party, a thuggery orchestrated by CP leaders, but often carried out by secondary cadre and rank and file members, was purposeful. It is meant to challenge historians who have evaded this sordid history, even written articles suggesting the treatment of Trotskyists was rather benign, to look at what was done to revolutionary leftists whose active pursuit of tactical and strategic ways forward

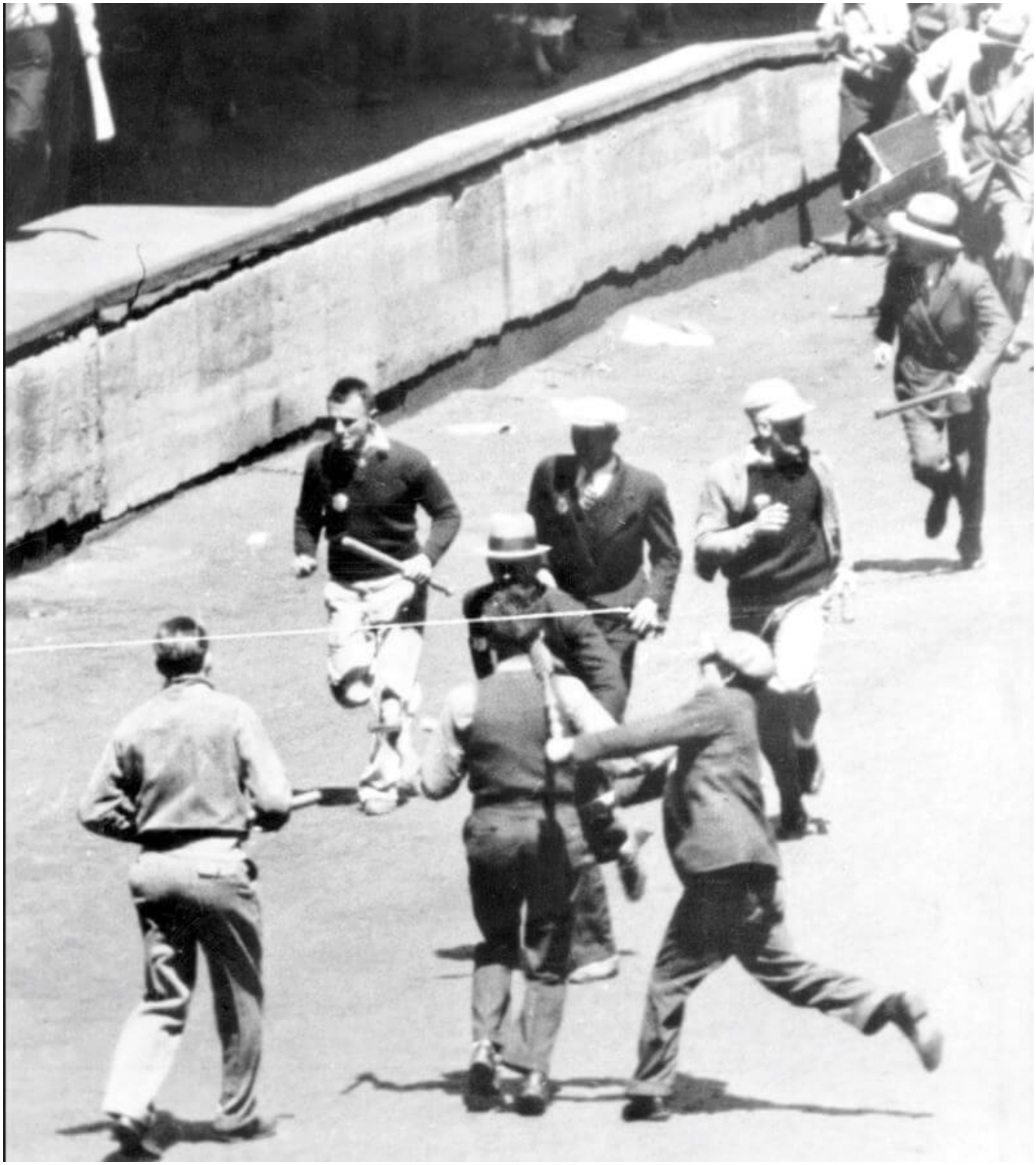
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led to physical attacks on them as well as slanderous verbal denunciation. This needs to be recognized, for any communist party that descends into this kind of a response to engagement with its policies has clearly abandoned much that it needs to recover.

