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## The 1946-47 Allis-Chalmers Strike and the Unraveling of the Popular Front

Nathaniel Tease  
*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

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THE 1946-47 ALLIS-CHALMERS STRIKE AND THE UNRAVELING OF THE POPULAR FRONT

by

Nathaniel Tease

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

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at

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August 2024

## ABSTRACT

### THE 1946-47 ALLIS-CHALMERS STRIKE AND THE UNRAVELING OF THE POPULAR FRONT

by

Nathaniel Tease

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2024  
Under the Supervision of Professor Amanda Seligman

Led by militant unionist Harold Christoffel, UAW-CIO Local 248 emerged at Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company in West Allis, Wisconsin in 1937. The union challenged the supreme authority of company management and established a sense of dignity and self-determination for workers during WWII. However, post-war tensions led to an eleven-month strike beginning in 1946, which was successfully put down by the collaborative efforts of the company, the press, the government, and right-wing unionists through a coordinated campaign of red-baiting and anti-Communism. As the Cold War commenced and McCarthyism emerged across the United States, unions like Local 248 were condemned as Communist-dominated and subservient to the Soviet Union. Left-leaning members were purged. Testimony by Christoffel before the House Congressional Committee on Education and Labor led to a lengthy legal battle, ultimately resulting in his imprisonment on charges of perjury. Meanwhile, anti-Communist campaigns also targeted progressive organizations and activists oriented around anti-fascism, anti-racism, and civil rights that had aligned themselves over the course of decades with the burgeoning industrial labor movement that Christoffel had championed. The long-term impact of these campaigns contributed to the decline of union influence, the suppression of progressive social policies, and a rightward shift in American political culture.

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## Introduction

This thesis investigates the 1946-47 strike at the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company in West Allis, Wisconsin. Most histories of the 1946-47 strike at Allis-Chalmers revolve around Harold Christoffel and for good reason. The founder and first president of UAW-CIO Local 248, Christoffel was the tragic hero of the militant labor movement at Allis-Chalmers and more broadly has been considered the first labor victim of McCarthyism. However, this paper also examines the strike through the lens of *Milwaukee Sentinel* labor investigator Hugh Swofford, who took part in a multifaceted campaign to break the strike, involving collaboration with Allis-Chalmers officials, right-wing CIO leaders, FBI agents, the Milwaukee Police Department, and local, state, and federal politicians.

Ultimately, Swofford's mission was a massive success. Left-leaning workers were purged from the union and the workplace, as well as from other unions across the country. Christoffel was brought before federal congressional committees to defend the union against allegations of "Communist infiltration" and ultimately was targeted with a perjury charge for insisting that he himself was not a Communist. A lengthy legal battle ensued. Meanwhile, however, Swofford began to experience what he referred to as "conscience trouble." By this point an expert on the Communist presence in the Milwaukee labor scene, he believed that the Communist charge against Christoffel was phony and ended up testifying in his defense. Nonetheless, Swofford's testimony was disregarded and Christoffel was ultimately convicted and imprisoned.

### *The Unraveling of the Popular Front*

The era of McCarthyism began to emerge in the late 1940s. For at least a decade, the nation became preoccupied with a witch hunt to remove "Communists" from positions of

power and influence. Across the country, left-leaning unionists, academics, politicians, and activists were targeted by corporate leaders, media enterprises, and the United States government, oftentimes operating in tandem. The story of Hugh Swofford provides an in-depth look into the various mechanisms utilized and alliances formed to successfully clamp down on militant unionism and left-leaning activism in Milwaukee.

Further, the story of Harold Christoffel's extended legal battle exemplifies the intensity and all-encompassing nature of the anti-Communist movement. It wasn't enough to defeat the union and purge its left-wing leadership. The anti-Communists sought to remove Christoffel from the labor scene entirely, setting an example to prevent other organizers and activists from challenging the status quo. At the same time, by convicting and imprisoning Christoffel on charges relating to his alleged Communist affiliation, they could then stir up a propaganda campaign about the Communist domination of the labor movement, spurring fear, paranoia, and further repression. This cycle of fear and repression, fueled by the successful takedown of progressive stalwarts like Christoffel, was utilized to dismantle the entire Popular Front movement. The result was an overall shift of the American political spectrum towards conservatism, thus hindering the advancement of social and economic justice.

### *Literature Review*

Robert Ozanne's *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin* is the most comprehensive work to date on Wisconsin labor history. It provides valuable context regarding the origins and development of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), both in Wisconsin and nationwide. However, Ozanne's anti-Communist bias should be acknowledged by anyone making use of the book. According to an unpublished critique by Milwaukee-based Communist

Party leader Fred Blair, who lived through many of the events Ozanne describes, “reading this book is a weird experience. It is like visiting a strange country in another world.”<sup>1</sup> Ozanne omits the numerous positive contributions of Communists to the labor movement in Wisconsin. Although he carried out a significant number of interviews for the book, he neglected to interview left-wing unionists such as Harold Christoffel, preferring to source his information from labor’s right-wing. Accordingly, the book is critical of left-wing unionists and praises their purge from the CIO.<sup>2</sup>

An investigation of Ozanne’s background reveals a long history of Cold War-era anti-Communist and anti-leftist bias. His 1954 Ph.D. dissertation, “The Effect of Communist Leadership on American Labor Unions,” was likely the first study on the 1940s labor struggles at Allis-Chalmers. However, the dissertation is reflective of the anti-Communist atmosphere of the McCarthy era in which it was written. The viewpoints of Allis-Chalmers management and anti-Communist government officials are taken for granted as factual, while the perspectives of actual unionists are underrepresented. Ozanne makes use of the same dubious testimony that resulted in Harold Christoffel’s indictment and imprisonment as evidence that he was a Communist. Accordingly, he argues that such “Communist” leadership of Local 248 misused the

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Blair, “Critical Notes on Robert Ozanne’s Book: *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*” (unpublished manuscript, September 8, 1985); This document was recently unearthed at the office of the Wisconsin Labor History Society and has since been donated to the Fred and Mary Keith Blair papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin: A History* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1984).



trust of workers to advance the Communist cause.<sup>3</sup> Ozanne has also been alleged to have had ties to the CIA through his work with the American Institute for Free Labor Development, according to Blair and the 1972 graduate thesis of Dagmar Schultz.<sup>4</sup>

Julian L. Stockley's 1988 article, "'Red Purge': The 1946-1947 Strike at Allis-Chalmers," was one of the first published works to focus on Harold Christoffel and Local 248 without a Cold War, anti-Communist veneer. It is a succinct, yet valuable paper that homes in specifically on the 1946-47 strike, while challenging the scholastic integrity of Ozanne's dissertation. According to Stockley, "Ozanne failed to take into consideration that the area and national press and Congressional committees worked in close association with Allis-Chalmers, which had something to gain by ousting the longstanding leadership of Local 248." Further, Stockley contests the validity of anonymous interviews on which Ozanne relies, contending that "they were probably granted by rivals of the Christoffel administration" and should be discredited.<sup>5</sup>

Stockley makes use of an unpublished 1984 paper by Stephen Meyer, entitled "The State and the Work Place: New Deal Labor Policy, the UAW, and Allis-Chalmers in the 1930s and 1940s," which Meyer eventually expanded into his 1992 book *"Stalin over Wisconsin": The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900-1950*. "Stalin over Wisconsin" is now the standard book on the subject, utilizing a wide range of primary sources to significantly expand

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<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Ozanne, "The Effect of Communist Leadership on American Labor Unions" (Ph.D. diss, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> Dagmar Schultz, "The Changing Political Nature of Workers' Education: A Case Study of the Wisconsin School for Workers" (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Julian L. Stockley, "'Red Purge': The 1946-1947 Strike at Allis-Chalmers," *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 76 (1988), 30.

upon the research of Ozanne and Stockley. Meyer frames the rise of Local 248 in the context of the growing, militant, industrial unionism movement of the CIO and in response to the notoriously anti-union management at Allis-Chalmers. He breaks down in detail the grievance policy that grew out of the 1939 and 1941 strikes and became central to Local 248's popularity and success. Most relevant to this thesis, Meyer explores the context of the 1946-47 strike and the ways in which Allis-Chalmers collaborated with the *Milwaukee Sentinel* to crush the union.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Witas' 1991 master's thesis, "On the Ramparts: A History of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*," traces the history of the newspaper back to its founding in 1837. It provides background information regarding the purchase of the *Sentinel* by William Randolph Hearst in 1924. Under Hearst ownership, the newspaper launched a propaganda campaign against Harold Christoffel and Local 248.<sup>7</sup> Ferdinand Lundberg's *Imperial Hearst: A Social Biography* provides additional context regarding the ambitions of Hearst and his ties to fascism and big business.<sup>8</sup>

Gerald Horne's *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* is a history of the Civil Rights Congress, a civil rights organization deemed a "Communist front" by the government. Horne outlines the rise and fall of the organization, which had played an integral

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Meyer, *"Stalin over Wisconsin": The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900-1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Witas, "'On the Ramparts': A History of the Milwaukee Sentinel" (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Ferdinand Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst: A Social Biography* (New York: The Modern Library, 1936).

