Fred Fine  
Narrator  

Carl Ross  
Interviewer  

February 7, 1988  
Palm Springs, California  

FF: What you've just said, you have an attic with audibility, cause I could barely hear it and I don't think you heard it.

CR: This is an interview with Fred Fine of Chicago on February 2nd, 1988 in Palm Springs, California. The interviewer is Carl Ross for the Minnesota Radicalism Project.

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END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE  

TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO  

CR: ...I want to come back to this question of the Farmer Labor movement years since we've been talking around it. Do you have a feeling about the relationship between the Communist Party and the Farmer Labor movement and the Benson administration, you were there during the heyday of left Farmer Laborism.

FF: My recollections suggest that the Floyd B. Olson and Benson administrations and the policies that they represented and pursued and I want to parenthetically say though in my mind there was some, that some distinction has to be made between the, not so much program, but methodology and tactics of Floyd B. Olson and Benson. I'll come back to this parenthetical remark later. But the Communist organization in Minnesota and the National Committee of the Communist Party thought this was one of the high water marks of the period that we are talking about. Here we had...
the unemployment, the Workers Alliance, the Hunger Marches which over the country at least involved literally millions. I myself participated in many hunger marches and saw the size and scope and broad representative character of the Workers Alliance. Even the veterans were in a fairly large degree being organized during this period with the Communists playing some role in it, for reasons that are just, have no really great political weight, it was just that a young person interested in what was happening, I went to Washington and was present when the General Douglas MacArthur cleared the Anacostia Flats and I do remember distinctly that there were Minnesota veterans encamped on the Minnesota...on the Anacostia Flats. And then came the organization of the CIO, again as luck would have it I was at the 1935 and 1936 conventions of the AF of L at which the CIO was born in Tampa, Florida and Atlantic City, I was representing at that time from Chicago what was called by the more powerful craft trade unions as a one lung local, a federal labor local out of Chicago, and was part of the small Communist caucus that functioned in these two national conventions and so in a real sense I was part of and had my finger on the pulse of this whole total development. Think of it, the veterans, the unemployed, the organization of the mass production and basic industries, the existence of the American Youth Congress, the flourishing among the artists and cultural workers of, as organized into projects by the WPA but in civilian life to speak by the John Reed Clubs and the influence of the Masses and New Masses. There was a great upsurge and radicalization taking place in our country. But there was no unique political expression of it except that within the New Deal which was very much under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party in which the Communists played relatively negligible role. Here was Minnesota with a Farmer Labor Party that in, which was in the same time part of the whole New Deal political development and this Farmer Labor Party in the eyes of the Communists was a political, the highest political expression of what was happening within the country as I have described and they sensed perhaps the most advanced, almost shock troops as seen by the Communists of the New Deal political development. And that is one reason why people like Clarence Hathaway and others, not only because of his original ties in Minnesota, why Minnesota received a lot of attention from the National Committee of the Communist Party. And within Minnesota, after this long-winded introduction but I think appropriate, the Communist Party had high on its agenda constantly its involvement in whatever it could find with the Farmer Labor Party itself. I know that when Clarence Hathaway would come to Minnesota, he was able on occasion to meet with Floyd B. Olson and certainly with Benson thereafter. I know that we had relationships of a fraternal nature with non-communists but progressive leaders of the Farmer Labor Party like Orville Olson and John Jacobson and other people within the Farmer Labor Party, Roger Rutcheck who was one of the main advisors to Elmer Benson and a host of other people like that and the Johnny Bernard campaign for Congress which came out of that more progressive wing of the Farmer Labor Party so that yes the Communist Party was extremely active member for member and committee for committee as members of the Farmer Labor Party and also as an outside influence that was trying to, that would meet and caucus or faction form to try and influence the policies of the Farmer Labor Party. Of course as you know, Carl, the Communist Party has always suffered from a near fatal disease which is that whenever it becomes active into something it begins to try and make it over into its own image and I think that these two things were at war within the Communist Party. On one had a desire to end its own sectarianism and to be part of these exciting mainstream developments that were a product of the increasing radicalization of American workers and farmers and youth and so on and at the same time its sectarian habit of instead of being refreshed by this experience and becoming more indigenous to the scene and more a part of this total development while in flexible and skillful ways preventing the disintegration of this
progressive and radicalized development we tended to force policies wherever we had more influence in directions where we were losing contact with the natural base for the Farmer Labor Party and I would say that we contributed to the defeat of Benson out of the best of our intentions. I think however we should also recognize that in the New Deal as a whole a major struggle was going on between, for lack of a better expression the more progressive tendencies in the New Deal and those that were more orthodox in their policies and convictions as to what the Democratic Party itself ought to be and the Farmer Labor Party being within the Democratic Party in a certain sense though still unique and independently...uniquely independent of it, could not be expected to be free of what was taking place within the New Deal and the Democratic Party as a whole and as we begin to get towards '39 and the outbreak of war, World War II, and the struggle that was taking place within the Democratic Party as to what should be the official policies of government towards Hitlerism and the Hitler offensive, all of this was also mirrored and reflected and had to have some consequences within the Farmer Labor Party. And I don't think that the communists were the most skillful or the, in helping navigate that turbulent complex struggle that was going on in the nation at large and in the Democratic Party itself. I think the Communists were also still later...being effected by the Soviet Union's policies towards the, how to contain and turn Hitler away from attacking the Soviet Union and I think that the Soviet German Pact which finally crowned this whole period had its repercussions in the Communist Party and in turn would be reflected in the policies that the Communists as individuals or as organized members of the communist movement would bring into the mass movements and wherever they were active. Now I don't remember, I would have to do specific, I would have to take more time and reflect more and look at things to try and make clear demarcations, but as you know historically there are no rigid periods, there's an ebb and flow. What do you think? About this.

CR: Hm?