**One of the most important labor victories in the 1930s involved Trotskyists. Here I'm talking about the Minneapolis Teamster strikes in 1934. How important were Trotskyists to the success of these strikes?**

I argue that of the four major strikes in 1933-1934 – a series of textile strikes led by the CP in the South, the Toledo Auto-Lite Strike led by the American Workers Party, the longshore conflict in San Francisco in which Harry Bridges and the Communist Party were in the leadership, and the Minneapolis Truckers' strikes organized by Trotskyists in the CLA – it was the Minneapolis strikes that were the most successful in securing for workers collective bargaining rights and advances in their wages/conditions. The three strikes of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters affiliated truckers in Minneapolis, occurring in February, May, and July-August 1934 ultimately, after much struggle, secured for the teamsters of the once proudly open shop city, union affiliation and improved conditions. These were bloody confrontations in which street battles led to the deaths of Citizen's Alliance (an employers' group) supporters who were special deputies, and striking workers. The strikes polarized the entire Minneapolis community, with tens of thousands of workers and their supporters massed in the streets. At the end of the bitter struggle, a union that was small and inhibited by its international leadership, who declared an interest in organizing only those workers who actually drove trucks, and, as a consequence could command an allegiance of less than 150 members, grew into a broad industrial union that boasted a membership of 7,000. John L. Lewis looked at the Minneapolis truckers and their willingness to battle reactionary bosses, Citizen's Alliance ideologues and their special deputies, cops, local politicians, and a Farmer-Labor Party governor, Floyd Olson, and he realized it was time to make a move inside the American Federation of Labor to break with the so-called craft organization of workers and instead opt for a more inclusive industrial organization.

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Battle of Deputies Run, Minneapolis 1934

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**“This Trotskyist leadership envisioned and built the infrastructure that would eventually carry the teamsters to an impressive victory. Their large and disciplined strike headquarters was run with military precision…“**



Women engaged in the Battle of Deputies Run, 1934, Minneapolis.

This was, from the beginning, the approach of the Trotskyists who envisioned organizing Minneapolis as a trucking hub, and who developed an extremely efficient set of preparations for an unprecedented class struggle. It was a nucleus of no more than a dozen members of the Trotskyist Communist League of America, Opposition, led by the Dunne brothers and Karl Skoglund, who worked, from 1928-1929 into 1933 to create the possibilities for the strikes. They had a long-term commitment

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and, once workers were eventually won over to the necessity of taking job action, they provided an exemplary blueprint for how to conduct a strike. This Trotskyist leadership envisioned and built the infrastructure that would eventually carry the teamsters to an impressive victory. Their large and disciplined strike headquarters was run with military precision; a commissary and a Women's Auxiliary was established, feeding striking workers and extending support for the confrontation with the bosses and their political supporters throughout Minneapolis; a workers hospital inside the strike headquarters, staffed by a doctor and nurses, was set up to care for the injured that the Trotskyists knew would likely emerge from street clashes and picket-line battles; a range of tactics were championed and developed, like the flying pickets that closed down thoroughfares and blocked incoming and outgoing trucks servicing a market center and 166 small trucking companies; and a daily newspaper, *The Organizer,* was set up to challenge the local daily press, which was a mouthpiece for the bosses. Trotskyists worked with already established, reform oriented local truckers' leaders, winning them away from allegiance to the conservative hierarchy of the international union, led by one of the most reactionary trade union bureaucrats of the 1930s, Dan Tobin, who did everything he could to thwart the workers initiatives in 1934. These CLA leaders, long ensconced in the coal yards and trucking industry, worked patiently for more than a half a decade to bring the workers in this sector to the point they trusted their Trotskyist leaders AND were willing to take job action. Such job actions were always undertaken with the responsible commitment to achieving the ends of the workers' strikes, which Cannon and the CLA understood were not about revolution, but about achieving collective bargaining rights. They adjusted to situations, and they kept their focus on what could be achieved and what was winnable in the particular, and changing, circumstances of 1934, which witnessed three separate working-class walkouts.


