

Radical Ideology vs. Ethnic Social Activities: The Finnish–Americans and the Communist Party of the United States, 1923–1932

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The peculiar history of the Finnish–American radical community is filled with ideological and organizational battles, as is the case with other Finnish immigrant groups. *One of the culminating points in the disputes among the radical Finnish–Americans was reached in the spring of 1930. At that time a message was sent from the headquarters of the Communist International in Moscow, regarding the Finnish fraction of the American Communist Party. The letter analyzed the special forms of activities of the Finnish fraction. On the one hand the Finns were given credit for good organizational ability, but on the other hand their activities were seen as proof of an inability to get rid of national limits and to assimilate into American society.¹ The message was that contacts with Americans should be established on a more solid basis. The letter states among other things that

Finnish workers must necessarily become a part of the revolutionary movement of the American working class. Americanization is for them the most important step in order to become real internationalists.²

However, it is obvious that the purpose of the Comintern was not to urge the Finnish immigrants to become a part of American capitalist society. The purpose was to prepare for the future American socialist society.³

The letter was an important link in a development that caused a large body of Finnish–American radicals to leave the Finnish fraction that had been affiliated with the American Communist Party. The change was connected with the problem of the content and ideology of the Finnish–American communist movement, the relationship between the concept of the "real American" radical movement and the ethnic-oriented

Finnish-American radicals. In this paper, the main course and background of this controversy is analyzed.

The organizational and cultural life of immigrant groups in the United States were affected by several factors. One group of factors derives from the old country, its traditions, folk culture, customs, social and economic as well as political structures. The other group of factors derives from the new country, the United States. The immigrants earned their living in the American economic system, they were influenced by the American political and social system. Thus we may generalize that the form of immigrant community and its functions was and is a mixture of differing views and influences. It is a new product, in which new ways of associational life emerge.⁴

There are several studies written about the history of the Finnish-American radical movements. These works include earlier ideologically oriented history-books as well as newer scholarly works which try to analyze the reasons why the Finns in America were so eagerly attracted to workers' societies, socialist societies, IWW-groups (the syndicalist-oriented Industrial Workers of the World), and after the First World War also to the communist movement. Important also was the leftist-minded cooperative movement, in which many Finnish-Americans made an invaluable contribution to American history.⁵

Considering the history of the Finnish-American community as a whole, the debate about "hall socialism" or "hall communism" among the radical Finns started quite early. It was primarily connected with the question of the social activities (which also included "entertainment") as part of the functioning of workers' societies. These latter societies attracted almost one-third of the 150,000 Finnish immigrants who lived in the United States after the First World War. Other central organizations for the immigrant Finns were the many churches, and at the turn of the century also the temperance societies. Anyway, the workers' societies, with their differing political views, gathered the workers of Finnish extraction in their halls and other meeting places.

After the founding of the Finnish Socialist Federation in 1906, the FSF, the activities were organized around the growing number of workers' socialist societies. In 1919, before the great ideological split caused by the birth of the communist movement, there were 225 member societies in the FSF with more than 10,000 active members. These societies included active theater groups, women's clubs, athletic clubs, sewing circles, agitation committees, etc. The geographical division of the existing societies reflects

the distribution of the Finnish population of North America in general—major centers were in the Midwestern states like Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin, but also in the east in New York and Massachusetts, and the West in Oregon, Washington, and California. Along with the socialist organizations there were a number of widely read Finnish-language newspapers, periodicals, and other publications.⁶

After the communist movement was born the majority of the FSF joined it following lengthy ideological battles. The Finns formed the largest ethnic group in the legal communist movement, the Workers' Party of America, until the beginning of the Bolshevization crisis of 1924–25, with more than 6,000 members of 40% of the total membership. The Bolshevization campaign ended in the expulsion or defection of several leading personalities of the Finnish fraction from the communist movement in 1925–31. Finally, the communists were defeated in the ranks of the wealthy and active Finnish-American cooperative movement, CCE (Central Cooperative Exchange), in the Midwest in April 1930.⁷

It was not easy to persuade the Finnish-American communists to accept the new organizational structure ordered by the Communist International in Moscow. The ethnic federations were abolished from the American party and new international cells were established. In this way, it was believed, contacts with American workers could be established. Less than two thousand Finns actually joined the cells.⁸ They did not want to give up their rich ethnic social and cultural activities. They preferred to operate on the old organizational and language basis.