FF: What do you think about this?

CR: Well, I [unclear]...

FF: See, the CIO leadership...now we're, let's talk now about '37-38-39. '38-39, the John L. Lewises and Sidney Hillmans were not as happy about the involvement of the communists in their organizing drive, were beginning to be concerned in more active ways.

CR: Do you think these tensions were already there in 1938 let's say when we're talking about the approaching 1938 elections.

FF: Right, I think they were beginning to be there, because communists were being forced into the background in many of these unions and many places the communists themselves on their own initiative would step back, in some cases they were removed from their posts, this was a very complex period of interaction and influences and countervailing influences of the most, one has to be careful not to oversimplify and put things into blacks and whites.

CR: The degree of unity in the Minnesota labor movement, the AF of L and CIO in the '38 campaign was not as great for instance as the general popular support that Benson got in his election.
FF: I agree with that.

CR: I think this, this is in part traceable to the issues that were put [unclear] and historians in Minnesota who have been preoccupied a lot with Farmer Labor history are not particularly known for their attempts to relate these questions to particular social, political issues. They're much more likely to answer them in more popular terms of the communists were dominating the situation or overreaching their, themselves trying to determine the course of events rather than allowing the broader courses, the broader coalitions to determine it. There were some changes in the politics or in the issues concerned, I think more substantially there were growing differences about tactics. The issue of Spain was a significant one causing differentiations. The New Deal of course always was wobbly on that issue and Roosevelt very reluctantly allowed himself to be pushed in the direction of supporting the Spanish Republic. The communists [unclear] in the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party however were pushing beyond the New Deal position. To some extent the [unclear] failed to understand the nature of Minnesota Farmer Laborism, what it came out of, what its platform was insofar as it had one, what kind of ideology it represented and examine the, this in relation to what was the political line that the left put forward.

FF: I may be wrong, but I always felt that Floyd B. Olson was a more natural outgrowth of what preceded in the upward middle western populist history of the United States.

CR: Olson seemed to be representative of that indigenous Midwest regional agrarian labor populist Farmer Labor...

FF: That's what I, what attempted to say...

CR: ...political upsurge, it goes back much farther and...

FF: Well Benson to me seemed to...

CR: ...and considerably more tactical abilities to deal with the problem, to form coalitions [unclear] on that basis...

FF: And a fine orator and a great personality all combined. On the other hand, Benson, who I think in every respect was as honest and as committed as Olson was not only a less colorful personality but also now the product of a consolidation and the stabilization of a Party so to speak with all of the strengths and weaknesses that come with the maturation of a political process, and functioning also more independent in a sense but at the same time more a part and more consciously a part of the Democratic Party and the New Deal and more also subject to the organized influences and countervailing influences of other political tendencies that were in existence and sometimes at war within this more stabilized, more consolidated, more orthodox political organization that it became out of which could grow a Hubert Humphrey and the people that finally developed the transition into the Democratic Farmer Labor Party and ultimately into the Democratic Party.

CR: Yeah, all the evidence exists that, indicate that first of all Benson personified this more progressive Farmer Laborism, [unclear], he had lost some of the base that he had when he came into office. If there is any criticism to be made of Benson it usually, properly so, is that he was so principled, so morally upright that he didn't know the art of compromise.
FF: Great rigidity, and the communists I think strengthened that tendency.

CR: Right. At this point there was a serious split in the ranks of the Farmer Labor movement represented by Hjalmar Peterson's kind of personal ambitions and political maneuverings which already had moved in the direction of an alliance with the isolationists. It was Peterson by the way who began to open up the attack on the Roger Rudcheck's and the Abe Harrises and others...

FF: See, Hjalmar Peterson was a name that completely escapes...

CR: ...[unclear] seduced the anti-Semitic element into politics.

FF: Hjalmar Peterson is a name that I should have easily recalled, didn't, but the moment you've mentioned a whole torrent of recollection has been opened up.

CR: Right. The point here of course is not that Peterson destroyed the Farmer Labor movement but as it turned out he provided the Republicans with some of the decisive weapons. How did anti-Semitism become in Minnesota such a major political issue that it could defeat a governor? [unclear] the fastness of the degree of the defeat of the governor, it's a good and interesting question.

FF: I really...it's a...

CR: ...and one of the first things we began to find in the archives and libraries of Minnesota Historical Society, we began to look into those in the last three or four months, anti-Semitic literature circulating around Minnesota since before the Bolshevik Revolution. We found the Protocols of Zion in the Society files, what brought them to Minnesota, where they came from, who fostered this over the years is not yet clear to us, but in the fall of 1938 between Hjalmar Peterson's Farmer Laborism and Stassen's Republicanism, it became a major political tool and engineering to defeat of Benson.

FF: I cannot trace the roots or explain this phenomena, I can only say that I think while I was there Hitlerism was having an effect in the United States and in Minnesota in many ways, one of them was to strengthen anti-Semitic tendencies. There was a large population, a population of German descent in Minnesota and there was travel between Germany and the United States which could have aggravated the early history that you mention of Protocols of Zion and ancient anti-Semitic tendencies. I remember again a personal small anecdote, I ran for the public office of Park Board Commissioner while I was there and if my memory serves right, I received about 10,000 which we thought was fair considering that I ran as avowed Communist and I remember our saying to be an avowed Communist and Jewish in addition, well that's a fair vote and I was reminded by a number of people that just because I ran, because my name was Fine did not mean that the voters necessarily thought I was Jewish, that there was somebody in the Cooperative Wholesale who was Scandinavian with the name of Fine, that there was a state Senator in one of the Dakotas with the name of Fine who was also Scandinavian and that we couldn't assume what we assumed. It'd be interesting if you can find some of the original literature that was issued when the Communist Party put up some of its own candidates. I think it was on a non-partisan ticket for local office in Minneapolis, there was the, people ran for the Library Board, for the Park Commission.
CR: Was that the same campaign that Nellie Stone was elected to the Library Board?