Dobbs in undated photo.

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Credit: Marxist Internet Archive.

The Trotskyist leadership in Minneapolis, supported by the national, New York-based leadership of the CLA, which staffed and created the workers' newspaper and advised the strike leadership on how to approach the struggle and carry it to a successful end, became a power within the mainstream Trades and Labor Council, and eventually led the organization of the IBT in an eleven-state campaign of over the road truckers that at least doubled the national membership of Tobin's IBT to almost 400,000 by 1940. Jimmy Hoffa later confessed that he learned everything he knew about organizing truckers from Farrell Dobbs, a Minneapolis teamster leader recruited to Trotskyism in the midst of the 1934 strikes. Minneapolis signaled that a few well-placed trade unionists, with a revolutionary organization behind them, could guide workers in struggle to previously unanticipated successes. In Minneapolis Trotskyists proved that their small numbers were not an impediment to them making great gains.

This established, also, that other ostensibly revolutionary groups, like A.J. Muste's American Workers Party, should align with the Trotskyists to create a larger, more effective group. The Minneapolis strikes, led by Trotskyists with a protracted understanding of class struggle and a principled commitment to advancing the cause of collective bargaining, put the CLA on the map. It was global Trotskyism's finest achievement in the trade unions, and would guide and influence Leon Trotsky in his preparation of the document that would serve as a founding statement of the Fourth International in 1938, a draft program known colloquially as the Transitional Program.

**Echoing a few others, you point out the limitations of Roosevelt's labor policies during the First New Deal, writing that "Roosevelt and Section 7A [of the National Industrial Recovery Act] actually provided little of material substance to workers battling to build unions, offering mostly rhetorical promise to those struggling to secure collective bargaining rights" (316). Can you talk a bit about how Canon and his colleagues viewed Roosevelt and the New Deal programs?**

Cannon played a decisive role in shoring up the local Minneapolis Trotskyists to resist the temptation to succumb to the liberal rhetoric of massaging class struggle. This was, of course, the approach of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Governor, Floyd Olson, as well, who, like Roosevelt, was quite adept at proclaiming himself the

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friend of the workers. Yet both Olson and Roosevelt were more interested in containing workers' upheavals than promoting them. When push came to shove, Olson was willing to call in the National Guard, raid the strike headquarters of the Drivers' Union, and declare martial law to keep "order" and trucks moving in the midst of a protracted confrontation. The entire New Deal order, an administrative response to capitalist crisis that aimed to stave off the upturn in class struggle and workers resistance of 1933-1934, was ultimately more concerned with keeping the Democratic Party in power than in fundamentally advancing working class entitlements and genuine trade unionism. Its rhetoric may well have encouraged workers' already committed to undertake militant actions, but it was those actions, not the New Deal agenda, that staked out new possibilities for labour's advance. Cannon and the leadership of the CLA always understood this and, indeed, their militant strikes in 1934 were a central component of the working-class upheaval that dragged Roosevelt's public utterances and policy offerings more to the left, rather than those appeals and legislative enactments pushing workers to struggle and build a more vibrant labour movement.

**"The Minneapolis teamsters provided a textbook lesson of militant class struggle politics in their unambiguous refusal to knuckle under to politicians pleas to compromise, and the pressure put on them by mediators, arbitrators, and the like. The Trotskyist strike leadership in Minneapolis repudiated, time and time again, what they insisted were nothing less than strike-breaking ruses."**

One dimension of this was the extent to which Roosevelt and his officialdom in Washington looked at the Minneapolis truckers' militant actions and did their utmost to bring their struggles to a close. A number of local and national mediators tried to encourage workers to end their struggles before their victory would be secured, just as Governor Olson encouraged strikers to get back to work, promising them arbitration would work in their favor. Cannon was the most resolute of all of