role in supporting Christoffel throughout his legal struggles.<sup>9</sup> Philip Deery's *Red Apple: Communism and McCarthyism in Cold War New York* includes an entire chapter on O. John Rogge, who was Christoffel's attorney and a prominent defender of left-wing causes—until he began to embrace anti-Communism.<sup>10</sup>

Ellen Schrecker's *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* is an overview of McCarthyism in the United States, outlining its origins, impact, and future implications. Schrecker addresses the alleged nature of the "Communist threat" and its supposed connection to labor unions. She contextualizes the attack on Christoffel and Local 248 with regard to the grander offensive against the labor movement by the US House and Senate.<sup>11</sup>

Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* provides insight into the significance of the Popular Front, a mass, grassroots social movement with which industrial unionists like Christoffel were often associated. The CIO and the Civil Rights Congress are examples of Popular Front organizations. Denning contests common understandings of the Popular Front that conceptualize it as simply a political strategy of the Communist Party, arguing that such an approach overlooks the depth and breadth of the movement. Denning's framework is helpful in

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<sup>9</sup> Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford [N.J.] : London; Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Associated University Presses, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Phillip Deery, *Red Apple: Communism and McCarthyism in Cold War New York*, (New York: Empire State Editions, an imprint of Fordham University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998).

making sense of the varying viewpoints and accusations regarding whether or not Christoffel was a Communist and Local 248 was “Communist-dominated.”<sup>12</sup>

The most important primary source material for this thesis is the affidavit of Hugh Swofford, submitted to the Court of Appeals during Christoffel’s second trial. In this affidavit, Swofford outlines his work with the *Milwaukee Sentinel* during the 1946-47 strike at Allis-Chalmers. Swofford was deeply implicated in a *Sentinel* propaganda campaign to dismantle the union. His affidavit outlines his collaboration on behalf of the *Sentinel* with Allis-Chalmers officials, right-wing CIO leaders, Republican politicians, former FBI agents, and the chief of the Milwaukee Police Department, along with members of the Department’s “subversive squad.” He spied on CIO meetings, broke into the regional UAW-CIO and state CIO offices, rummaged through file cabinets and desks, and stole documents he was told would “definitely prove Christoffel a Communist.”<sup>13</sup> Swofford spent thousands of dollars on the *Sentinel*’s budget to microfilm more than 26 years of the *Daily Worker* and nine years of the *Wisconsin State CIO News* in the hope of finding incriminating evidence.

Although Swofford personally doubted the adequacy of evidence regarding Christoffel’s alleged Communist ties, the *Sentinel* deemed his efforts a success. Subsequently, *Sentinel* higher-ups dispatched Swofford to the University of Indiana, where seven Hearst newspapers, including the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, were grappling with a \$13 million lawsuit from three

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Swofford, “Swofford Affidavit,” January 23, 1950, F. 15, Box 7, Nat Ganley Papers, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, 29 (hereafter “Swofford Affidavit”).

professors falsely accused of “Red Fascism.” Swofford resorted to blackmail, wielding the potential for adverse publicity from Hearst papers as leverage against the university, ultimately securing a settlement for just \$25,000.<sup>14</sup>

While this was a colossal success for the Hearst Corporation, Swofford eventually began to feel “conscience trouble.” As much as he feared the supposed threat of Communism, he began to recognize many of his collaborators as disingenuous and opportunistic. Meanwhile, Harold Christoffel was facing potential prison time for perjury after claiming he had never been a Communist. Now an expert on Communist influence in Milwaukee labor, Swofford traveled to Washington, D.C. to testify in Christoffel’s defense. He submitted the aforementioned affidavit, which outlines in detail his morally dubious exploits on behalf of the *Sentinel* and asserts that his investigation found no evidence of Christoffel being a Communist. However, the testimony was disregarded and Christoffel was subsequently convicted and imprisoned.

Three autobiographical books were consulted for this thesis. Irving Richter was a labor economist, trained at the University of Wisconsin, and a staffer with the AYW-CIO Washington office. In *Labor’s Struggles, 1950-1950: A Participant’s View*, Richter chronicles the unfolding of the Taft-Hartley Act, which clamped down on unions upon its passage in 1947.<sup>15</sup> *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties* is a 1949 memoir by Christoffel’s attorney O. John Rogge. It provides helpful

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<sup>14</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 36-37.

<sup>15</sup> Irving Richter, *Labor’s Struggles, 1945-1950: A Participant’s View* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

background information about Rogge and covers Christoffel's first perjury trial.<sup>16</sup> John Gilman was a Milwaukee-based civil rights, civil liberties, and peace activist. During the final years of the Wisconsin Civil Rights Congress, he was made executive director. In his autobiography, *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice: The Story of John Gilman*, he includes information about his work with the Civil Rights Congress and the incessant task of rooting out FBI informants.<sup>17</sup>

Archival research was crucial in filling in the gaps in the historical narrative. The Harold Christoffel papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society include correspondence detailing Christoffel's legal battle, a speech entitled "The F.B.I. – Super Labor Spy," and various FBI records acquired through the Freedom of Information Act. The Wisconsin Historical Society also houses a number of oral history interviews referenced by this thesis. In 1970, the Milwaukee Independent School created a detailed labor history course curriculum revolving around the 1946-47 strike at Allis-Chalmers. The curriculum materials include interviews with Local 248 members Christoffel, Robert Buse, and Gerald Mayhew. As part of the Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, an oral history of labor attorney Max Raskin was captured in 1981 and of Local 248 members Christoffel, Buse, and Sigmund Eisenscher in 1982. The papers of the Civil Rights Congress are housed at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black

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<sup>16</sup> O. John Rogge, *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties* (New York: Gaer Associates Inc., 1949), 27-28.

<sup>17</sup> John Gilman, *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice: The Story of John Gilman* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2009), 67.

Culture and accessible digitally through Gale's *Archives Unbound* program. The FBI Files of attorney O. John Rogge are accessible through the Internet Archive.<sup>18</sup>

Various newspapers, especially the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel*, played a key role in piecing together the historical narrative. Lastly, the written proceedings of congressional committees were fundamental to understanding the government's role in elevating the anti-Communist tactics and rhetoric of corporations like Allis-Chalmers to the national political discourse. These committees include the House Committee on Education and Labor, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare.<sup>19</sup>

Although much has been written about Harold Christoffel, Local 248, and the CIO, Hugh Swofford and his exploits have largely only been mentioned in passing, if at all. The one exception is a 1951 article in trade unionist magazine *March of Labor* from Esther Handler, former educational director of Local 248. Entitled "Frameup: Taft-Hartley Style," the article makes use of Swofford's story as evidence of a conspiracy to smash the union, imprison Christoffel, and set a precedent to "indict scores of other militant union leaders under the Taft-

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<sup>18</sup> Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society; Milwaukee Independent School: Labor History Course Materials, Wisconsin Historical Society; Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society; Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*; O. John Rogge files, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/O.JohnRogge/O.%20John%20Rogge%2001/>.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor, *Amendments to the Labor Relations Act*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Washington, D.C.; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding Communism in Labor Unions in the United States*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Washington, D.C.; U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, *Labor Relations Program*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Washington, D.C.

Hartley law.”<sup>20</sup> In the article, Handler describes Swofford as “an ‘expert’ on communism, who had done enough research on Christoffel to know what he had for breakfast each morning”—an exaggeration but fundamentally true.<sup>21</sup> The paper is an excellent primer on the efforts and Swofford and struggles of Christoffel, but is also extremely brief—just three pages in length—and was published before the conclusion of Christoffel’s legal proceedings.

While scholars such as Meyer and Schrecker have referenced Hugh Swofford’s affidavit, they do not delve into the document’s origins or explore in detail the complex scheme with which the company, the press and the government collaborated to remove Christoffel from the labor scene. Accordingly, current literature leaves out the important story of how Hugh Swofford, likely one of the foremost experts on Communism in Milwaukee at the time, ended up switching sides due to “conscience trouble” and testifying in Harold Christoffel’s defense.

Existing literature also ignores or skims over Christoffel’s lengthy legal battle and the assistance he received from the Civil Rights Congress for funding and publicity purposes. Although Horne’s *Communist Front?* briefly explores the relationship between Christoffel and the Civil Rights Congress, it does not do so in the context of Local 248’s conflict with Allis-Chalmers.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, while Deery’s *Red Apple* provides context for Rogge’s shift from Communist defender to anti-Communist, Christoffel is only mentioned in one sentence.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Esther Handler, “Frameup: Taft-Hartley Style,” *March of Labor*, December 1951, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Handler, “Frameup: Taft-Hartley Style,” 20.

<sup>22</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 282-287.

<sup>23</sup> Deery, *Red Apple*, 136.



Lastly, existing literature fails to contextualize Christoffel's actions and political associations within Denning's framework of the Popular Front as an expansive, grassroots social movement developing over the course of decades. Traditional frameworks of the Popular Front tend to reduce the movement to a short-term strategy of the Communist Party. Until recently, there has been a tendency among historians to ignore the history of American Communists. The anti-Communist purge of Popular Front members from unions, universities and the forefront of political activism has been celebrated as a Cold War American victory, as exemplified by Ozanne. As a result, many stories of one of the most vibrant, progressive social movements in American history remain untold—or at least need to be pieced together.