One of the main reasons for the disagreements appears to have been the English language, the use of which immigrant Finns did not like. Because of the language difficulties in general the Finns have been prone to clannishness and inward-oriented activities. English was, of course, not a problem only for the Finns, for many other immigrants faced the same difficulties. This was recognized also by the American Communist Party and Comintern leaders?

At the time of the Bolshevization crisis Finnish resistance was so strong that help from Moscow was deemed necessary. The Comintern sent its emissary, a well known former Finnish communist leader, Yrjö Sirola, who in the 1910s had spent years in the United States, to settle the differences between the Finns and the American Communist Party. Largely due to the efforts of Sirola the Finns yielded and the Finnish organization ceased to function. The leading Finnish-American communist of the period was Henry Puro (originally John Wiita), who was the real organizer of the Bolshevization process among the Finns, and a member in the party Central

Executive Committee. Wiita describes in his memoirs the role of Sirola as that of a compromisebuilder. According to him it was Sirola who succeeded in making peace between the competing groups. It seems that Elis Sulkanen and Wiita were competing for the leadership of the Finnish radicals. Like Wiita, Sulkanen was an important federation official and newspaperman, who had mainly made his career in the Eastern states.¹⁰ Sulkanen was later in 1929 expelled with his closest supporters.

A new organization, the Finnish Workers' Federation (in Finnish *Suomalainen TyöväenJärjestö*), was born in the beginning of 1927. It was created after the leaders realized that about three-fourths of the Finnish members had been lost because of the Bolshevization process. "It served as the connecting link for Finnish-American radicals, and it was not directly under the control of the American Communist Party. However, the contacts were obvious, and it supported the party line ideologically, financially, etc. The members of the FWF could at the same time belong to the party cells, although everybody did not join them. The Communist Party also had an office, which organized the activities among the Finns. Actually, the system appeared to be about the same as at the time when the communist movement did not yet exist and the Finns comprised the largest language federation of the Socialist Party of America, or at the time when the Workers' Party had not yet been reorganized through Bolshevization.

However, a great number of Finnish-American communists were not happy after these organizational changes. More dissatisfaction had been caused by the interference of the American Communist Party headquarters and even the Cornintern. Both groups wanted to control the Finns, a most important element in the party because of their great number. Because of their continuing obstinate attitudes the Finns were accused of bourgeois, i.e. Social Democratic, leanings and tactics. Consequently, the Finnish-American communist ranks were repeatedly purged in 1928-31. It was the period when several leaders and rank-and-file members were expelled from the FWF and the party.¹² David Ahola interprets the Bolshevization process among the Finnish-Americans as an effort to lead them away from Social Democratic ideology and behavior.¹³

It seems that the opposition critical of the party and the Cornintern was concentrated for the most part in the Eastern states, particularly New York, and the town of Superior, Wisconsin, in the Midwest. It was in Superior that the newspaper *Työmies* was published. Its editors were influential in the Finnish-American radical circles, and in the reorganization process heresy was also found there. The same was the case with the Eastern Finnish newspaper *Eteenpäin*. The Finnish Workers' Society of Superior was one of the largest and most active branches and also one which strongly favoured the

"old fashioned" activities. In the course of the disputes it was expelled from the Finnish Federation.