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the Trotskyist leadership, either inside or outside of the local Drivers' Union, in opposing these state initiatives to placate workers with the false promises of what could be delivered by mediators and arbitrators. He took this stand forcefully, for instance, even before the Minneapolis strikes, arguing decisively against the inclination of B.J. Field in the 1933-1934 New York Hotel strike to rely on Labor Board officials tied to Roosevelt to offer settlement terms to the striking workers. Those workers, it should be known, were marching in the street while Roosevelt celebrated his birthday in hotels where scab labor was providing the food and services to the President's fête. That minor event symbolized the Democratic President's relation to class struggle: a rhetorical proclamation that he stood with the workers; and actual actions that indicated he did not. The Minneapolis teamsters provided a textbook lesson of militant class struggle politics in their unambiguous refusal to knuckle under to politicians pleas to compromise, and the pressure put on them by mediators, arbitrators, and the like. The Trotskyist strike leadership in Minneapolis repudiated, time and time again, what they insisted were nothing less than strike-breaking ruses. They used what mediators proposed that would advance the cause of the strikers to good effect, but when mediators demanded the ultimate *quid pro quo* of a return to work without guarantees of actual settlement terms, the Trotskyist-led teamsters sent these emissaries from Roosevelt's administration packing. Reports in the Trotskyist press referred to mediators being "crucified by the rank-and-file" in mass meetings of rejection, and Cannon noted that as one mediator, a Catholic priest, left the union hall he was visibly shaken when a young worker ripped a crucifix off of his neck and hurled it at the priest. In their steadfast stand, Minneapolis's unionists found that, in the end, the only way to get the attention of Federal mediators, was to refuse to give in. Then, they found, mediators were more likely to come around to seeing the value in taking a more forceful stand on behalf of the workers and their demands.

In short, Cannon and other Trotskyists followed a course in Minneapolis that promoted class struggle politics rather than reliance on New Deal legislation and the officialdom associated with the state's bureaucracies, committed as it was to managing the Great Depression's working-class discontent.

**Briefly, what can you tell readers about the relationship between Trotsky and Cannon? How did Trotsky view Cannon? How would you characterize their relationship?**

The point of departure is an elementary one. Cannon had considerable regard for Trotsky, even reverence. He was aware of his significant role in the Revolution of

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1917, second only to Lenin. If, during the mid-1920s, when still a leading figure in the Communist Party, he voted on motions critical of Trotsky, he did so largely unaware of what was happening in the Communist International, and with little enthusiasm. Brought out of his disillusionments with the trajectory of the American Party in the late 1920s by reading Trotsky's draft document at the 1928 Congress, Cannon appreciated that Trotsky was the founder of the Left Opposition with which he was aligned in his stand against the Comintern in 1928-1929. This led to his expulsion and the founding of the Communist League of America, Opposition. One of the essential tasks of the CLA was a publication program which struggled against all odds to place some of Trotsky's key political writings outlining the missteps of the Comintern before an American readership.

Notwithstanding this high regard, Cannon also retained some suspicion of a figure like Trotsky, wondering to himself if this revolutionary Bolshevik pioneer would exhibit some of the same heavy-handed traits of a lesser counterpart such as Stalin. Would Trotsky insist on riding rough-shod over the national sections of the International Left Opposition?

Cannon also had no personal contact with Trotsky in the early days of the CLA, and one of the grounds for figures like Shachtman and Glotzer maintaining their personalized factional animosity to Cannon at the height of the dog days of the movement in 1932, was that Cannon was insufficiently theoretical and arguably too parochially embedded in the American movement to lead the Left Opposition in the US. Cannon, unlike Shachtman and Glotzer, did not travel to Turkey or Europe in the early days of the movement to meet with Trotsky, and was thus not assigned by him, in this period, to important tasks of building the International outside of the US, as, for instance, was Shachtman.

Cannon worried, in 1933-1934, if Trotsky, through meetings and, admittedly, likings for, elements gravitating to the US movement like B.J. Field and Albert Weisbord, might insist on the integration of such figures into the CLA. Both were incapable of being assimilated to the politics of the revolutionary Left Opposition, each opting instead for a kind of freelancing foreign to the discipline of a Bolshevik organization. Trotsky, however, was not heavy handed, and he ended up agreeing with Cannon about people like Field and Weisbord.