FF: I think so but I'm not absolutely sure.

CR: She was the first black to be elected to any public office in the state of Minnesota. What did you think of the difference in the style of leadership of Nat Ross and Carl Winter, do you have any observation about that?

FF: Because I knew Carl Winter longer, he was also the District Organizer of the Communist Party in Michigan for part of the time that I was there, and I knew Helen Winter's father, Alfred Wattenknecht with whom I worked in Chicago for many years.

CR: You know that campaign you were referring to may have been the campaign where Carl Winter ran for Library Board before...

FF: Yes, yes.

CR: ...the time that Nellie was elected. Probably, that probably was, we'll check it out.

FF: Carl went according to the book. He was an extremely disciplined Communist without too much imagination or creativity, he was, he would apply the Party line, he would apply the Party line as it was defined in New York City, he was quite doctrinaire. And perhaps was responsible for in part the more narrow application and more rigid, more colorless if you please application of Communist policies in the mass movements. Nat Ross was more of an individualist, a little more flamboyant, a little bit more unpredictable. I think he had flashes of insight and daring which is not to say that he was necessarily more capable than Winter was, but there was a different style of work. I think he enjoyed more seeking out individual leaders of the Farmer Labor Party, perhaps the trade union movement, on a one to one basis. He loved more being involved in the intrigue that exists in any organization and the Farmer Labor Party had lots of it. That's about it. Is that confirmed by other people that you've talked to?

CR: Well, I think that's true myself, I knew Nat very well, and Carl Winter not very well. Was Carl Winter still there when the Farmer Labor Party and Democratic Farmer Labor Party merged in '41, '42, probably was. Well, we'll check that out.

FF: I don't think so. When I first came to Minnesota the, there were other District Organizers, there was Pat Tuey...

CR: Was Pat Tuey in Minnesota?

FF: I say in Michigan, I'm sorry, when I first came to Michigan, there were other District Organizers, there was Pat Tuey and I think Will Winestone and finally Carl Winter and I enlisted in the U.S. the day after Pearl Harbor which is of course December 8th, 1941 and Carl Winter had already been there for some months.

CR: Yeah, okay. There's some reason for asking this kind of questions, there's a symposium taking place in Minnesota this spring on the Farmer Labor movement including a lot of the former leadership and some of the scholars and even Harold Stassen and I understand that Sam Darcy's
been invited. I have a tape recording of an interview with Sam Darcy on this subject. Apparently the Central Committee of the Party sent Darcy in there to Minnesota in, sometime in '38 or '39 I'm not sure this is when you were there or...

FF: Yes, it was. He was there while I was there.

CR: Okay, he makes some big claims to the fact that Browder sent him there to straighten out a situation that Hathaway and local people had screwed up and that the big problem was that the Communist Party had buried itself in the Farmer Labor movement, didn't have a base of its own or a position of its own at all and he was trying to reestablish this. If you'd want to comment on that I'd be glad to hear what [unclear] first hand information you have, I haven't listened to the Darcy interview yet, even, we got it very recently, but as I say he supposed to come there. In other words the waters are pretty muddy about what was going on at that time.

FF: Darcy, very interesting man, a brilliant articulate forceful personality. The very opposite of my description of Carl Winter. I can see why the National Committee would have wanted to leaven the situation and the scene a little bit after the kind of leadership that Carl Winter gave. I don't know that he was sent there particularly because of mistakes that Hathaway, though that's possible because Hathaway...

CR: That's Darcy's information, we don't know if...

FF: Yes, I see, I don't know that.

CR: But it was [unclear]

FF: Because Hathaway did have the absolutely the very best connections with the top ranking Farmer Labor leadership and also did come with the authority of the National Committee and with power to negotiate to the degree that anybody in the Farmer Labor Party cared about what the Communist Party had to give them in ways of help. I'm not sure that it would be Hathaway's policy to totally submerge the Communist Party within the Farmer Labor Party so that it had no existence or expression of its own. I would say that would be more the tendency of Carl Winter. For all the reasons that I've already described. I also know that the Communist Party throughout my association with it has been on pendulum swings in trying to cope with what seemed to be a constant stubborn contradiction. It was not able to find a synthesis for it at any time. The contradiction was between how does it play its vanguard revolutionary role in which it not only gives a far, a, the vision and the advance guard view to the more progressive and radicalized members of the, Americans. How does it play this vanguard role which was a Leninist concept of course and at the same do the other which is to be a very valuable and needed partner in a united front where our allies felt that they needed and wanted our participation and could trust us to carry out the objectives of this mass movement or united front. And I don't think that the Communist Party for any period longer than a year, any place succeeded in achieving that synthesis. I would say that the American Youth Congress was perhaps the best example of where that synthesis was achieved and that might be in part because it was a federation of organizations and not a membership organization. I think in a membership organization, the Communist Party had much less luck in trying to fulfill this seemingly contradictory role.
CR: You don't know if...

FF: I'm saying that therefore that Sam Darcy one month could be emphasizing the unique extraordinary vanguardist position that the Communists could play and Sam Darcy could two years later be saying that we are separated ourself and we are at risk.

CR: I think you're quite right about that which is not a unique problem with, it's not unique to Sam Darcy or any particular leader of the Communist Party, it was indigenous to the movement as a dilemma and to be unable to resolve it.

FF: We had a kind of a cozy way of addressing this dilemma, if you were in the Party long enough and were articulate enough, when asked about these kind of questions, you would say what is the main danger, the right danger or the left danger. And the most sophisticated and evasive answer was that you fight that danger which is the main danger at any given time.

CR: That makes some little sense. On the other hand the other characteristic was that every tactical issue that arose was settled as though it were the most fundamental long term strategic issue that had ever been faced by the Party, and that had to be settled and everybody in the mass movement [unclear] the Party had to be convinced of it.