### *Chapter Outline*

Chapter One sets the stage for the paper by introducing the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company and chronicling the rise of Local 248, a militant UAW-CIO union under the leadership of Harold Christoffel. By delving into the company's history and the background of Christoffel and Local 248, the chapter provides context for the 1946-47 strike—the final showdown between the company and Christoffel's union. The chapter details the developments of the strike, while also examining a struggle for power within the UAW and the CIO between left-wing unionists like Christoffel and a rising right-wing contingent. The left-wingers were ultimately defeated and Allis-Chalmers achieved victory over the striking workers. Local 248 was dismantled and Christoffel began an extensive legal battle revolving around allegations of perjury before the House Committee of Education and Labor.

Chapter Two explores the intricate strategies and collaborative efforts employed by Allis-Chalmers to break the union and reshape the national labor landscape to favor

management objectives. The chapter revolves around the affidavit of *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporter Hugh Swofford, who was assigned to investigate alleged Communist domination of Local 248 and the Milwaukee labor scene. The chapter unveils a complex web of collusion involving Allis-Chalmers, the *Sentinel*, the Milwaukee Police Department, right-wing unionists, the U.S. Department of Justice, the FBI, and members of Congress, among others. Together, these forces orchestrated a narrative portraying Local 248 as Communist-controlled, fueling national anti-Communist sentiment and facilitating the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act. The chapter includes a rundown of the congressional committees that placed a target on Harold Christoffel and Local 248, resulting in the indictment of Christoffel by a federal grand jury.

Chapter Three revolves around the legal battle of Harold Christoffel, spanning from his initial trial in 1947 to his imprisonment in 1953. At the heart of the chapter is the accusation that Christoffel lied about his Communist Party membership. By successfully prosecuting Christoffel, his foes sought to elevate the narrative that Local 248 had operated under the orders of the Soviet Union in an attempt to subvert the American way of life and provide Moscow with an upper hand in the developing Cold War. This narrative was useful for a nationwide propaganda campaign painting left-wing unionists and advocates of progressive causes as agents of a foreign adversary. The chapter takes a look at the Civil Rights Congress, a civil rights organization with an active Wisconsin chapter that provided support for Christoffel throughout his legal struggle. However, as the chapter explains, the Civil Rights Congress also fell victim to accusations of Communist control. Just as Christoffel's prospects of avoiding incarceration began to fizzle out, the strength of the Civil Rights Congress was fading. Soon, the

organization was dissolved and Christoffel was sentenced to sixteen months to four years in prison.

The Conclusion addresses the fundamental question that continues to linger behind the story of the 1946-47 strike at Allis-Chalmers: was Harold Christoffel really a Communist? All of Christoffel's enemies concluded that he was, from Allis-Chalmers management to the FBI. However, after carrying out an extensive investigation of Christoffel and Communism in the Milwaukee labor scene, Hugh Swofford claimed to have discovered no evidence of Christoffel's Communist affiliation. To this day, no such evidence has been produced that carries any level of credibility. Regardless, this thesis proposes a new framing of the situation that avoids the simplistic Cold War dichotomy of Communist versus non-Communist, aiming to transcend the witch hunt mentality that characterized the McCarthy era.

The left-wing labor and civil rights organizing of union leaders like Christoffel and groups like the Civil Rights Congress can most accurately be identified as part of a larger movement: the Popular Front. More than just an organizing strategy of the Communist Party, the Popular Front was a mass social movement built on decades of organizing by left-leaning Americans of varying political persuasions united against racism, fascism and labor repression. McCarthyism was a response to the success and prominence of the Popular Front. In order to dismantle the movement, left-leaning unions like Local 248 and union leaders like Harold Christoffel were targeted and smeared as enemies of the state, seeking to undermine the security of the nation.

## Chapter One: Labor Struggles at Allis-Chalmers

### *Introduction*

The 1946-47 strike at Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company was the culmination of decades of struggle between employees in pursuit of better lives and workplace conditions and an intransigent management resistant to the notion of worker-led organization of labor. Relying largely on secondary sources, this chapter sets the stage for the strike, exploring the history of Allis-Chalmers and the emergence of UAW-CIO Local 248, led by the militant Harold Christoffel. The chapter also outlines the general developments of the strike and explores tensions within the labor movement that contributed to the union's defeat. Lastly, the chapter touches on the behind-the-scenes collaboration of Allis-Chalmers with a variety of anti-labor and anti-Communist interests that helped to ensure the company's success in crushing the union and removing Christoffel from the labor scene.

### *The Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company*

The Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Corporation was the largest industrial establishment in Wisconsin in the twentieth century, manufacturing agricultural equipment and other capital goods. The company maintained a number of factories across the country, but the largest plant and corporate headquarters were located in the Milwaukee suburb of West Allis, employing more than 25,000 employees at its peak in 1944.<sup>1</sup> West Allis took its name from Edward P. Allis,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Pifer, *A City at War: Milwaukee Labor During World War II* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015), 11.

founder of the Edward P. Allis Company, which merged with various other firms to form the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company in 1901.<sup>2</sup>

At the West Allis plant, the state's largest Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) union was formed in 1937: United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 248. A militant, industrial union, Local 248's ascendance paralleled the nationwide rise of a mass movement of militant CIO workers. However, just as these organizations rose to power in unison, they would ultimately be collectively debilitated some years later by a multifaceted propaganda campaign against labor and the political left. Under the guise of anti-Communism, this campaign successfully dismantled Local 248 and enacted retrogressive labor legislation that drastically altered the landscape of American labor.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Background: Wisconsin CIO History*

In the mid-1930s, American Federation of Labor (AFL) executive council member and president of the United Mine Workers of America John L. Lewis recognized the labor movement had been in a state of decline since its strong growth in 1919 and 1920. He found it impossible to organize under the craft union policy of the AFL, which separated workers within a plant into distinct unions based on craft and generally excluded unskilled workers.<sup>4</sup> According to historical sociologist Michael Billeaux, "organizing on the basis of craft allowed [skilled workers] to

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Meyer, *"Stalin over Wisconsin": The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900-1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, *"Stalin over Wisconsin,"* 2, 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin: A History* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1984), 78.

effectively control the labor supply of workers in their own trade, and also provided them with a strong sense of pride and dignity.” However, Billeaux writes, “As the onslaught of mechanization and scientific management led to deskilling and the proliferation of proportionately greater numbers of unskilled or semiskilled workers in industry, industrial unionists argued that an overly zealous commitment to craft organization would render the AFL irrelevant.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Lewis believed that successful unionism moving forward would require a strategy of industrial organization.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the AFL blocking his initial attempts at launching an industrial organizing drive, in 1935 Lewis was able to convince six AFL unions to join his United Mine Workers union in establishing a Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) within the AFL. Together, they sought to organize non-union manufacturing industries, such as “auto, steel, agricultural machinery, rubber, oil and chemical, electrical, maritime, textile, and hard rock mining.”<sup>7</sup> In 1936, however, all CIO unions were suspended by the AFL executive council and subsequently expelled from the AFL. The CIO was renamed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and continued carrying out its plan to organize new unions and win over members from AFL unions. Both the AFL and CIO continued to expand at an astonishing rate, with 10 million new members joining the labor movement by 1948.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Billeaux, “The Rise and Fall of Militant Interracial Solidarity on the Milwaukee Waterfront, 1934-1942” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2022), 117.

<sup>6</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 78-79.

In Wisconsin, the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the United Steelworkers were at the forefront of the CIO. One of the biggest gains for the CIO was the transfer of the AFL union at Allis-Chalmers manufacturing plant in West Allis to the UAW. In 1937, the UAW-CIO established a district office in Milwaukee, assisting workers at local plants with unionization, many of whom were eager to organize as quickly as possible. One notable example was Briggs & Stratton, a large auto parts and small engine manufacturer in Milwaukee, where all 1,300 employees joined the union in just three weeks.

In the summer of 1937, the workers at three other major Milwaukee firms were unionized under the UAW-CIO: Harley-Davidson, Globe Union, and Trostel Tannery. These unionized workers were able to establish new agreements securing exclusive bargaining rights, wage increases, grievance procedures, seniority on layoffs and recalls, and paid vacation.<sup>9</sup> There were also entire AFL unions in Milwaukee that switched to the CIO, such as “the stove workers at Lindemann-Hoverson, auto workers at Seaman Body, farm equipment workers at Allis-Chalmers, and small engine workers at Briggs.”<sup>10</sup> Historian Darryl Holter summarizes the reasons for CIO successes over the AFL:

The CIO succeeded in Milwaukee in part because it intervened in politics at a time when the local AFL's political program was stalemated. The CIO demonstrated a boldness and elan that captured public attention and turned many non-unionized workers toward unionization. The CIO even had its own tactic, the sit-down strike. And most of the CIO unions were willing to work with anyone who wanted to help build the movement, no matter what their political convictions. Under these circumstances, the CIO became a catalyst for leftwing activists, union militants, and young workers who wanted change

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<sup>9</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 79, 82-83.