Moreover, in his dealings with Shachtman internationally, at the same point that Shachtman was leading the personalized attack on Cannon inside the American movement, Trotsky came to appreciate that Shachtman simply could not be trusted

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to adhere to the revolutionary resolve demanded in certain situations. He was too prone to value journalistic felicity rather than programmatic clarity. In a number of instances, Trotsky was convinced that Shachtman compromised revolutionary politics in his willingness to substitute chumminess with those following a wrong course rather than offering a forthright critique. Shachtman too often seemed unable to hold to the necessary political principles that differentiated the International Left Opposition from an array of radical and reformist positions. Cannon, more cautious, proved more steadfast.

Over time, then, Cannon became valued by Trotsky as the leading figure, not only in the US section of the Left Opposition, but within the broader international movement. Trotsky relied on Cannon, especially after the demonstrative example of the Trotskyist Minneapolis strikes, as a foundational proletarian figure in the potential vanguard. This was evident in 1937-1938, as Trotsky was drafting the document that would serve as the guiding statement of the new Fourth International, in which he relied on discussions with Cannon and others in Mexico, particularly with respect to trade union questions and the orientation of the new International to work in the labor movement. The Socialist Workers Party that Cannon founded in 1938 became the flagship national section in the New International, and while Shachtman, whose facility with languages was considerable, played a role in the meetings convened to establish this body, it was Cannon whom Trotsky trusted to try to bring together a deeply divided British Trotskyist movement and to convince wavering delegates from other European sections to join with Trotsky in the Fourth International. No figure in the American movement was more highly regarded by Trotsky than Cannon, and Trotsky was constantly urging Jim to participate in this or that development in the United States, even as he was geographically distant from places where such happenings were unfolding.

**While you clearly admire Cannon, you are not guilty of hero-worship. You write, “Cannon’s foibles and shortcomings as a leader, of which he was well aware, were also on display in the mid-1930s.” Talk about some of his shortcomings.**

The starting point is that Cannon himself recognized his shortcomings. He was not unduly modest, but his self-reflection, and capacity to look at himself critically, was decided different than others in the movement, among them Shachtman or C.L.R. James. The latter, for instance, while talented, cosmopolitan, and brilliant on the literary front, was given to egocentric postures of grandeur that would have been

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entirely foreign to Cannon. Cannon knew his limitations, and one of his favorite sayings was that, “He has the merits of his defects.” Which meant that the subject was aware of his shortcomings. Cannon, more than most revolutionary leaders was cognizant of those areas where he was lacking. He once said, for instance, that he wanted Sylvia Bleeker to give a eulogy at his funeral. “She will tell the truth,” he said. Bleeker, a needle trades worker in New York, and long time CLA/SWP member, was a friend of Rose Karsner’s, Cannon’s wife, and would, on occasion, be dispatched to some saloon or Lower East Side restaurant to get Cannon home after a night of drinking. She knew his shortcomings well.

Balanced against his accomplishments in the 1930s, Cannon’s personal failings were hardly overwhelming, but they did exist. He had a tendency to retreat into the bottle when the political movement that was so crucial in his life flagged, as it did in the early 1930s, and younger comrades whom he had mentored throughout the 1920s, like Shachtman, Abern, and Glotzer, turned against him. He neglected his duties and responsibilities in the movement for a time, as it flagged, although *never* to the extent suggested by his adversaries. They exaggerated and blew things out of proportion, and themselves were guilty of behaviors arguably as problematic.

Cannon also had to constantly shed his impatience with factional opponents, reaching back to tendencies engrained in the Stalinist school of bureaucratization that was the American CP in the mid-to-late 1920s. Trotsky would routinely admonish Cannon to let the differences between majorities and minorities in the dissident communist movement run their course, in debate and open discussion, rather than resolve them through the exercise of organizational power. Majorities and their leadership, Trotsky stressed, owed minorities more leeway than they were likely to give those exercising majority authority.