FF: That is so true. The American Party perhaps less than any other Communist Party in the world had no sense of history and the long march.

CR: You made an observation a little while ago about 1939. The two events then, one was the Hitler Non-Agression Pact and the other was the Finnish-Soviet War, both in historical hindsight were brief interludes but both at the time were considered that kind of issues on which the CP's relationship with everybody had to be determined.

FF: In Minnesota it was a paramount, ever-present, almost over-riding problem, the Finnish-Soviet War because my parents and family except for my wife were in Chicago and I would visit Chicago quite often and there would be regional meetings and national meetings in New York and while it was a problem for the Communist Party in the United States everywhere, in Minnesota it had an intensity and omnipresence that was different than anyplace else. And naturally the large Finnish population for one thing, even though there were strong Finnish Communist sympathizers, groups of sympathizers. I did one foolish thing personally, this is a little flashback. My parents came from the Ukraine, my father was a great folk dancer and fine amateur singer, and so I grew up doing a one hell of a Russian dance. [unclear] the first time I was ever [unclear] in my life was at a major [unclear] Discovery Night at the [unclear] Theater in Chicago on Armitage and Western, where I'd [unclear] a very attractive young woman accordionist and a elderly magician because my Ukrainian Hopack was pretty good. New Year's Eve during the Finnish Russian War I came from a Party again not far from 7th and Hennepin feeling pretty good with a bunch of young friends, young Communists and so on and on the corner of 7th and Hennepin went into a Ukrainian Hopack, right on the corner, and was quickly surrounded by a group of hostile fellow Minnesotans who recognized this as a Russian dance and I was lucky to get away with my whole skin. What's the matter?

CR: [Unclear]
FF: Oh, that's the kettle, a very noisy kettle. That had less to do with the Communists and more to do with my own buoyancy on New Year's Eve.

CR: I recently saw a 100 page paper, a study of the life history of Andy Johnson on the Iron Range, the woman who did it, at UMD Duluth, University of Minnesota-Duluth, properly calls Andy a hard-core communist, it's a life study of a hard-core communist, who remains faithful to this day to all those principles. One of the most interesting things reflected in that study is the total isolation of Andy from the effective political life of the Iron Range in 1939 by those two events.

FF: When did the Finnish Russian War end?

CR: Hm?

FF: When did the Finnish...

CR: There were two phases of it, in the fall of 1939-40 and in February of 1939, of 1940...

FF: February of 1940?

CR: Yeah, yeah, right.

FF: It was the New Year's Eve of 1940 that I did my Ukrainian dance on 7th and Hennepin.

CR: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it, there's a fine example of the Communist Party finding itself trapped in the kind of allegiance to Soviet principle out of the total context of the political realities of American political life or even of what the international situation was shaping up to become within a few short months. Surely a skillful political party should be able to wind through that kind of somewhat temporary crisis and yet in that situation and many others the Communist Party found it necessary to apologize or to explain or to take responsibility for this or that act of the Comintern or of the Soviet Union which or may not have made some sense in terms of Soviet interest. Sometime it didn't make sense even in those terms as we later discover.

FF: Carl, that sets in motion another thought I have, in 1935 was the 7th World Congress of the Communist International...

END TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

FF: The World Congress which had a great affect on the American Communist Party and Earl Browder and Gil Green from the Young Communist League both played a very important role in it, emphasized the whole tactic of the Popular Front and was extremely critical of the whole concept that had been practiced until shortly before that of considering Social Democrats as social fascists and attributing the victory of Hitlerism not only to the policies of the Social Democratic Party of Germany but also the mistakes of the Communist Party in not being able to effect the United Front with the German Socialists. This was the period in which I came into Minnesota, '36, '37, '38, and as I said earlier the Farmer Labor Party and the CIO organization that was going on but primarily on the Mesabi Range and in Upper Minnesota and so on, though I think the Packinghouse Workers were already, were beginning to come into Austin, Minnesota and other places, you'd have to double-check that. That was one of the few times when taking snuff in Moscow and sneezing in
Minneapolis was not all bad for the future of the indigenous communist movement, and that explains in part the successes that we have, relative successes with the American Youth Congress, including in Minneapolis. The approach that we took to the CIO organization effort, and the great enthusiasm with which we embraced and participated in the Farmer Labor Party development and advances. That began to be mitigated when the popular front theories were running into difficulties in Europe too, and conclusions were being drawn by the international plenary sessions of the Comintern and again we reflected very closely in the United States all of the fluctuations of the Moscow direction and influence of the Communist International, and I think that a closer examination, that would be quite an undertaking, of that would explain some things too.

CR: The problem can't be avoided and they are very much in the center of current historiography about Minnesota Farmer Laborism. [Unclear] two years ago a book was published called the Dubious Alliance which is the story of the Democratic Farmer Labor Party starting with the merger of the Farmer Labor Party, essentially what it is is an examination of the, what the author who is not a communist and never was one, calls the People's Front period.

FF: The People Front Period.

CR: People's Front Period, in other words that relationship between communists and other democratic forces that prevailed in the period of the People's Front. So we are not alone in looking at that. My own opinion about it is that to some degree the 7th World Congress should be and can be characterized as a...[Fred starts coughing badly, tape clicks] Yeah, I was just saying that in my judgment the 7th World Congress represented as near that point at which West European and American communist experience probably determined the general direction of Comintern activities at that point, more so than at any other point, over-riding the Soviet national interest. So that the policies which derived from that were more indigenous to west European and American experience, work better...

FF: But in my opinion began to fade...

CR: ...but also were...

FF: But in my opinion began to fade some as the Hitler war aggressions became more threatening and approached and that by itself together with other factors of course put strains on some of the concepts that came out of the 7th World Congress because the national interests of the Soviet Union became increasingly paramount again.