<sup>10</sup> Darryl Holter, “Sources of CIO Success: The New Deal Years in Milwaukee,” *Labor History* 29, no. 2 (1988): 203-204.

with little delay. By contrast, the AFL unions seemed to many to have failed to change with the times.<sup>11</sup>

A strike wave swept the entire country in the spring of 1937. More than 50 strikes occurred in Milwaukee alone, including 20 sit-down strikes, the vast majority conducted by CIO affiliated unions. That same year, the Wisconsin state legislature passed the Wisconsin Labor Relations Act (WLRA). This act established a state Labor Relations Board to mediate and arbitrate labor disputes, generally proving advantageous to CIO organizing efforts. However, lawmakers were not always so friendly to labor. A Wisconsin circuit court judge ruled sit-down strikes illegal in 1937, and they were prohibited federally in 1939.<sup>12</sup> Opposition to the WLRA by the press and employer groups led to the passage of the Wisconsin Employment Peace Act (WEPA) of 1939, a precursor to the federal Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. Intended to protect the public, employees, and employers from unfair union practices, WEPA significantly restricted the agency of unions. According to historian Thomas Gavett, “While the passage of the Wisconsin Employment Peace Act did not mean an end of union gains, it signaled a change to a more hostile social environment and underlined a weakness in labor’s political efforts.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite the massive successes of the CIO in Milwaukee and across the state, there existed significant challenges in finding agreement within the organization. According to anti-Communist historian Robert Ozanne, “Several of the new, young leaders in the state were so

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<sup>11</sup> Holter, “Sources of CIO Success,” 209.

<sup>12</sup> Holter, “Sources of CIO Success,” 215, 218-219.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas W. Gavett, *The Development of the Labor Movement in Milwaukee* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 170.



left-wing in their ideology and in their public relations and political activities that they brought on ten years of internecine warfare within the state organization.”<sup>14</sup> In 1938, the president of the CIO local at the Allen Bradley Company in Milwaukee made accusations of Communist domination within the organization at the state and county level: “The fight going on in the UAW is a struggle to retire Communists from active leadership in the CIO.... The Communistic element which is being ousted from leadership and control in the Allis-Chalmers Local is also in control of the State and County CIO.”<sup>15</sup>

The following year, the left-wing president and secretary-treasurer of the state CIO were compelled to abstain from running for re-election.<sup>16</sup> Instead, at the suggestion of future UAW president (and ultimately co-founder of the AFL-CIO) Walter Reuther, the anti-Communist Harvey Kitzman ran for and was elected president of the state CIO in an attempt to counter its left-wing leadership.<sup>17</sup> At the 1941 CIO state convention, however, Kitzman chose not to seek re-election, later claiming that “Communist elements dominated the organization and just wanted him as a front man.”<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, at the national level, a political schism within the UAW led conservative UAW president Homer Martin to split off from the CIO and establish the

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<sup>14</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 86.

<sup>16</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> “Biography/History,” 1987, Harvey Kitzman Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, <https://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi/f/findaid/findaid-idx?c=wiarchives;cc=wiarchives;view=text;rgn=main;didno=uw-whs-mss00725>.

<sup>18</sup> Leon Hughes, “Hoover Election Made Kitzman a Union Man,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 5, 1972.

rival UAW-AFL, although this new union only garnered a small fraction of the membership of the UAW-CIO.<sup>19</sup>

Internal conflict within the CIO slowed down from 1942 to 1945 due to a collective interest in achieving Allied victory in WWII. Post-war, however, dissent within the CIO between the leftists and anti-leftists resumed. Leftists were in control of the Milwaukee County Industrial Union Council (IUC), later also referred to as the Milwaukee CIO Council, and the Wisconsin CIO. In the summer of 1946, the anti-leftist locals revolted. The USW local at the Harnischfeger plant in West Allis denounced the leftist leadership of the CIO, claiming the Wisconsin edition of the *CIO News* sought to “inoculate the rank and file members with ideologies that are Un-American and which are contrary to the desires and beliefs of the vast majority of CIO members.”<sup>20</sup>

The incorporation of the anti-leftist Brewery Workers into the CIO bolstered the threat to the left-wing leadership, as did diminishing support from the increasingly anti-leftist national CIO. This ultimately led to a purge of left-wing leadership in the Milwaukee County IUC and the state CIO, which, according to Ozanne, “made possible the slow rebuilding of labor’s public image and political influence.”<sup>21</sup> Estranged from its militant foundations, the CIO went on to merge with the more conservative AFL in 1955, which had by then come to embrace industrial organizing, forming the AFL-CIO, which exists to this day. According to labor activist and

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Halpern, *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 89-90.

<sup>21</sup> Ozanne, *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, 91, 94.

researcher Kim Moody, such developments marked the triumph of business unionism over social unionism, characterized by a “shift from a collectivist, egalitarian ethic to an individualist one” for American labor.<sup>22</sup>

### *Harold Christoffel and UAW-CIO Local 248*

Few union locals exemplify the CIO’s eventual rightward shift better than UAW Local 248 at Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company.<sup>23</sup> According to Julian L. Stockley, the company had a reputation for its “markedly inflexible labor policy,” as well as a history of crushing strikes and suppressing attempts at worker organization.<sup>24</sup> Harold Christoffel, Local 248 president from 1937 to 1944, led a successful campaign to unite Allis-Chalmers workers under one industrial union, arguing that the craft unionism of the AFL had failed the workers.<sup>25</sup> Historian Stephen Meyer outlines the differences between the AFL and the CIO at the time, demonstrating some of the fundamental reasons behind Christoffel’s success:

The industrial unionists won because the CIO was a qualitatively different form of unionism. The AFL was accommodating toward management; the CIO was combative. The AFL recommended negotiation; the CIO threatened strike. And the AFL appointed business agents to represent workers; the CIO elected shop stewards.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (Verso, 1992): xvi.

<sup>23</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 2.

<sup>24</sup> Julian L. Stockley, “‘Red Purge’: The 1946-1947 Strike at Allis-Chalmers,” *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 76 (1988), 18.

<sup>25</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 57.

<sup>26</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 62.

The emergence and ascendancy of the CIO provided a promising opportunity for workers like Christoffel who favored industrial unionism. Given these conditions, he was able to organize several thousand workers into the largest industrial union in Wisconsin.<sup>27</sup>

Christoffel was born in 1912 into a working-class family of Swiss immigrants.<sup>28</sup> His father, John M. Christoffel, ran a small contracting firm out of the Christoffel family home, which provided the household a reasonable level of economic security. However, when Harold was a young teenager, his father died, driving the family into poverty. He would later recall having to purchase stale bread and poor cuts of meat, telling shopkeepers it was for his chickens and dog. At sixteen, he dropped out of Milwaukee Technical High School and began work as a messenger for Western Union before finding himself in an apprenticeship at Allis-Chalmers in West Allis. Meanwhile, he returned to school four nights a week, studying electrical engineering at the Milwaukee Vocational School. He discovered a knack for the job but told a CIO reporter that he “wanted to know why, when his instructor said he was an electrical genius, he and his family were eating dog meat.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Meyer, “economic hard times, a Milwaukee socialist tradition, and a family heritage of Swiss socialism” steered Harold Christoffel into radical politics during the Great Depression.<sup>30</sup> He was active with the Young People’s Socialist League and became a member of

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<sup>27</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 3.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 4.

<sup>29</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 5.

<sup>30</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 5.

the Socialist Party. In 1933, he gained his first experience in labor organizing, becoming the president of the Allis-Chalmers Apprentice Association and drawing up a petition that resulted in increased wages for all Allis-Chalmers apprentices. After his apprenticeship concluded, he was able to organize fellow tradesman into the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), a craft union affiliated with the AFL.<sup>31</sup>

In 1937, despite a struggle on the part of the AFL to retain control, Christoffel successfully organized Allis-Chalmers workers into UAW-CIO Local 248. This was the first plant-wide organization of workers at Allis-Chalmers, incorporating electrical workers, molders, machinists, and assembly line workers into one, all-encompassing union. Christoffel served as the first president of Local 248 until he was drafted into the Army in 1944 and replaced by the likeminded Robert Buse.<sup>32</sup> In 1938, Local 248 gained recognition as the bargaining agent of Allis-Chalmers workers. Despite these achievements, however, Stockley writes that “Local 248 still did not enjoy union security, freedom from management’s arbitrariness, or a wage package comparable to those paid by [other] area manufacturers.”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, the relationship between Local 248 and Allis-Chalmers officials remained contentious.

#### *A History of Labor-Management Conflict*

Allis-Chalmers had a strong record of resistance to the demands of labor. Strikes occurred in West Allis in both 1906 and 1916, but both efforts were unsuccessful and resulted

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<sup>31</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 5.

<sup>32</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 6.

<sup>33</sup> Stockley “*Red Purge*,” 19.

in the total dissolution of the unions. In the late 1930s, other firms began to relax their stances on labor and open up labor-management communications, but Allis-Chalmers remained hostile.<sup>34</sup> According to Bert Cochran, “the contracts that Local 248 extracted from the company were inferior to many others won by unions with lesser leaders and weaker organizations. From early days, the company exhibited a stiff-necked determination to retain most of the prerogatives of its open-shop past.”<sup>35</sup>

Not only did Allis-Chalmers refuse to negotiate with unions, the company also clamped down on the entire labor movement through legislative measures. Company attorney and later vice president Harold Story was responsible for writing the 1939 Wisconsin Labor Peace Act, which rolled back union gains provided by the 1937 Wisconsin Labor Relations Act and would later serve as inspiration for the infamously anti-labor 1947 Taft-Hartley Act. One direct impact of Story’s legislation on Local 248 was raising the threshold of worker support required to declare strikes or achieve a legal union shop, defining a legal labor dispute as one “between an employer and a *majority* of employees.”<sup>36</sup> A legal strike would now require the majority of a firm’s collective bargaining unit, rather than a majority of voters or union members. Union shops were forbidden without three-fourths of the bargaining unit’s votes.<sup>37</sup> This was particularly threatening due to the highly factionalized labor situation at Allis-Chalmers.