Cannon’s great strength in helping to found both the Workers (Communist) Party in the very early 1920s and the Communist League of America, Opposition, in the late 1920s, was that, as his one-time comrade in the CP, Alexander Bittelman, once said, he functioned like a mechanic, moving throughout a factory, maintaining, oiling, and reviving the apparatus of production. Cannon did this with the variegated personnel of the revolutionary movement, bringing together various human components of the left, situating them amongst the larger body in ways that led to enhancing their respective contributions. Cannon was an architect of movements, an organizer of organizers, a party builder, mentoring the young, and solidifying more senior cadre. This was a great strength, and Cannon continued to function in this way in various endeavors of the 1930s.

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On occasion, however, he faltered. By the 1930s, after decades devoted to building the revolutionary movement, Cannon perhaps lost patience with some older comrades, in whom he placed great faith that they would function, as he did, in the best interests of the movement. But he was perhaps too insistent that once a comrade reached a certain level of experience in the movement, they should stand on their own, and come to the right conclusions. If they resisted coming to such conclusions, Cannon was perhaps less than able to offer them the comradely guidance they might well have benefitted from. There was a bit of this in Cannon's response to personalized attacks on him in the early 1930s by Shachtman, Glotzer, Abern, and Maurice Spector. That said, this quartet gave as good as they got. The same could be said of the split of Hugo Oehler and Tom Stamm from Cannon later in the 1930s, over the question of entry into the Socialist Party. Again, this duo and those they attracted to them in their attack on what they considered the liquidationism of entry, violated discipline, behaved in a reckless and irresponsible manner, and conducted themselves in ways that certainly warranted expulsion from the body Cannon then headed, the Workers Party. That said, Oehler and Stamm were dedicated revolutionists, with a long history of functioning as Cannon's trusted organizers, people whom he came to rely on in difficult situations and could be counted on to embrace left-wing stands. Might not Cannon have attempted to appease them somewhat as the decision to enter the SP was made, draw them back into the revolutionary fold? Cannon, however, at a certain point had had enough, and the split was irrevocable, as it had been between Cannon's oldest friend in the CP, Bill Dunne, and himself in 1928. Cannon long harbored regrets that he had been unable to win Dunne to his positions at the end of the 1920s, and blamed himself for this failure. There was something of that, as well, in his reflections on his break from Oehler and Stamm in the mid-1930s, for he had great regard for both individuals.

**"When the Trotskyists secured a foothold in the early UAW, and Homer Martin, a right-winger who assumed the Presidency of the auto workers, battled the CP, Cannon operatives in the union like Bert Cochran, tended to be too uncritical of Martin. It was too easy, given the machinations of the CP and their fellow travelers inside the**

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**UAW, to want to strike blow after blow against the Stalinists. The enemy of their enemy, became, in some ways, too much the Trotskyists' friend. But aligning with Martin to do this was inevitably going to end badly, as it did."**

A final shortcoming related to Stalinism. The revolutionary Left Opposition was always threading a political needle when it came to Stalinism. It had to drive its political message in a principled passage through the eye of a needle that separated undue hatred and dismissal of Stalinism (Stalinophobia) and the danger of taking an opportunistic path in reacting to Stalinist elements in the labor movement. What had to be avoided, in the trade unions, for instance, was pandering to the instinctual anti-communism of a mainstream officialdom, accepting or acquiescing to elements of their program in order to curry favor with them in legitimate struggles against the mistaken practice of the Communist Party. For the most part, Cannon pursued such a principled course. But on occasion, especially when confronted by slanderous attack and the worst (and exceedingly vile) behavior and positions put forward by the CP, its leaders, and even, sometimes its rank and file, Cannon faltered. He actually endorsed suing the CP in the bourgeois courts, for instance, when the CP alleged that the murder of a non-revolutionary trade unionist who worked with the Minneapolis Trotskyist teamster leaders in the late 1930s was a consequence of the Trotskyists facilitating the entry of gangsters into the Drivers' Union. This was of course a vicious lie, and much evidence existed to repudiate it, but Cannon should not, along with all the rest of the SWP's leadership, have opted for a libel case. He should have pursued an open discussion and debate of the issue, exposing Stalinist falsifications and the embittered irrationality that drove such misleading accusations. When the Trotskyists secured a foothold in the early UAW, and Homer Martin, a right-winger who assumed the Presidency of the auto workers, battled the CP, Cannon operatives in the union like Bert Cochran, tended to be too uncritical of Martin. It was too easy, given the machinations of the CP and their fellow travelers inside the UAW, to want to strike blow after blow against the Stalinists. The enemy of their enemy, became, in some ways, too much the Trotskyists' friend. But aligning with Martin to do this was inevitably going to end badly, as it did. Cannon might even drift into Stalinophobic statements that the Stalinists in the UAW were a greater