CR: Exactly, so they, those interests began then to determine Comintern policies.

FF: We're really talking about an extremely rich and pregnant and fecund five years when we talk about 1935 to 1940. So much happened then, that was the Spanish Civil War, it was the 7th World Congress, it was the rise of Hitlerism, it was the growth of the New Deal, it was the organization of the, of basic and mass, the great basic industries in the United States, it was the period of the flourishing of the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party, the American Youth Congress and...those were five years that are hard to match.

CR: Yeah. Not to mention the evolution of various other forms of political coalition and alliance
in California or the state of Washington or the state of Michigan or the state of New York, and so on. You can probably extend that period by five years by associating that the wartime period...

FF: But I see that as a somewhat different, the reason I say '40 is because once Hitler crossed into Poland, and first Sudetenland and so on, we were beginning to talk about a new context of circumstances that had fundamental considerations which while insipient in '38 and '39 and so on, became dominant and I do think it's important to say, there was, of course there was some fusion, the Popular Front became virtually a National Front in countries that were at war with Hitler, even in the United States under Browder, many of the American Communist policies were addressed to the concept not only of Popular Front but of a National Front. Not willingly, we were not accepted with open arms at all times by the establishment and the Communist Party still carried the mark of Cain, but I think that was a different period. Then of course there was the, does it always come in fives, in five years? Then there was the Cold War and the McCarthy period which ended about '55-'56 if you can put a terminal point on it. The next five years, given what's happening in the Soviet Union and in China and with the IMF Peace Pact and certain signs in Europe of remove your war planes out of Spain, Portugal, we may be coming into another five years that could be extremely pregnant with things of historic, great historical import. To get back, I do want to put on record the fact, Carl, that had I known and had I the time for this interview I would have attempted to refresh my memory by going to books, maybe newspaper morgues, and maybe even personal letters that may be kicking around. This is completely off the top of my head, with no preparation at all, and so for what it's worth, let's continue.

CR: It's in the nature of oral history to be more spontaneous than studied academic kind of thinking that we may do whether we're academics or not.

FF: Yeah, but I think I could be a lot more responsive to particular examples and experiences if I could fix the dates, if I had before we had set down, fixed some of the dates more specifically. And now we have a voice that's been injured by my aspirating a chocolate cookie.

CR: How much of the, let's put it this way, in terms of the fact that we're talking here about the influence of the Communist International and the Soviet Union on American Communist politics, how much of the real activities and responses to concrete issues in the life and activity of the Communist Party were in response to those things, how much do you think was bona fide, genuine response to what was going on in American society and needs and requirements of the American working class?

FF: That's a very good question because most of the writing both by communists, ex-communists, the most hostile critics of the communists, in my opinion very few of them do justice to what was the real situation. I think there were two factors at work and to underestimate either of these factors is a mistake and distorts the reality of what was transpiring, at least in the period in which we're talking about. There's no question about it that with the split of the Second International over the imperialist nature of World War I and the coming of the Bolshevik Revolution and the role of national patriotism/chauvinism, and what you aptly describe when we were off the tape as the romantic period among radicals and Marxists throughout the world about the success of the Russian Revolution and the various efforts to defeat in its cradle as Winston Churchill hoped that it would be, that the influence of the Soviet Communists, Communist Party through the Communist International, the Comintern, and on a one on one basis, the visits of American communists to the
Soviet Union which was going on continuously from November 1917 and the representatives that were here legally and illegally from the Communist International and the Young Communist International who in many cases were Russians, but not always Russians. That all of this laid an extremely heavy hand on the emerging and existing CP-USA and its junior branch, the Young Communist League. Every major meeting, political meeting that took place in the Soviet Union or in the Comintern was avidly studied by all the American Communist leaders, our conventions and our plenums and our state conferences, our schools, our classes would diligently study like the disciples of any religion might, the writings of their gurus and that was always at work in whatever was the policy and the practices of the Communist Party. But to for one moment ignore the fact that the immigrant communists who came here with a class consciousness that antedated the Bolshevik Revolution, my father coming here in 1910 and immediately as a clothing worker and Harchafener [?] and Marx being part of a now famous historic needle trade workers strike out of which the Amalgamated Clothing Workers was born, thought about German and Scandin...

CR: 1912 you mean.

FF: 1910, yeah, yeah. I think it was '10. Scandinavian workers, Greek workers, Italian workers, German workers, who came here with this class conscious view of the world and their disappointments in part with not finding gold in the American streets, these were people who before the Russian Revolution, whether they were within the Socialist Party or in some cases joined the Wobblies or whatever else existed, were honestly devoted without reference to the Russian Revolution, because I'm talking about the period that predated the Russian Revolution, were dedicated to trying to find some way towards a socialist order. And then the American born who joined the communist movement, whether they were middle class idealists who had naive notions of a utopia, and romantic notions about the Soviet Union, or the first and second American born of the generations of the immigrants, while influenced by perhaps their parents' class conscious ideology that they brought from Europe, also had sincere and passionate convictions about the inequities of capitalism in America and hope for a socialist solution to the weaknesses of economic and social life in America. And certainly when the blacks began to join the Communist Party, and particularly from the days of Scottsboro, very very early '30s, through such things as the organization of the unorganized under communist leadership in many cases in Gastonia, North Carolina, and other places in the South, those were not things that anybody who was an American communist was motivated primarily by well directions or specific political inspiration from what was happening in the Soviet Union. There was an interaction and interplay between the two and when push came to shove, if there was ever a major strategic or tactical controversy within the Communist Party, the resolution was found through advice, guidance, direction, leaning on the Soviet Communist Party. And even as late as in 1950-51, when the American Communist movement decided that it should go underground, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and I went to Paris to talk to Jacuqes du Cleau as to whether he had any advice to give on this policy which the American Central Committee of the Communist Party had already decided upon but there was some debate within the leading committee of the Communist Party as to whether it should happen and therefore it was thought that since du Cleau was sort of our uncle and in fact directly or indirectly had voiced the views of the now dissolved Comintern when he intervened into the American Communist internal situation which finally resulted in the removal of Earl Browder, with his slogan of Communism is 20th Century Americanism, even as late as that. The point I'm making is that any major policies at issue, major policies at issue, would look towards Moscow and abroad for advice
and resolution, but that's not to gainsay the existence of indigenous commitment which predated the Russian Revolution and had a validity of its own after the Russian Revolution.