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<sup>34</sup> Stockley, “Red Purge,” 18.

<sup>35</sup> Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict That Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977): 168.

<sup>36</sup> Meyer, “Stalin over Wisconsin,” 78.

<sup>37</sup> Meyer, “Stalin over Wisconsin,” 77.

According to Meyer, “Although the split into the UAW-AFL and UAW-CIO had ended internal factionalism on the national level, the war continued on the Allis-Chalmers shop floor.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite a substantial election victory by Local 248 in 1938, almost 28 percent of the more than 8,400 production workers did not vote for the union. Some of these workers were simply indifferent and didn’t cast ballots. Another portion were “conservative skilled craftsmen who opposed the more militant, confrontational stance of the CIO union.” Others were antiunion altogether.<sup>39</sup>

Allis-Chalmers took advantage of this anti-CIO minority in order to challenge the security of Christoffel’s Local 248. This led to strikes in 1939 and 1941, both of which centered around demands for a closed or union shop.<sup>40</sup> The 1939 strike lasted twenty-six days and resulted in a number of gains for Local 248, but these did not include the primary objective of union security. As such, labor factionalism at Allis-Chalmers continued.<sup>41</sup> An Independent Union (IU) was established in an attempt to counter Local 248’s control. Meanwhile, the Milwaukee AFL began to campaign more aggressively for craft unionism at Allis-Chalmers. One AFL representative

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<sup>38</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 76.

<sup>39</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 68.

<sup>40</sup> According to T. T. Hammond’s “The Closed Shop Issue in World War II,” a closed shop entails that “All persons employed must be union members when hired and must remain union members during employment.” A union shop entails that “All persons employed must within a specific time after hiring become and remain union members.” Either of these would have granted Local 248 an increased level of union security and the achievement of one or the other was sought by the union at varying points throughout its struggle with Allis-Chalmers management, who demanded an open shop; T.T. Hammond, “The Closed Shop Issue in World War II,” *North Carolina Law Review* 21, no. 2 (1943): 133.

<sup>41</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 78, 80-82.

even met with Harold Story to discuss collaboration in their shared goal of usurping the CIO local. According to Meyer, “Story and the other company officials viewed the AFL campaign with the hopeful expectation of more amenable labor relations.”<sup>42</sup>

Tensions between the militant Local 248 and conservative AFL came to a head on December 18, 1940, when a confrontation between two AFL members and a group of local 248 members somehow resulted in the AFL members fleeing in a car with a Local 248 member on the hood. The AFL members reported the situation to the police as a mob action; the Local 248 member claimed attempted murder. In an open letter to Wisconsin governor Julius Heil, Christoffel threatened to shut down the entire plant if the two AFL members returned to work. Meanwhile, the incident compelled Local 248 to settle the question of union security once and for all. In a meeting at the State Fair Park Coliseum on January 2, 1941, thousands of Local 248 members met and authorized a formal strike vote. On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, Allis-Chalmers workers shut down production, resulting in a seventy-six-day strike centered around the demand for a union shop.<sup>43</sup>

Allis-Chalmers officials claimed that the strike was interfering with national defense production. This narrative was echoed by local newspapers and soon attracted national attention.<sup>44</sup> Clare Hoffman, a Republican congressman from Michigan, blamed the strike on Communist domination of Local 248. These charges were reiterated by AFL president William

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<sup>42</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 86.

<sup>43</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 89-91.

<sup>44</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 92.



Green, who claimed that the Allis-Chalmers strike, as well as other CIO strikes, were “wholeheartedly in line with Communist Party policy toward defense.”<sup>45</sup> Notably, according to historian Roger Keeran, “when the company raised the cry that the union was sabotaging defense work, Max Babb, Allis-Chalmers president, served as chairman of the Milwaukee Chapter of the America First Committee, and Babb’s successor as Allis-Chalmers president, Walter Geist, served as head of the Wisconsin America First Committee.”<sup>46</sup> This right-wing organization of isolationists opposed American involvement in WWII and had a reputation for anti-Semitism and pro-Nazism.<sup>47</sup> Regardless, representatives from Allis-Chalmers and the UAW were invited to Washington in hopes of settling this “defense strike.”<sup>48</sup>

In mid-February, a temporary agreement was brokered by Sidney Hillman, an experienced negotiator and director of the federal Office of Production Management.

According to historian Matthew Josephson, the terms of the agreement were as follows:

It was a compromise formula providing for “maintenance of union membership”. . . . Thus the existing status was to be “frozen,” with substantial union recognition granted and union wages and standards established for some of the workers. The management promised not to interfere with or discriminate against employees because of their choice of a union; the union promised not to force non-union members out of their jobs, but remained in a position to advance gradually toward the full union shop it hoped for.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 93

<sup>46</sup> Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 268.

<sup>47</sup> Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions*, 268.

<sup>48</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 93.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Josephson, *Sidney Hillman, Statesman of American Labor* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1952), 539.

Establishing a requirement for all Local 248 members to maintain membership with the union, the agreement split the difference between the demands of Allis-Chalmers for an open shop and Local 248 for a closed shop. A perhaps overly boastful Christoffel returned to Milwaukee proclaiming that union security had been achieved. However, Babb denied that the agreement had anything to do with maintenance of membership and urged a written explanation or amendment be released that would make this clear. Hillman refused, insisting the original agreement be upheld. As such, Josephson writes, "For a whole month longer, throughout March 1941, it was the company and its president, Mr. Babb, who were on strike."<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the company continued to blame the strike on Communist sabotage.

Abandoning negotiations, Allis-Chalmers collaborated with AFL officials to galvanize a back-to-work movement.<sup>51</sup> When strikebreakers returned to the plant, they were met by large crowds of angry strikers. Five hundred police and special deputies showed up in an effort maintain order, equipped with tear gas and an armored vehicle.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, a level of chaos ensued, in what FBI director J. Edgar Hoover would later describe as "virtually [an] insurrection."<sup>53</sup> According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, Local 248 stormed the plant, police "ran out of tear gas," and Governor Heil's Cadillac was "banged up and splashed with red paint."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Josephson, *Sidney Hillman*, 540.

<sup>51</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 96.

<sup>52</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 100.

<sup>53</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 101.

<sup>54</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 100-101.

Consequently, Governor Heil requested Allis-Chalmers to cease operations “in order to prevent bloodshed.”<sup>55</sup>

The plant closed once again and the National Defense Mediation Board (NDMB) called the two parties back to Washington to renegotiate. A new, one-year agreement was approved by Allis-Chalmers and UAW officials on April 6 and ratified by Local 248 members the following day, ending the strike. Among other terms, the agreement specified that an impartial referee would be assigned to address issues of union security. According to Meyer, the referee “provided the important wedge that eventually ensured union security against AFL and company provocations.”<sup>56</sup>

Along with the National War Labor Board (NWLB), the NDMB would continue to ensure union security for Local 248 throughout WWII.<sup>57</sup> Such guaranteed stability allowed Local 248 to further the union’s challenge to management over control of workplace conditions. In particular, a robust shop steward and grievance procedure—later described by Christoffel as “the heart of our union”—allowed workers to assert their rights and test the limits of their power and authority. According to Christoffel, this filled the workers with a sense of pride and the sentiment that they “weren’t just to be kicked around but [rather] they had a right to speak up and to be heard... and if they do speak up that the union is going to back them up. And we

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<sup>55</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 101.

<sup>56</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 101-102.

<sup>57</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 105.

did.”<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, however, Harold Story prepared for confrontation, planning to reassert management rights upon the war’s conclusion.<sup>59</sup>

A number of NLRB rulings throughout the war years were favorable to Local 248, but post-WWII the NLRB was terminated and its recommendations could no longer be enforced. Additionally, according to Meyer, post-war unemployment weakened the union’s position, while “the prospect of huge federal tax breaks” strengthened that of Allis-Chalmers.<sup>60</sup> As reconversion to civilian production commenced at the plant, Allis-Chalmers officials demanded the resignation of the assigned referee, claiming his decisions “constituted an unwarranted intrusion into management’s domain.”<sup>61</sup> Consequently, negotiations between Local 248 and Allis-Chalmers officials broke down.<sup>62</sup> The company saw potential for a final showdown with Local 248 and, as such, refused to entertain the union’s demands for “wages comparable to national industrial wage rates, an improved grievance procedure, and union security.”<sup>63</sup> On

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<sup>58</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 106, 111; Harold Christoffel, interview by Dale Treleven, January 27, 1982, tape recording, Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter Christoffel Interview, 1982); Stockley notes the unequivocal degree to which Local 248’s undertakings during this period were contrary to the directives of the Communist Party: “Had the ‘Communist’ leadership of Local 248 been heeding the advice of such leading Communist figures as Earl Browder, the union would have curtailed its use of the grievance procedure and listened to Browder’s urging that ‘Communists must avoid alienating employers’ in order to maximize wartime production.” Stockley, “Red Purge,” 19.