The opposition, on the other hand, assailed the Finnish Federation for its dictatorial treatment of members. The critics contended that rank-and-file members had no say in deciding the internal affairs of the organization and that all the activity was directed from party headquarters. The opposition would have liked to preserve the Finnish character of the FWF, whereas the leadership unconditionally favored pursuing the more international line proclaimed in the slogan urging all the workers of the world to unite. The debates and quarrels were keenly followed and reported in the Finnish radical press. During the late 1920s the papers were overwhelmed with accusations and counterattacks, reports from the meetings, information on the decisions of the party organs and the Executive Committee of the Finnish Federation, and now and then notes on somebody's ideological errors, and finally expulsions. Also the study of the minute books of the workers' societies of this period reveal how heated the discussions were, and how eagerly people joined in them.¹⁴

At this point we have to remember that it was not only a question of ideology. An important element in the struggles was property: the economic control of Finnish halls, printing houses and machines, bookstores, libraries, as well as the cooperative stores was a very important factor.

Support of the opposition became so widespread that Moscow once again decided to interfere. Comintern headquarters was most interested in the role of the Finns in the American communist movement. This was due to their great numbers in the party membership, but another explanation is apparently the fact that both Sirola and Otto Wille Kuusinen, another red refugee from Finland after the Civil War of 1918, had important positions in Communist International affairs. Later Kuusinen rose to great fame in the Soviet leadership until his death in the 1960s. The Comintern used to write to Moscow foreign leading communists, especially in cases of ideological disputes. Thus, John Wiita with others in their turn had invitations to visit Moscow.

The Comintern decided to send advisers to solve the problems in America. This time, it was the turn of Kullervo Manner, the former head of the unsuccessful red revolutionary government in Finland in 1918, who was accompanied by a women delegate, A. Morton. Manner mainly operated on the Canadian side dealing with the same type of organizational problems as those which were faced in the United States.

A. Morton turned out to be Aino Kuusinen, the ex-wife of O. W. Kuusinen. Aino Kuusinen established her position in the Finnish-American communist movement in the years 1930-1933. She gained so strong a

position that she even became the real leader of the federation. In achieving such a position she was greatly helped by her ex-husband's fame in international communist circles. Because of this she was able to carry out a number of organizational changes in the Finnish Workers' Federation.¹⁵

Further spread of opposition was therefore checked. It is likely that the membership of the FWF reached its highpoint of 9,000–10,000 in 1932. Thereafter a continuing slowdown of activities and decrease in the membership began, at the same time as the Communist Party enjoyed broader support during the Depression decade. The FWF had dropped to 4,500 members on the eve of the Second world War.¹⁶

The short revival of communist sympathy among the Finns appears again to be based on "hall communism"—type activities. The meetings, libraries, sports clubs, theater groups, women's circles, etc. flourished and gathered people from the surrounding Finnish community. However, with the exodus of some 6,000 people of Finnish extraction from the depression-hit United States and Canada to Soviet Karelia in the early 1930s to build a "real workers' republic," as Reino Kero notes in his study, difficulties arose.¹⁷

Also, the struggles on the cooperative front analyzed below, had an effect of lowering the Finnish membership of the communist group. One of the apparent reasons for this was the general inability—with few exceptions—to attract the younger generation to the radical movements. The Finnish-American communist movement was overwhelmingly made up of immigrants who had arrived before the First World War, since immigration from Finland to the United States was actually stopped after the adoption of strict quotas in the early 1920s. Thus the Finnish-American communist movement was composed of aging radicals with modest English language skills and with few opportunities to make personal contact with others outside the Finnish ethnic group.¹⁸

During the early 1930s, however, there were problems on the cooperative front, which greatly endangered the future of the communist movement in America. A break-up of the Finnish cooperative movement in the Midwest had been going on for some time because of disagreement about the tasks of the cooperatives in general. Great confusion was caused in July 1929 by the demand for a "loan" of 5,000 U.S. dollars to the Communist Party by its leaders William Z. Foster and Max Bedacht. Thereafter the CCE was repeatedly asked to supply money for communist activities. The central figure among the radical Finns and party liners at the time was Henry Puro (alias John Wiita).¹⁹

Especially at the conference of the CCE in the spring of 1930, it became clear that the radicals were a minority in the movement in the Midwest. The CCE adopted moderate political views, that is, they refused to turn the CCE

into a weapon of political engagement as the extremists urged. The radicals departed and formed a cooperative central organization of their own. It remained, however, considerably weaker than the CCE.²⁰ The CCE membership originally included both many extreme radicals, people more or less sympathetic to the left, and also people with little or no political interest. From now on, the CCE concentrated mainly on the effort to promote the consumers' cooperative movement in the Midwest.