CR: What did du Cleau say?

FF: He very wisely...

CR: I'm interjecting a little curiosity here.

FF: He very wisely said France and the United States are different, our traditions and our political way of life is different. For example in France if you're elected to the Chamber of Deputies you cannot be arrested, why don't you get elected to Congress which showed how remote he was from our situation. In fact, he did not give any specific advice at all. And that in itself was a tribute to his own wisdom and political shrewdness, but that didn't stop us in our naivete to go ask uncle for advice.

CR: So what brought you, I think you're saying is first if you were to judge the Communist Party's record in this country even on one five year period, it would be a positive contribution and the second thing you're saying is...

FF: Especially in that five year period.

CR: That specific...

FF: Much more in that five year period perhaps than any other five year period.

CR: Well one can argue that 1930-35 was a significant predecessor to the fruition of the New Deal and the People's Front policies [unclear]...

FF: And the period during World War II would be up there among the five year periods, but I still think that '35-40 was perhaps the most important.

CR: Harvey Klehr, a historian at Amery...Emery University in Atlanta, has written a major treatise on the American Communist movement, called The Heyday of American Communism, dealing with the period from 1930-45. The book is essentially an extension of the work of Theodore Draper's first two volumes about the Communist Party, in fact he based it on papers that Draper had collected and gave to him to continue the work.

FF: Who is the author of that?

CR: Harvey Klehr.

FF: How do you spell Klehr.

CR: K-L-E-H-R. He takes much the same data that you're suggesting and he shows how it did in fact become the heyday of American communism. On the other hand the main thrust of the book is to prove that the Communists through this tactic achieved very important and strategic positions in the American labor movement and thereby of course increased the threat that they represented to
America because the, there's only one important question to be considered in relation to American Communism, that it was in fact a creature of the Soviet Union. This is a clearly articulated evaluation of the communist experience of that period.

FF: Well, I don't feel that.

CR: And it is, it is based more on looking at the leadership and the formal policies of the Communist Party than it is on the real life of the membership and the active people of the Communist Party and their relationship to the American labor movement.

FF: It's also their affection for the conspiracy theory of history. The fact is there was a left wing and a right wing and a centers group in the Socialist Party before there was a Russian Revolution all over the world including in Czarist Russia, and that split that took place between, in the Second International was not the product of a conspiracy that was born in Moscow. There's enough sins at the door of the American Communist Party in being so dependent upon and compliant to the Russian Communist Party, that we don't have to distort history in order to go off the deep end.

CR: Yeah. Well perhaps a more accurate way to describe it is that the American communist movement was essentially an outgrowth of particular historic conditions in American society and the American labor movement, that the birth of this party of course was influenced by the collapse of the Second International, of the Socialist Party's crisis in World War I and of the Russian Revolution, all of which combined to create an upsurge of radicalism, romantic illusions about what the Soviet Revolution represented and so on. And that those events that led to the American Communist Party affiliating to the Comintern, of accepting principles of Marxism-Leninism and Party organization designed for Russian conditions and not American, did introduce into the history of this Party aberrations of its policies and aberrations of its goals and of tactics and activities. The intervention of the Comintern, the intervention of Soviet national interest weighed very heavily on and distorted the history of this Party.

FF: And I think probably sentenced it to a life-long sectarianism which resulted in a Party which after World War II had diminishing influence into an almost irrelevant sect. But in addition to it, has made it easier though I think it would exist even without it, made easier the whole main thurst of American foreign policy and diminution of civil rights at home, especially when in various periods of our contemporary history that the Russian threat to the entire world to undermine to subvert, to conquer all of this has been made easier by what you summarized so aptly. Frankly I think that if there was no Communist Party that there are strong dominant forces in American society who would invent one because of the great success with which they've had in attributing all of the dangers to democracy, to world peace, to subversion everywhere including in the United States to the Russians.

CR: The, it seems to me another point that you make has some validity, some bearing on this, you were speaking quite accurately I think of Communist leaders who poured over Comintern articles and tracts and speeches...

FF: And Soviet in particular.

CR: How large a group of people are you talking about, I mean in relation to the Party cadre, how
much of the cadre or leadership of the Communist movement was of this type and operating on these premises?

FF: Well, if you had aspirations towards being a leader within the Communist Party, there were two ways to achieve it, one was by being an influential member of a non-Communist organization, preferably a trade union, a farm organization, a black church, the NAACP. The Communist Party always sought to include in their leadership people who were rooted among and influential among non-communist organizations. They frequently of course made the mistake of considering organizations that were extremely sympathetic to the communist movement, and led by communists, in some cases even organized under the sympathetic stimulus of the communist movement, like the International Workers Order, the Fraternal Society and so on, and as...parts of the so-called mass movement that would be represented in the leadership. The second way to aspire to leadership was to be knowledgeable and fluent in the especially contemporary Russian and Comintern interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. To make a speech, to give a report, to write an article for a Party theoretical journal without heavy reliance and numerous quotations on what some Russian communist and leader of the Comintern like Dimitrov would say, that was standard practice. If you're asking how many people in Communist leadership were theoretically aware and diligently followed all the writings and the twists and turns of communist strategic and tactical dogma, I would say a minority were that, but you can't be active in a trade union and have a family life and also be active in the Communist Party and find much time to do much reading and much study and that's why there were schools that were set up full-time and part-time in order to, but there was the, what was originally called the Agit-Prop Department of the Communist Party/Young Communist League, Agitation Propaganda Department where constantly and actively and assiduously an effort was being made to immerse and keep constant the theoretical and programmatic training and teaching of all communists. Now I must say that there was a big gap between what happened at the national level and in the commission of agitation propaganda and what finally would happen in a branch or, yeah...