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danger to the auto workers than the bosses. This hyperbole was unfortunate, a political step backwards. Given the ugliness of Stalinist practices in the unions and elsewhere, which most labor historians slide over, whitewashing a lot of dirty behavior, Cannon's unfortunate drift into Stalinophobia is understandable. We must not forget that this was a period as well that, in spite of the Popular Front's class collaborationist unity with progressive bourgeois elements and all others on the social-democratic, reformist left, Trotskyists were still demonized by the CP. The Moscow Trials, at their height with the coming of the Popular Front, claimed Trotsky himself had collaborated with fascists and capitalists to sabotage the Soviet Union, and that Trotskyists were responsible for terroristic acts against the workers' state. Stalinism was murdering left-wing dissidents in Europe, including in Spain, where the Trotskyist-inflected POUM and anarchist battalions fighting Franco were being sabotaged by Comintern agents. Cannon knew all this and had experienced Stalinist gangsterism, thuggery, and personalized, calumnious attack. Throughout all of this he often maintained a principled position on the place of the Communist Party, but he could, and did, occasionally slip.

**You conclude this volume with these words "… James P. Cannon helped transform the development of the American left, leaving a militant, revolutionary footprint on the landscape of class relations in the world's most powerful capitalist nation" (943). What key lessons can today's activists draw from Cannon?**

The starting point for any answer to this question is an assessment of where the left – a revolutionary left — is at right now, within the current conjuncture. Many see the left as vibrant, a forceful presence in the politics of our time. Much, however, depends on what we regard as left. I agree that in our time there is broader acceptance of a range of important diversity issues that are certainly necessarily included in any assessment of left-wing politics than there has been in the past. Certainly anti-racism is more forceful in our times than it has been in previous times. Basic commitments to women's equality and feminism, advocacy for the disabled, and acceptance of and defense of the rights of various components of the LBGTQ2s+ communities are now very much in the public eye, and gaining support among the general population and within mainstream political culture in ways that were simply unimaginable in the 1930s or even the 1960s. This is all to the good.

It is questionable, however, as to how much the widespread politics of diversity, is aligned with a politics that seeks fundamental socio-economic transformation, the replacement of capitalist with socialism.  A revolutionary left that seeks a root-and-

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ranch repudiation of capitalism, and the establishment of socialism, in spite of the growth of bodies like the Democratic Socialists of America, seems to me weaker than at any point in United States history, reaching back at least 150 years. And the labor movement, while it is indeed showing signs of revival, and is the undeniable vehicle of defense of working-class interests, has suffered blow after blow in the last 50 years, losing much of the ground it secured through struggle in the course of the 1930s and 1940s. The weakening of the trade unions and the evisceration of the revolutionary left have been the decisive developments of the neoliberal era of the last half century.

Rebuilding the labor movement and the left is the necessary political task of our present, and that will not be done without an infusion of energy into movements and mobilizations that are unambiguously anti-capitalist. Capitalism, to my way of thinking, must be transcended if working-class exploitation is to be brought to an end *and* a host of varied oppressions, associated with colonialism, imperialism, racism, and the bigotry directed against so many components of modern society, are to be dismantled and defeated.

Even if Cannon did not speak in the idiom of our present (he was the product of a Victorian era, after all), his project was to bring capitalism to its knees and build a socialist society. His embrace of revolutionary socialism, from a young age, encompassed the ending of all oppressions, including, of course, the decisively important material marker of social hierarchy, class. Cannon's anti-capitalist revolutionary politics must be revived if the left and its organized presence in the world of the 21st century, including within the trade unions and an array of social movements, is to pose a meaningful challenge to entrenched authority and its varied sources of power.