<sup>59</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 147.

<sup>60</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 152.

<sup>61</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 155.

<sup>62</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 157.

<sup>63</sup> Stockley, “Red Purge,” 17.

April 29, 1946, approximately 11,000 workers walked out of the plant, the majority assembling at the State Fair Park, where they voted to strike once again.<sup>64</sup>

### *The 1946-47 Allis-Chalmers Strike*

Rather than engage with the union's contractual points of contention, Allis-Chalmers officials renewed a propaganda drive to persuade the public and its employees that the 1941 strike had actually been a "Communist-inspired plot to disrupt American industry."<sup>65</sup> The timing was perfect—the early stages of McCarthyism were coming into fruition, as the press stirred up fears of a Soviet threat and the Truman Administration geared up for the Cold War.<sup>66</sup> The industrialist-backed Republican Party took control of the U.S. Congress for the first time in eighteen years, while the Chamber of Commerce began to publish pamphlets warning of Soviet infiltration, such as "Communists within the Labor Movement, Facts and Countermeasures."<sup>67</sup> According to Stockley, "The American people seemed to conclude that although they could not control threats from the outside, they could at least identify and eliminate the enemy within their own ranks."<sup>68</sup>

Federal efforts at mediation failed due to the refusal by Allis-Chalmers officials to resume negotiations, resulting in the U.S. Secretary of Labor threatening government seizure of

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<sup>64</sup> Meyer, *"Stalin over Wisconsin,"* 157.

<sup>65</sup> Stockley, "Red Purge," 20.

<sup>66</sup> Stockley, "Red Purge," 20-21.

<sup>67</sup> Stockley, "Red Purge," 21.

<sup>68</sup> Stockley, "Red Purge," 21.

the plant.<sup>69</sup> Allis-Chalmers responded by declaring the prospect of plant seizure as an “invasion of our constitutional rights.” The *Milwaukee Sentinel* concurred, while also charging that the strike was part of a Communist plan “to irritate and disrupt the orderly process of democratic society” and “to provoke and hasten the chaos of which world revolution is expected to rise.”<sup>70</sup> Ultimately, in the face of nationwide public resistance to the tactic, President Truman decided against an Allis-Chalmers takeover. According to presidential press secretary Charles G. Ross, “the strike was not considered a national emergency of a character to warrant seizure.”<sup>71</sup>

Meanwhile, a struggle for power developed on the Milwaukee CIO Council as right-wing dissidents sought to reduce Local 248’s control. The *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel* began to aggressively cover the issue of Communism in the Milwaukee CIO. The *Journal* charged the Communist Party with “control[ling] the Milwaukee and Wisconsin CIO councils through leadership” and declared Local 248 the “pride” of the Party.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, the *Sentinel* published a series of front-page articles for fifty-nine days straight that alleged to reveal the Communist infiltration of the striking Local 248, the Milwaukee CIO Council and the state CIO Council.<sup>73</sup> Published anonymously under the pseudonym “John Sentinel,” the series claimed to “focus the light of publicity on each detail of the Communist menace here at home so that the

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<sup>69</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 161.

<sup>70</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 160-161.

<sup>71</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 162.

<sup>72</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 167-168.

<sup>73</sup> Stockley, “Red Purge,” 25.

thinking power of the intelligent reader audience will be brought to bear on the situation every day.”<sup>74</sup>

According to Meyer, “Milwaukee press reports on labor Communists also inspired a new opposition movement within UAW Local 248.” One founding member of the union, Leon Venne, organized the Rank and File Membership Committee in October 1946 with the purpose of ousting Communist leaders.<sup>75</sup> Venne sent telegrams to CIO president Philip Murray and AFL president Walter Reuther, claiming that the union was “completely under communist domination.”<sup>76</sup> That same month, CIO conservatives managed to oust left-wing leaders from the Milwaukee CIO Council by admitting several new unions with right-wing sympathies, eliciting praise from the local press.<sup>77</sup>

Meanwhile, at the national level, Murray refrained from taking an active role in the strike. According to Stockley, “It seemed as though the national union leaders viewed Local 248’s desperate situation as an opportunity to oust the union’s leaders.”<sup>78</sup> Just one month prior to the strike, Walter Reuther had been elected president of the UAW, narrowly defeating left-wing incumbent R. J. Thomas.<sup>79</sup> According to Meyer, “Reuther made labor and Communism an

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<sup>74</sup> John Sentinel, “Stalin over Wisconsin: Reds Aim for Control in Our State,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 23, 1946.

<sup>75</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 170.

<sup>76</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 172.

<sup>77</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 173-174.

<sup>78</sup> Stockley, “Red Purge,” 26.

<sup>79</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 187.

important issue in his quest to maintain his hold on the UAW.”<sup>80</sup> However, the left-center faction of Thomas and George Addes maintained considerable support, with Thomas elected as vice president and Addes as secretary-treasurer, resulting in constant tension within the union’s leadership. Privately, Reuther supported the conservative dissidents in the Milwaukee and Wisconsin CIO, but publicly the UAW organization had maintained support for the strikers and Thomas was assigned to oversee the situation.<sup>81</sup>

In December 1946, CIO rightists won control of the Wisconsin CIO Council and, as Meyer writes, “the balance of Milwaukee and Wisconsin labor politics shifted further to the right.”<sup>82</sup> Developments at Allis-Chalmers followed suit. The Independent Workers of Allis-Chalmers (IWAC), an independent union, was formed by conservative workers around demands for a back-to-work movement. IWAC petitioned the Wisconsin Employment Relations Board for a representation election, claiming to have accumulated 3,400 members. Local 248 leaders attempted to challenge the call for an election in the federal court, but the challenge was struck down by Judge F. Ryan Duffy, coincidentally brother-in-law to Harold Story.<sup>83</sup>

In January 1947, Reuther and Thomas clashed over the handling of the strike and the threat of IWAC, resulting in Reuther going behind the backs of Thomas and Local 248 in an attempt to end the strike. “Just before the WERB election,” Meyer writes, “Reuther met with

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<sup>80</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 188.

<sup>81</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 188.

<sup>82</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 192.

<sup>83</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 194.



Harold Story and other Allis-Chalmers officials in Milwaukee. Without the knowledge of Thomas or local union leaders, Reuther and John Brophy, CIO president Murray's personal representative, tried to negotiate a settlement."<sup>84</sup> The Reuther-Brophy proposal involved complete capitulation to Allis-Chalmers demands. However, Thomas was able to push back further negotiations until after the election, hoping Local 248 would score a victory.<sup>85</sup>

UAW Local 248 won the representation election by a thin margin—a "triumph for all organized labor" according to Thomas.<sup>86</sup> The following day, Thomas publicly derided Reuther, leveling allegations regarding Reuther's backdoor dealing with Allis-Chalmers officials to *Detroit Times* and *New York Times* reporters. Reuther denied the allegations, claiming that his contact with Allis-Chalmers had been authorized by the national Policy Committee. Regardless, Meyer claims, Allis-Chalmers officials had evidently managed to convince Reuther of the Communist orientation of Local 248 leaders. Reuther subsequently demanded the removal of Local 248 officers and the placement of the union under UAW administratorship.<sup>87</sup>

In February and March 1947, Meyer writes, "the drama of the Allis-Chalmers strike moved to the national political stage," as three congressional committees investigated Local 248 and the Allis-Chalmers strike: the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee, the House

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<sup>84</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 194.

<sup>85</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 194-195.

<sup>86</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 196.

<sup>87</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 197-198.

Education and Labor Committee (HELC), and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).<sup>88</sup> Meyer summarizes the investigation proceedings:

Chaired by Representative Fred Hartley, the House sponsor of the Taft-Hartley Act, the HELC heard the testimony of company and union officials. The committee looked forward to amending the National Labor Relations Act, which management conservatives believed tilted the balance of federal power toward labor unions. At the hearings, Harold Story led top Allis-Chalmers officials and R. J. Thomas led Local 248 leaders. Two freshmen congressmen, John Kennedy and Richard Nixon, sat on the HELC and interrogated union leaders about their alleged Communist activities. In addition, HUAC, which had recently gained prominence in the anti-Communist atmosphere of the new Cold War America, heard the testimony of three Local 248 opposition leaders. By March 1947, the combined weight of UAW factionalism and the Red Scare had broken the will of Allis-Chalmers strikers.<sup>89</sup>

Local 248 officials who testified included Buse and Christoffel. Based on guilt by association, the hearings confirmed the existence of Communists in Local 248, a devastating blow to the union efforts.<sup>90</sup>

The star witness for Allis-Chalmers at the HELC was former Communist Louis F. Budenz, who reasserted prior claims that the 1941 strike at Allis-Chalmers was carried out on behalf of the Communist Party to impede the flow of American war supplies to the West Allies, as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union at the time had formed a temporary non-aggression pact. Budenz claimed to have engaged in discussions with Christoffel during his time as a Communist, claiming he was one of “the party’s top flight leaders in the American labor movement.”<sup>91</sup>

According to Meyer, however:

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<sup>88</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 204.

<sup>89</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 186-187.

<sup>90</sup> Stockley, *“Red Purge,”* 28.

<sup>91</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 8.