CR: It's probably important to accurately portray what the life and activity of the Communist Party was like at lower echelons or how it...

FF: Most of them were active....

CR: ...or how it differed as between the center in New York and...

FF: Well I would say the great majority were either active in internal housekeeping for the Communist Party, collecting dues, selling literature, keeping the headquarters clean, the kind of housekeeping duties that you have in the American Legion and in any church, and also those whose, who were members of and active of the YWCA as there were some and trade unions and fraternal societies, those people were too busy to read regularly the theoretical organ, Political Affairs and before that it was called the Agit-Prop Department of the Communist Party/Young Communist League, Agitation Propaganda Department where constantly and actively and assiduously an effort was being made to immerse and keep constant the theoretical and programmatic training and teaching of all communists. Now I must say that there was a big gap between what happened at the national level and in the commission of agitation propaganda and what finally would happen in a branch or, yeah...
if you were active in a mass organization, there was frequently a compromise in practice, a pragmatic one, between what the individual activist was doing and what some doctrinaire leader was calling for.

CR: In other words how monolithic was the Party, really?

FF: For those who did internal housekeeping chores and who were members of the leading committees it was monolithic. For those who were active in mass organizations there was a constant give and take, push and pull, with some kind of pragmatic compromise arrived at otherwise the existence of these people as influential people in the mass organizations would have been quickly terminated.

CR: How much regionalism and regional distinction [unclear]...

FF: Quite a bit...

CR: [Unclear]...

FF: Quite a bit, California for example was consistently known as somewhat more independent than most other state and district organizations, their own newspaper, Peoples World, was far less doctrinaire and sectarian than the New York Daily Worker. Bill Schneiderman who remained a loyal communist to this day nevertheless took pride and so did his district committee in a certain degree of independence. The independence was within a well defined area, you cannot really come in collision with any fundamental policies, but as in any other science, there are within certain secondary areas, room for considerable variance and division of opinion. I would say that Minnesota was one of the more independent and flexible and unique state organizations of the Communist Party. On the other hand Illinois, and a lot depended on who was the individual chief communist at that time. Under the leadership of let us say a Morris Child who was later exposed as being allegedly a double agent and who made frequent trips to the Soviet Union, the majority of the leadership was holier than the Pope. And there were other district organizers like that and state Party organizations.

CR: Do those [unclear] of labor leaders and other mass leaders who found compromises all the time and those regional peculiarities and those differences in how lines were interpreted by various individuals at different times add up to significant factors?

FF: They should not be ignored. You take a man like Harry Bridges, I don't know whether he ever carried a card within the Communist Party, but he certainly was a friend of the Communist Party for long periods, and of the Soviet Union. The General Strike in San Francisco, the relative importance of the Longshoremen's Union, the leadership of Harry Bridges which was as maverick a pro-communist leader in the trade union movement as you can find anywhere, influenced and helped shape and merged with the relative independence of the California Communist Party. I think it was geographic distance for one thing, I think it was the fact that California has always been a little bit off-base, Mike Rycow thinks they ought to build a wall around California and keep the nuts in.

CR: Well possibly it's also consonant with characteristics of the American working class in the
West.

FF: Right, very much so. And I think that's also true for Minnesota, I think that the long history of populism and free thinking that existed in the Upper Midwest found its continuing reflection, greater or lesser extent, in the Minnesota and perhaps the Dakotas Communist Party. And you cannot live and work in a state with a Floyd B. Olson becoming a governor and coming out of the kind of political formation as emerged there and hope to have any influence on the political life without making some departure from, but let me add to this, as always Carl, we know we should beware of easy generalizations. Let's even take New York, in New York proper, Brooklyn was somewhat maverick as among the borough organizations of the Communist party. Within the Communist organization it was well known and frequently a subject of wisecracks that the Brooklyn leadership were more maverick than let us say the Bronx or Queens and even the emergence of the American Labor Party in New York while you had people like Ben Davis who was doctrinaire and again holier than the Pope, you also had Mark Antonio who I don't think was ever a card-carrying member of the Communist Party but was such a force in the political life in New York in that period and with the Communists practicing the policy of the Popular Front to some degree successfully within the Labor Party so that the Communists were actually able to elect on the Communist ticket members of the City Council of New York, Pete Cashione...

END TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE

TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO

FF: ...variety, peculiarities, unique history, all of the factors that combined to add up to something.

CR: The question partly involves a concept here of whether a cadre of leaders with close connection with the Comintern for instance truly determined the character, the functions, the effectiveness, the historic role of the Communist Party, or with a lot of factors that are involved.

FF: A lot of other factors were involved, and let me give you perhaps the most dramatic example of how difficult it is even when there's a long history in this direction, of it being uniform and consistent. Earl Browder. Earl Browder reflected a what I consider a basically healthy nationalist tendency within the American Communist Party. Here is a man who worked with the Comintern, I believe at one time even went to China for the Comintern, but you cannot live and work in a situation, whether it's in a new local of the CIO, in a steel mill with 20,000 workers, or in a country whether it's Italy or Spain or the United States and for long ignore and be free of the national traditions, characteristics, sociological and political complexities that make up a country. If you do ignore it's at the peril of sterility, witness Gus Hall.

CR: I was going to ask you your estimate of Earl Browder and Browderism. You probably answered that question...

FF: I'm going to take a break for a minute.