We can appreciate that this kind of revolutionary left has been on a downward slide for decades. Organizations and movements of the left that emerged out of the 1960s and that occupied a significant place in the alternative political universe of the 1970s have largely been either repressed by the state – Black Panthers & American Indian Movement, for instance – or imploded, their internal fragmentation encouraged and accelerated by that same apparatus of coercive suppression. The times do not look good for the kind of revolutionary left Cannon dedicated his life to building, in part because the Stalinism that he lived through, broke from, and abhorred, has done so much to discredit the revolutionary socialist project within which it grew and which it came to undermine and eventually destroy within specific geographical boundaries.

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If our times look inauspicious for the revival of the revolutionary left, imagine how they looked to Cannon in 1928. When he embarked on creating an alternative to a powerful Communist International that symbolized so much positive possibility to peoples of the world gravitating, amidst capitalist collapse, to the need to confront exploitation and oppression and establish societies whose guiding light was not the profit motive, the task before Cannon must have appeared especially daunting.

Yet with a small but committed group of like-minded men and women, Cannon built a political organization that intervened in the American class struggle in an amazingly effective way. That same group battled an entrenched Stalinist left-wing that outstripped it in size and historic significance at the same time as they aimed their sights at a political monolith, United States capitalism, that appeared to be marching to global hegemony. War and fascism threatened, racist segregation still governed much of the social relations of everyday life in the United States. Yet into this context, Cannon and the American Trotskyists jumped, exercising influence in trade unions, winning some (by no means all) progressive intellectuals to their banner, forcing the recognition that a society many on the left gravitated to instinctually had conducted show trails that were nothing less than a judicial obscenity, exposing their murderous outcomes as resting on nothing less than slander and falsehood. In the process a workers' revolutionary party, the Socialist Workers Party, was formed, occupying the status as the flagship organization in a new revolutionary International. All of this took place amidst arguably the longest and most intense capitalist crisis in the history of modern political economy.

During the depths of this Great Depression, more and more people understood that capitalism was no longer a progressive force, pushing societies forward. As the crisis dragged on, some lost hope and became immobilized, but a militant minority came to understand that it must fight back. Today, those militant minorities tend to be hived off into their particularistic political silos. Moreover, capitalist crisis tends to be more mercurial and much more insidious in its continuities than was the Great Depression. We have witnessed, over the course of the last half century, a commonplace routinizing of capitalist crisis that manifests itself in an almost permanent state of crisis, so normalized that the crisis becomes identifiable only as fresh moments of intensification push people to the brink: currency breakdowns; financial meltdowns; pandemic panics. Capitalism, once a progressive force bringing a new mode of production and its class forces into being out of the ossified structures of an outmoded feudalistic, aristocratic order, is now clearly a destructive force. Its rapacious accumulative appetites have brought the planet closer and

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closer to an apocalyptic end; its destruction of biodiversity has unleashed inter-species, globally spread, viral pandemics. The reconfiguration of the transnational political economy threatens war and destabilizes material life throughout the world. Famine, drought, floods, pestilence, and destruction abound, cutting swaths of catastrophe across both the already impoverished global South, where the devastation is most acute, and the more developed and somewhat insulated economies of western capitalism. Never have we needed more the generalized perspective of the revolutionary anti-capitalist left, yet never has the voice of such a left been weaker.

The key lesson that Cannon's history of the 1930s imparts to today's revolutionaries is nothing less than the insistence that it can be done, that a revolutionary organization can be built, and that in building such a body, achievements can be realized. Capitalism is now an undeniably destructive brake on humanity's advance, even survival. A revolutionary opposition is vitally necessary, now more so than ever. Cannon's history is a reminder that this kind of fighting, anti-capitalist political organization can be established and nurtured, even in the worst of times, and that it can achieve tangible, immediate effect. More than ever the rallying cry of "Socialism or barbarism," should be ringing in our ears. Cannon's history provides us with a glimpse of how that ringing can translate into actions and accomplishments.

## Author

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