In addition to actual trading business, the activities of the CCE may be defined as a form of extended "hall" activities. It was typical that many cooperative societies organized different kinds of social meetings, celebrations, educational courses, children's summer camps, etc. These activities were of the same type as those in general connected with the earlier socialist societies and workers' clubs as well as communist halls. The people in the cooperative societies were in many cases the same as those who had participated in the radical Finnish-American societies. Thus, it is no wonder that the activities in the cooperative stores and societies on the one hand and in the workers' societies on the other hand resembled each other quite a lot.

Before the ideological battles began the CCE had about 20,000 members in one hundred member societies or stores. By 1941 the CCW (a new name, Central Cooperative Wholesale, adopted after the crisis) had grown to a phenomenal membership of 50,000 with 126 member societies. Now, the ethnic basis had been changed so that one-third were non-Finns? So it seems that the cooperatives were doing what the Communist Party had been unable to do about organizing the Finns. The CCW was able to raise the membership by concentrating on the problems of everyday life.

Thus, the general failure of the Comintern tactics in the period 1928–33, "the Third Period," resulted in continuous tactical and ideological battles and in the loss of membership. Comintern tactics were supposed to swing the workers to the left and to counter-attack capitalism.²² When this failed in America, the new tactics of the Popular Front were tested. However, the results were no better among the immigrant Finns. This appears to have been due largely to the actual composition of the communist group—it included both real committed communists and sympathizers who easily dropped out.²³

In conclusion, it seems that social activities played a crucial role in the history of the radical Finns in America. According to orders from the Comintern the communists tried to reformulate their activities, everyday tactics, and ideology. They failed, because they underestimated the role of

ethnic features and activities. The temporary growth occurred in communist circles was to a considerable degree based on halls and social activities. Ironically enough, this was true again after the period following the Second World War, when Finn halls, Finnish newspapers, and social get-togethers resumed a prominent place for Finns in the communist movement. Although a few younger Finns held notable positions in the party leadership (e.g. Gus Hall, the party general secretary), the majority became acculturated into the mainstream of American life and stayed out of leftist politics.

The reasons for the failure of American communism in general have been discussed by many historians and social scientists with reference to economic, social, political, and ideological factors.²⁴ It appears to be a fact that Finnish-Americans, too, were apt to accommodate themselves to the American system, its practices and beliefs, for practical reasons, mainly. However, the bonds within the Finnish subgroup appear to have been very strong. Traditions, personal contacts, linguistic factors, etc. played a very important role. Thus, when the Comintern tried to solve American problems by decisions that actually ignored the subgroup systems, its policies failed. The acculturation process analyzed here do confirm the conclusions presented by other scholars that the inner social and cultural systems of the immigrant groups are very persistent.²⁵

NOTES

- * This article is based on a presentation given at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington, D.C., Dec. 29, 1987.
- 1. See, *Taistelu oikeistovaaraavastaan: Kominternin opetuksia amerikkansuomalaiselle tyovaelle* (The Comintern on the Right-Wing Danger among the Finnish-Americans) (Superior, WI, n.d.), p. 18.
- 2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 3. Auvo Kostianinen, "For or against Americanization? The Case of the Finnish Immigrant Radicals," in *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, Ed. Dirk Hoerder (Urbana, Ill, 1983), p. 264.
- 4. On the problems of assimilation and acculturation, see, e.g. Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life. The Role of Race, Religion, and National*