CR: Sure. [tape clicks]

FF: They agreed to give the...now I have to start all over again.
CR: No, let's get this on tape. Yeah, just hold it on your lap...

FF: [Unclear]

CR: It's [unclear] directional if you speak into it, yeah. Hold it for him Doris.

FF: I'll hold it. At the time that I went to Minnesota for the first time I was working at the Calumet Steel, an inside organizer for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. Rudy Hanson who could have lived in Washington or Minnesota, he was a native of Washington, was the outside organizer. We were on a 7 week strike, the company finally agreed to negotiate and had recommended that, I'm sorry, and the negotiations had reached a point where they would recognize the union and agree to a small wage increase but they refused to permit me to return to my job. They claimed that I had obtained employment under false pretenses which was true. I used an alias because I felt that my FBI records would probably get to the company soon after I took work. And there was a disagreement in the Communist Party which was very interested in this strike, since it was I think the very first of what was known as the 'little steel strikes', as to how this strike should be terminated. Steel Workers Organizing Committee of course was in charge and there was some division in the Steel Workers Organizing Committee as to whether we should settle the strike and concede that I would not return. It came before the Executive Committee of the State Committee of the Communist Party in Illinois. At that time Morris Childs was the District Organizer and Jack Johnstone who had worked for the Red International of Labor Unions on behalf of the Comintern in India and elsewhere was the trade union director for the district Communist Party. I was asked to come to the meeting for discussion as to how the strike should, what the Communist Party policy should be with the Steel Workers Organizing Committee as to how the strike should be ended. I wanted to remain in the mill and I therefore took the position that I thought we could win the strike including this demand if we held out, just a short time. Jack Johnstone took a similar position. Morris Childs opposed that position for trade union tactical reasons but also said at any rate he had a telegram in his pocket from Mack Weiss of the National Committee of the Young Communist League directing me to proceed to Minnesota as a national representative for the Young Communist League there. I lost the vote in the executive committee. I appealed to the national committee of the Young Communist League likewise what was known as their Secretariat and they said it was very important to go to Minnesota, that the Farmer Labor Party, that we wanted to broaden the base of the Young Communist League in every respect, among farmers as well as workers and there was this very exciting political situation. And they also wanted to learn more about the indigenous personnel of the YCL. Of course I went. I remember writing very enthusiastic reports about this young man, Carl Ross, who I had only met very casually at some national meeting in the past, what an intelligent, articulate, promising functionary we had here and recommended that at some time if the opportunity arose he should go to our international school in Moscow. I came back to Chicago under the impression that at some point Carl was going to be sent to the Kimm School.

?: So I always thought that that's where you went.

FF: I became active and organized the merchandize handlers in Chicago and formed the Federal Labor Union of the CIO, I mean of the AF of L and went to the second convention of the AF of L, I'd already been at the first when once again I received orders to go back to Minnesota, this time to become the District Organizer and to ultimately relieve Carl Ross who was going to be sent abroad. I just learned today that Carl did not go to school but he went there for other purposes.
?: Didn't you organize [unclear]?

FF: That was earlier...

?: Earlier.

FF: Yeah. But then I came back to it.

CR: Okay, my version of the story is already on tape in a series of interviews with me by Hy Berman that includes the story but never the episodes concerning Fred, and again for the record I was in Moscow about two weeks and it consisted of a series of very interesting conferences and I think the fact that I was there and had the opportunity to meet people like Dimitrov and Hercoly who later became recognized as Trotsky persuaded me that that particular moment in time, the policies articulated by the Communist International were not strictly determined by Soviet national interest but were very basically the products of Western European and American influences and experiences, one rare camelot in Comintern history, although one in looking at the relation between the Communist Intern and the American Communist Party can't always look at those instances where the Comintern was wrong, also look at the peculiar documents like the Open Letter to the American Communist Party of 1930 which said get off your butt and start organizing the unemployed and things of that kind, so that there were conflicting influences which in [unclear] were perhaps negative but cannot be looked at in terms of one particular incident or another alone.

FF: Were you able to distinguish any difference in the Browder and Foster positions at that time? At the Moscow meetings?

CR: Only in terms of what appeared to be the line of thinking that Browder was developing. There was no argument, there was apparently a consensus, I don't recall the substance of the discussion which had to do with formulating people's [unclear] policies.

FF: Had Browder already at that time raised a question that for domestic reasons the American Communist Party would have to withdraw from the Comintern.

CR: No.

FF: That came later.

CR: Yeah, that was much later. I think that was an outgrowth...

FF: About 1940...

CR: ...of the period in the 1940's that related to the dissolution of the Communist Party and the formation of the Communist Political Association. We had reached a point then when Browder had first begun to take a look at American tradition and American history, he was reading Volume I of Bower's books on Thomas Jefferson at the time and it was from this reading his first effort to understand American history I think that he evolved ideas he began to put forward in the 1938 National Convention of the Communist Party where he talks about the dichotomy in American history representing by the different [unclear] Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson and this being a dominant trend in American society since. That was the single short period in which the
American communist movement appeared to take the study of American history seriously and to try
to draw some conclusions from it, in rather superficial ways as they appear when you look back at
them.

FF: And a number of American Marxist theoreticians began to write about American history in a
more emancipated way. Listen, shall we go for Chinese food?

?: Yes.

CR: I want to mention in this connection, the one serious philosophical intellectual discussion of
American tradition that was written was by Landey, is called Marxism and the American
Democratic Tradition I think and it is the single instance of a effort to relate Marxist ideology and
Marxist attitude to the Jeffersonian tradition.

FF: I remember that.

?: By who was that?

FF: Landey.

CR: It still reads comparatively well, much better for instance than Dimitrov's speech to the 7th
World Congress or even of Browder's speeches in 1938.

FF: How would you like to go...

END INTERVIEW