

Morning Panel Discussion, WLHS 26th Annual Conference, April 28, 2007

Labor's foreign policy pluses, minuses discussed

(This is a more complete summary of the morning session of the annual conference, compiled from audio tapes by Ken Germanson advoken@sbcglobal.net.)

If there was any doubt that labor and workers should not be involved in our nation's foreign policies it was dispelled after a day-long discussion at the 26th Annual Conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society in Madison on April 28.

More than 80 persons attended the annual event at the Union South on the Madison Campus, hearing of the history of our nation's foreign affairs from World War I to the present day. With the sons and daughters of working people being called upon to do most of the fighting on our nation's wars of the era, speaker after speaker told of the need of workers and their families to help bring their views into the nation's political discussions about war.

David Nack, a member of the UW School for Workers faculty and WLHS Board Member, went back to the Russian Revolution of 1917-1918, in which soldiers recruited mainly from Wisconsin and Michigan were sent into North Russia as the World War I was ending in the late summer of 1918 to battle the Bolshevik troops of the Communists. He called it a "forgotten war," in which the troops had no idea why they were there spending the winter freezing in North Russia.

"There was a role played here" by organized labor, he said. Samuel Gompers, the founder of the American Federation of Labor and its leader until his death in 1924, was deeply involved in the formation of U.S. foreign policy, Nack added. Noting that Woodrow Wilson had been elected to President as a Democrat with labor's support, he said that gave Gompers entry into the discussion.

Gompers, he said, had been a Socialist at the founding of the AF of L in 1886, but may have grown disillusioned with the "left" after Socialists successfully challenged him for the leadership in 1896, and he spent a year out of leadership, before returning.

He recalled the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, which was won by Japan, leading up to the first Russian Revolution of 1905, in which the Czar was forced to make some democratic concessions, such as the developing of a *duma* (or legislature). Already in 1905, Nack said, Gompers was concerned with the alternative leadership that may challenge the labor movement in creating social change. He raised warnings against the more dramatic revolutions that appeared to be popular throughout the world, as perhaps destroying the more peaceful evolution of the

There was a tension between the AF of L Leadership and these more radical, revolutionary actions, Nack said.

With the Russian Revolution, there was great debate as to how the United States would continue to have Russia continue to be able to battle, thus keeping the Eastern Front in place to challenge the German forces. Many U. S. capitalists sought to make deals with Bolsheviks, as a way to reap profits from the new Russian leaders.

Labor was saying something different, that there was a need to suppress the Bolsheviks Nack said. He noted Gompers was concerned about the effect that a Bolshevik success would have in causing similar uprisings among American workers. He said that labor's views endorsed the action of sending the troops to North Russia in 1918.

He drew a parallel between this North Russia action and the later U.S. ventures into Vietnam and Iraq, in which our troops are killed and maimed.

Nack cited the experiences of John R. Commons, the famous University of Wisconsin professor who in a sense was the founder of the study of labor history. In a 1934 biography, Commons related the story of his son, Jack, who was among those sent to fight in that frigid North Russian winter. Commons related that Jack enlisted, because he supported the War in 1918. He related that his son became mentally ill, based upon his experiences in

North Russia, and disappeared. It's an indication of how war affects people in many ways, Nack said.

There's been a change from World War I to the present day, in which the leadership now is opposing the entry into Iraq, he said.

Frank Emspak, also of the University of Wisconsin School for Workers, said that his family experienced the anti-Communist extremism that was rampant within the labor movement during the Cold War period after World War II. His father, Julius Emspak was a founder and secretary-treasurer of the United Electrical Workers union (UE) having been hired by General Electric in the 1920s. Most of his family worked at the Schenectady plant, and later Frank himself worked for 12 years for GE at the Lynn, Massachusetts, plant.

He said the union became a target of the anti-Communist crusade, during the purging of the union movement of many of the most liberal labor organizations, he said. It is most critical to what is happening today, Emspak said. "The basic framework that has directed the American labor movement was put in place essentially in the four or five years after World War II: the legal framework, the political framework and the internal organization."

One result, he said was the organized destruction of the left wing in the movement. He said that when he was hired at GE in 1976 he was the first person in some 20 years to be hired with a "left wing" background, because the company was so careful in its hiring practices. "The entire intellectual memory of those people taking on the company was lost because those people were fired," he said.

This happened in most industries, in the loss of a "tremendous resource in standing up to the company," he added. Emspak said these people were not all Communists, but were militant, committed trade unionists.

The second thing that happened was the destruction of a progressive trade union in the South, he said. Through labor's "Operation Dixie," organizers were paid to do away with the Food and To-

bacco Workers in North Carolina which had elected a Black woman Communist as president and the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers in Birmingham, AL, which had elected a black Communist as president as President of 17,000 integrated local.