- Origins (New York, 1964), pp. 60–83. See also, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, Ed. Stephen Thernstrom *et al.*, 2nd printing (Cambridge, Mass., 1981): "American Identity and Americanization," pp. 31–58 and "Assimilation and Pluralism," pp. 150–160.
5. Among the most important works are Paul George Hummasti, *Finnish Radicals in Astoria, Oregon, 1904–1940: A Study in Immigrant Socialism* (Ph. D. thesis, University of Oregon, June 1975) and Michael Gary Karni, *Yhteishyvä, - or for the Common Good: Finnish Radicalism in the Western Great Lakes Region, 1900–1940* (Ph. D. thesis, University of Minnesota, Dec. 1975).
 6. Bibliographical information on labor newspapers and periodicals, see Auvo Kostiainen, "Finns," in *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s–1970s. An Annotated Bibliography, Vol. 1: Immigrants from Northern Europe*, Ed. Dirk Hoerder, Ass. Ed. Christiane Harzig. *Bibliographies and indexes in American History*, No. 4 (New York, 1987), pp. 199–258.
 7. See, e.g., Michael Karni, "Struggle on the cooperative front: The separation of Central Cooperative Wholesale from communism, 1929–30," in *The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives*, Eds. Karni, Kaupps, and Ollila (Vammala, 1975), pp. 186–201. For information on the geographical divisions, numbers of stores, etc., see e.g. Arnold Alanen, "The Development and Distribution of Finnish Consumers' Cooperatives in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, 1903–1973," in *ibid.*, pp. 103–129.
 8. See David John Ahola, *Finnish–Americans and International Communism (A Study of Finnish–American Communism from Bolshevization to the Demise of the Third International)* (Ph.D. thesis, Syracuse University, May 1980), pp. 53–55.
 9. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.
 10. See John Wiita's memoirs at the Department of History, University of Turku, Finland, esp. pp. 90–91.
 11. Cf. Ahola, *Finnish–Americans and International Communism*, 1980, pp. 113–116.
 12. Among the leaders purged were the notable newspapermen and federation officials Elis Sulkanen, Henry Askeli, Wilho Boman, Axel Öhrn and the cooperative leader William Marttila. Also, a number of FWF branches were expelled. The most important of them was that of Superior, WI, which was expelled in January 1930.
 13. Ahola, *Finnish–Americans and International Communism*, 1980, pp. 28–75.
 14. See e.g. the minute books of the Superior Finnish Labor Branch for 1925–32, the papers of Walter Salmi, at the Department of History, University of Turku, TYYH/S/a/10/XVII, XXIV, and the papers of Finnish Allouez, WI Labor Society papers for the years 1925–32, Signe Koskinen papers, at the Department of History, University of Turku, TYYH/S/a/129/II–III.
 15. See Auvo Kostiainen, "Aino Kuusinen Kominternin asiamiehenä Amerikassa," (Aino Kuusinen as a Comintern Agent in America), in *Turun Historiallinen Arkisto*, 30 (Vammala, 1975), pp. 234–256. Ahola believes, how-

- ever, that Aino Kuusinen actually was fully authorized agent of the Comintern, which seems doubtful. See Ahola, *Finnish-Americans and International Communism*, 1980, p. 199.
16. Information based on Onni Kaartinen, an important official of the Communist Party at the time, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 227–230.
 17. See Reino Kero, "Neuvosto-Karjalaa rakentamassa. Pohjois-Amerikansuomalaiset tekniikan tuojina 1930-luvun Neuvosto-karjalassa," in *Historiallisia tutkimuksia*, 122 (Ekenas, 1983).
 18. On the role of the Finns in the American Workers' Party, see Auvo Kostainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism. A Study in Ethnic Radicalism, 1917-1924*, *Annales Universitatis Turkuensis*, Ser. B, Part 147 (Turku, 1978), esp. pp. 154–158.
 19. See Karni, *Struggle*, 1975, which deals with the problems thoroughly.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 196–7.
 21. *Ibid.*, pp. 200.
 22. See e.g. Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, with the assistance of Julius Jacobson, *The American Communist Party. A Critical History*, 2nd printing (New York, 1962), esp. pp. 178–197.
 23. Cf. Ahola, *Finnish-Americans and International Communism*, 1980, p. 272.
 24. Cf. Michael Parenti, "Ethnic Politics and the Persistence of Ethnic Identification," *American Political Science Review*, vol. LXI, No. 3 (Sept. 1967), esp. pp. 719–724.