The controversial defense strike certainly interfered with the production of important materials for Britain's defense against Germany. But its direct causes were the intransigent management opposition to CIO unionism and the fratricidal AFL-CIO war. Despite the . . . assertions of Louis Budenz, union security, not Communism, was the fundamental reason for the long and bitter defense strike.<sup>92</sup>

Despite having considered himself a proponent of labor, Kennedy was fully absorbed by a quest to root out the Communists, as was not uncommon with politicians of the era.

According to a later statement by Kennedy, he was completely sold on the "illuminating" testimony of Budenz and the narrative woven by Allis-Chalmers officials, proclaiming that the company "had been unable to carry on good labor relations because the union in their plant was dominated by Communists."<sup>93</sup> The proceedings of the HELC inspired Kennedy to call for Christoffel's indictment for perjury, as a result of the union leader stating that he was not a member of the Communist Party.<sup>94</sup>

Newspaper coverage of the committee hearings exacerbated the decline of Local 248's position in the strike, devastating members' morale. Eventually, the UAW Executive Board ordered Local 248 leaders to call the strike off. By this point, more than half of the eleven thousand original strikers had already returned to work. After 329 days of struggle, the remaining 1,200 strikers voted to end the strike.<sup>95</sup> When they returned to the plant on March

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<sup>92</sup> Meyer, *"Stalin over Wisconsin,"* 103.

<sup>93</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Remarks of John F. Kennedy at the Convention of the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor, Springfield, Massachusetts, July 31, 1947," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/springfield-ma-19470731>.

<sup>94</sup> Sentinel Washington Bureau, "Budenz Calls Buse a Red: Charges Party Gave Christoffel Orders for 1941 A-C Strike," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 14, 1947.

<sup>95</sup> Meyer, *"Stalin over Wisconsin,"* 207-209.

24, 1947, it was announced that the company had terminated ninety-seven workers for disruptive acts. Many of them were officers, including Buse and Christoffel. The militant heart of Local 248 had been ripped from the union. By June, the number of dues-paying members had plummeted from approximately 8,000 before the strike to just 300. On December 1, Reuther appointee Pat Greathouse took over as administrator of the largely destroyed local.<sup>96</sup> Addressing the tenth annual Wisconsin CIO convention in Milwaukee just a few days later, Reuther proclaimed that Local 248 “was a black spot on the whole CIO, in Wisconsin, and Milwaukee, in particular.”<sup>97</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In 1948, the year after the strike was broken, Harold Christoffel was convicted of perjury and sentenced to two to six years in prison. However, the Supreme Court reversed the conviction the following year on a technicality. Dead set on placing Christoffel behind bars, Kennedy lashed out against the ruling, declaring it a “travesty on justice.” The Justice Department decided to retry the case, resulting in Christoffel’s reconviction and imprisonment.<sup>98</sup> According to Meyer, “in the emerging Cold War climate, he was the first union leader indicted and subsequently jailed as a Communist.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 212.

<sup>97</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 213.

<sup>98</sup> “John Fitzgerald Kennedy: A Compilation of Statements and Speeches Made during His Service in the United States Senate and House of Representatives” (United States Government Printing Office, 1964).

<sup>99</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 7.

From a small, craft union local affiliated with the AFL to a formidable, militant industrial union, Christoffel successfully organized Allis-Chalmers workers to stand up to their recalcitrant bosses and secure better rights and conditions for themselves. For at least a few years, Christoffel's Local 248 was able to establish working conditions that provided Allis-Chalmers workers with a level of dignity, respect, and autonomy that would be enviable of many if not most American workers today. Particularly through the establishment of a highly functional grievance procedure, the union posed a significant challenge to the supreme authority of management.

However, as Christoffel would later state, "No matter how strong you are you're still finite in certain limits." As successful as Local 248 may have been when the struggle was between workers and management, there were greater forces plotting on the union's demise. "When we just had the company to fight, we did pretty well," said Christoffel. "But when we had to start fighting not only the company, but [also] the press on an all-out basis, plus the government. . . . [Local 248] was no match."<sup>100</sup> The following chapter details that collaboration between Allis-Chalmers, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and the government, as revealed by the affidavit of *Sentinel* reporter Hugh Swofford.

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<sup>100</sup> Christoffel Interview, 1982.

## Chapter Two: A Conspiracy against the Union

### *Introduction*

The previous chapter provided a broad overview of the 1946-47 Allis-Chalmers strike and its causes. This chapter, however, delves deeper into the strategies and tactics employed by the company to break the strike, as well as its broader intentions to transform the American labor landscape into one more conducive to the goals of management. It examines what *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporter Hugh Swofford would later refer to as a “conspiratorial arrangement” between Allis-Chalmers, the *Sentinel*, the Milwaukee Police Department, right-wing unionists, the U.S. Department of Justice, the FBI, and members of Congress, among others. The chapter relies primarily on the written testimony of Swofford, who, in his investigations of subversive activities for the *Sentinel*, found himself in the center of the entire scheme.

Together, these powers were able to successfully break the strike by framing Local 248 as dominated by Communists under Soviet control. A series of congressional hearings contributed to the elevation of the anti-Communist narrative to the national level, rousing concerns over the issue of alleged Communist infiltration of labor unions across the country. The resulting anti-Communist fervor facilitated the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. This legislation not only prompted the ousting of left-leaning union leaders and expulsion of left-leaning unions from the CIO, but also severely restricted the power and ability of unions to organize and advocate for their members.

## *The Milwaukee Sentinel*

Although its name has been adapted over the years, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* is the oldest surviving newspaper in Wisconsin. Robert Witas writes that the *Sentinel* “can fairly lay claim to being part of the life blood of Milwaukee and Wisconsin from the date of its founding as a weekly newspaper on June 27, 1837,” eleven years before Wisconsin was admitted into statehood. The newspaper was initiated with financial contribution from Solomon Juneau, one of the area’s first non-Native settlers, who went on to become one of Milwaukee’s founders and the city’s first mayor.<sup>1</sup> Juneau sought to establish a newspaper that could counter the *Milwaukee Advertiser*, which was controlled by business rival Byron Kilbourn.<sup>2</sup>

From 1837 through 1990, the *Sentinel* changed hands numerous times, going through 37 different editors and 27 alterations of ownership. According to Witas, “the paper would forge a history during those years of editors who . . . manned the journalistic ramparts in relentless support of causes and pursuits of goals in which they passionately believed.”<sup>3</sup> As the owners and editors transitioned over the years, the newspaper’s political orientation and editorial goals followed suit, as the city of Milwaukee evolved from a small settlement into a modern metropolis. Throughout this time, a series of struggles occurred over the control and direction of the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Witas, “‘On the Ramparts’: A History of the Milwaukee Sentinel” (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1991), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Witas, “On the Ramparts,” 2.

<sup>3</sup> Witas, “On the Ramparts,” 4.

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *Sentinel* was purchased by Charles F. Pfister, a local millionaire who owned the luxurious Pfister Hotel and had inherited his father's stake in the Pfister & Vogel Leather Company.<sup>4</sup> The politically conservative Pfister discovered that another millionaire, Isaac Stephenson of Marinette, planned to finance a newspaper that would act as an organ for the Progressive movement of Wisconsin Governor Robert M. La Follette. According to Robert Witas, "La Follette's Progressive movement . . . was gnawing at Pfister's conservative soul."<sup>5</sup> He sought to counter the political messaging of Stephenson's La Follette organ by utilizing the *Sentinel* as a strong voice for the Republican Old Guard, mounting a twenty-five year campaign against Socialists in Milwaukee and Progressives across the state.<sup>6</sup>

After World War I, the *Sentinel* began to face financial troubles, as competition among local newspapers increased. On June 1, 1924, the *Sentinel* was sold to the Hearst Corporation, the media empire of William Randolph Hearst. Pfister was given a position on the board of directors, along with three other local businessmen. Hearst's ownership of the *Sentinel* was initially kept secret. Serving as the newspaper's public face as publisher was respected municipal judge August C. Backus.<sup>7</sup> According to Witas, "it was obvious, however, that Backus was the respectable local façade behind which Hearst chose to cloud his role."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Witas, "On the Ramparts," 54.

<sup>5</sup> Witas, "On the Ramparts," 54.

<sup>6</sup> Witas, "On the Ramparts," 54-56.

<sup>7</sup> Witas, "On the Ramparts," 69.

<sup>8</sup> Witas, "On the Ramparts," 70.



*“The Hearst Sentinel”*

The Hearst Corporation was founded in 1887. With 28 major newspapers and 18 magazines in 1935, the industrialist-allied Hearst was able to steer the American labor narrative and spread anti-worker, anti-leftist, and sometimes explicitly pro-fascist propaganda across the country. According to financial journalist and Hearst contemporary Ferdinand Lundberg’s 1936 biography of the newspaper baron, he stood out as “the keystone of American fascism, the integrating point in a structure around which political reaction is attempting to develop a movement which, if it succeeds, will tragically dupe America.”<sup>9</sup>

On September 28, 1930, Hearst newspapers such as the *Milwaukee Sentinel* published editorials by Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini, featuring explicit calls for fascism.<sup>10</sup> In 1934, Hearst spent the summer visiting Nazi Germany, where he traveled and consorted with high-level Nazi officials. His trip concluded with a conference with Hitler himself.<sup>11</sup> At some point during this time, a deal was arranged with the Nazi propaganda division in which they would pay \$400,000 annually for Hearst’s news services.<sup>12</sup> The most expensive news contract in the world, Lundberg alleges that it was intended to “establish such an obligation as might well result in favorable newspaper comment for the Hitler regime and unfavorable comment of the

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<sup>9</sup> Ferdinand Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst: A Social Biography* (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), 343.