Not only didn't the South get organized, but Operation Dixie helped to spell the end of a progress labor movement in the South, and that would have had a moderating effect upon fighting the racism of the 1950s, Emspak said.

The third effect was the separation of the labor movement from all of the progressive movements of the period of the 1950s and 1960s, he said, affecting efforts for a single payer health care system, the rights to equal education, etc. It's only been in last 10 to 15 years that labor has opened up to more progressive movements, he added.

What has been the longterm effect of these actions?

First, there are a lot of people who say "Don't bite the hand that feeds you," meaning the management, while others say: "We feed it." Emspak said that's the "fundamental division in the labor movement in 1946 and today."

Secondly, it meant labor surrendered itself to the Democratic Party, and labor has "no where to go." That was traded away in 1948 when labor's fundamental goal was to destroy the Progressive Party, he said.

Thirdly, labor isolated itself from progressive movements, and often were on the wrong side in equal rights issues, he said.

Emspak also cited Section 9 (h) of the Taft-Hartley Act which called for the non-Communist oath of officers of leadership. This was opposed by many on principle, particularly the UE, he said. The UAW under Walter Reuther used this rule to raid UE locals and others who stood up against the rule, Emspak said. The fundamental anti-Democratic aspect of the rule was that it took away the ability of workers to elect their own officers, he said.

It followed from that that labor generally supported the U.S. position in the Cold War, he added, and labor councils and locals found themselves forced

to decided whether to support the Cold War, NATO, etc. “If you didn’t do that your union was expelled,” Emspak said. Labor was frozen into these positions right through the Vietnam War, he said.

“Think about the South and the difference it would have made if the South had been organized on some sort of progressive basis,” he said.

Referring to his own family, Emspak said every one of our families got fired from the Schenectady, NY, for their progressive leadership in the union, he said. “The real affect on our family and others was this terrible destruction on humans and of a whole intellectual and political movement in our country,” Emspak concluded.

Susanna Rasmussen, the granddaughter of Darina Rasmussen, one of the founders of the Society, told of what happened when Darina was accused of being a Communist. She was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, where she risked being jailed for pleading the Fifth Amendment.

Her grandfather was born in Forest County, Wisconsin, in a family that once was privileged, but which became impoverished during the Depression. Even so he was able to attend the University of Wisconsin in hopes of becoming a doctor, when tuberculosis laid him low.

He was sent to the rehabilitation institution at Tomahawk, where, Rasmussen said he met “my lovely, auburn-haired grandmother fresh out of the UW School for Women Workers serving up dinner in the cafeteria while trying to organize the sanitarium’s employees.”

“I hear it was love at first sight,” she said. After marriage, the couple moved back to Forest County to farm, and “life was good,” until grandfather Rasmussen’s TB returned. He died shortly after in Madison, and Darina left the farm and moved to Cudahy to be close to her family. At first she worked for the County, but bus transportation was difficult, so she soon took a job at the more convenient office of UE Local 1111 at Allen-Bradley Co. as a secretary.

Rasmussen searched the FBI files to learn the question of whether Darina was a Communist, since she had been accused of being the fifth member of a Communist cell that met at the UE. She said the FBI documents she examined had sections whited-out as well as “lots of extraneous information.”

“They assumed that any Communist was anti-American,” she said. “Does this mean my grandmother was a threat to national security, that she was smuggling secrets to the Soviet Bolsheviks. I seriously doubt it. My grandparents were hard-working rural idealists. They believed in workers’ rights. I’m sure they did not consider themselves subservient to the Kremlin.”

Rasmussen referred to a Jan, 21, 1955 meeting that was to take place at UE1111 office in Milwaukee. At that time, Darina she was approached by two FBI agents and asked to become a labor spy for the FBI against the UE.

Darina was in an ideal spot to look at people entering the office, Rasmussen said, and the fact that she did sign up for the Communist Party in the 1940s could mean they were blackmailing her. “She was probably a key candidate to be an informer.” Darina did not take the bait to become an informant; yet, she felt threatened, perhaps the reason she went public with the claim that she had been approached, Rasmussen said.

In May 1955, she went to Washington to testify before HUAC, where the government claimed she was the “fifth member of a Communist cell that met at the UE1111 office.” Darina remained silent, refusing to answer the questions, likely to protect others.

Rasmussen said her study of the issue with her family told her that her family’s involvement with Communism was much more dynamic than she had perceived. “Their Communism was the result of loving books, appreciating religion and philosophy while making day-to-day decisions. . . They believed in the power of choice and the freedom of speech and the joy and blessings of life and when the government took away the ‘freedom of voice,’ my grandmother combated it with what she could: silence.”