<sup>10</sup> Adolph Hitler, “Desperate People Near Bolshevism, World Is Warned,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 28, 1930; Benito Mussolini, “Mussolini Traces So-called Fascism in Other Nations,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 28, 1930.

<sup>11</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 344.

<sup>12</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 352.

Soviet regime, of which Hitler has chosen to be the arch-enemy.” After establishing the contract, writes Lundberg, “the Hearst newspapers switched to the policy of praising the Hitler regime whenever possible and denouncing the Soviet Union in particular and Communism in general.”<sup>13</sup> That being said, Hearst didn’t actually concern himself as much with Communism as he did with crushing labor unions and silencing left-leaning intellectuals. The anti-Communist line played into the hands of reactionary, American business and industry leaders, who were afraid at the prospect of increased government spending to support struggling citizens in the age of the New Deal.<sup>14</sup>

Upon returning to the United States, Hearst directed his attorney, John Francis Neylan, in the breaking of a general strike held in sympathy with San Francisco dockworkers. Hearst’s papers labeled the strike a “communistic revolution,” claiming it was responsible for holding back food, milk, medicine and electricity from children and hospital patients, despite the reality that the striking unions had gone out of their way to ensure that the flow of such humanitarian needs would not be disrupted. San Francisco newspapers described how a new, revolutionary government had taken power and required permission be granted for all public acts, a charge which was found to be unsubstantiated by federal investigators. According to Lundberg: “there was not the remotest tinge of revolution about the strike. It was a simple strike for decent wages for the dockworkers. The employers won by lies and murder.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 353.

<sup>14</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 361-362.

<sup>15</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 345.

During the final stages of the strike, Hearst's San Francisco Bay Area newspapers called for violent measures by the police, after which two strikers were shot and killed.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Hearst newspapers called for the formation of vigilante bands to assist in the suppression of the "revolutionaries," after which mobs of hoodlums began to roam the streets of San Francisco in conjunction with the police. The offices of the regional Communist Party newspaper were demolished. Communists, liberals, progressives, and Jews were assaulted. The University of California-Berkeley campus was raided, as vigilantes sought to attack the "intellectuals" warned about in Hearst publications. The strikes were successfully broken; the Hearst Corporation's propaganda played a major role.<sup>17</sup>

Next, Hearst targeted college campuses across the country in an attempt to "expose" Communist professors. According to Lundberg, "the Nazis had convinced Hearst that Communism was an intellectualistic business, as well as a social aim."<sup>18</sup> Undercover reporters were sent to Syracuse University to dig up Communist dirt. The front page of Hearst's *Syracuse Journal* on November 22, 1934 read: "DRIVE ALL RADICAL PROFESSORS AND STUDENTS FROM UNIVERSITY." Professors across the country were labeled "Communists," while Hearst pushed for policy that would reduce taxes on the wealthy by trimming the budgets of public universities, especially those whose teachings he disagreed with.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 345.

<sup>17</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 346.

<sup>18</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 347.

<sup>19</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 349.

One standout example of Hearst's shameless distortion of the news to suit his propaganda needs revolved around the framing of the peculiar story of Milwaukee's "Mad Bomber," the 20-year-old Hugh "Idzy" Rutkowski, who terrorized the city for seven days in 1935, planting homemade dynamite bombs that resulted in many injuries and a number of deaths, including his own. A tragic and sensational story, Hearst's newspapers claimed without evidence that Rutkowski's youthful mind had been "warped with the seeds of Red Russia's Communistic menace."<sup>20</sup> In the Hearst Corporation's framing of the story, Rutkowski "took long bicycle rides in the country" and "read revolutionary literature and thought about it." However, according to Lundberg, "at no time did the Associated Press or the non-Hearst Milwaukee papers find any traces of Communism, radicalism, or liberalism; at no time did any responsible public official make such charges." Nonetheless, the Hearst papers continued to push the story further, with subsequent articles claiming the bombings were an example of Communism's "open warfare against America and American institutions."<sup>21</sup>

Lundberg estimated the "Mad Bomber" series to have been "a preliminary step in Hearst's deliberate campaign to create an atmosphere of violence in this country, not against Communists alone, but against militant labor leaders, progressive educators, writers and artists, unemployed demonstrators and rebellious farmers."<sup>22</sup> Moving forward, the Hearst Corporation would develop a reputation for deceptive tactics and attempting to stir up a "red scare" across

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<sup>20</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 366-367.

<sup>21</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 369-370.

<sup>22</sup> Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst*, 372.

the United States. Hearst demanded that the *Sentinel* gave special treatment to certain topics and personally directed editors on the framing of stories.<sup>23</sup> According to Witas, during the 35 years of Hearst ownership, “the *Sentinel* would routinely be referred to as the Hearst *Sentinel*, as a short-hand for discussing the character of the newspaper.”<sup>24</sup> In collaboration with Allis-Chalmers, the paper’s signature anti-Communist vitriol would be used to disparage Local 248 throughout the 1946-47 strike.

*Hugh Swofford, Sentinel Labor Editor*

Prior to his time at the *Sentinel*, Swofford was stationed in Italy during WWII, driving an ambulance for the American Field Service. Shortly after his return from overseas service in early 1945, he began work as an editor for the *Waukesha Daily Freeman*. Later that year, he was hired on as a writer for the Hearst-operated *Milwaukee Sentinel*. He had a particular interest in labor affairs, of which there was an increasing amount to report on. With the recent lifting of WWII wage controls and the conclusion of no-strike pledges by the AFL and CIO, the labor movement began to agitate for higher wages and improved working conditions. According to labor economist and left-wing unionist Irving Richter, “in the year following Japan’s surrender, more than 4,600,000 American workers went on strike.”<sup>25</sup> Before long, Swofford was assigned

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<sup>23</sup> Witas, “On the Ramparts,” 71.

<sup>24</sup> Witas, “On the Ramparts,” 69.

<sup>25</sup> Irving Richter, *Labor’s Struggles, 1945-1950: A Participant’s View* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xii.

the position of labor editor. Under this title, he carried out the majority of the *Milwaukee Sentinel's* labor reporting leading up to the 1946-47 strike at Allis-Chalmers.<sup>26</sup>

During this time, Swofford also began undercover investigative work for the *Sentinel*, with his first task being to expose the antisemitic Gentile League of Watertown, Wisconsin, as a fascist, un-American organization. He infiltrated the Watertown Gentile League, becoming close friends with founder and president Arthur Friede and establishing himself as editor of the League's paper, the *Gentile League News*. Through this undercover work, Swofford was able to identify a profit motive behind Friede's "anti-labor, anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, anti-Protestant, and anti-New Deal" rabble rousing. However, the *Sentinel* ultimately decided not to publish the results of the investigation. According to Swofford, the newspaper decided the publicity of such exposure would only serve to benefit Friede. Nonetheless, the investigation provided Swofford with a significant opportunity to sharpen his counter-subversive investigatory chops, preparing him for a career in espionage and infiltration.<sup>27</sup>

#### *"CIO RED PURGE DUE HERE"*

Shortly after Local 248 called for a strike at Allis-Chalmers on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1946, it became apparent to Swofford that "a storm was brewing within the [Milwaukee] County and State CIO Councils." He began to hold conferences with Walter Cappel, a Walter Reuther acolyte and representative for several UAW-CIO locals. From these conferences, Swofford gleaned

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<sup>26</sup> Hugh Swofford, "Swofford Affidavit," January 23, 1950, F. 15, Box 7, Nat Ganley Papers, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, 1-2 (hereafter "Swofford Affidavit").

<sup>27</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 2-3.

information about an unfolding struggle for control between the left-wingers in power and what Swofford referred to as the “so-called right wing movement.”<sup>28</sup>

Inspired by Reuther’s recent election victory as UAW president, a number of caucuses emerged within the UAW to combat the alleged domination of “pro-Communist” union leaders and oust militants from the state and county CIO councils.<sup>29</sup> The chief target of these caucuses was the Local 248 delegation, whose influence representing the largest single CIO union was dominant in both councils. According to Swofford, Cappel stated that if the right wingers within the county CIO could not successfully remove the left wingers, “the right wing locals, some 17 in number . . . would secede from the CIO council and set up their own Milwaukee County Association of CIO Unions.”<sup>30</sup>

On Labor Day of 1946, Swofford wrote the first of a series of stories on the developing right-left battle within the CIO, appearing at the top of the *Sentinel*’s front page: “CIO RED PURGE DUE HERE.” According to the article, a reliable source from within the CIO-affiliated Milwaukee County Industrial Union Council disclosed exclusively to the *Sentinel* that a powerful segment of the council “is seeking to purge alleged Communists from its ranks.”<sup>31</sup> Around the same time, as the Allis-Chalmers strike entered its fifth month, Swofford began to inquire

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<sup>28</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin”: The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900-1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 166.

<sup>30</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 7.

<sup>31</sup> “CIO Red Purge Due Here: Locals Chart Fight before Union Council,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 2, 1946.

where he might be able to “secure information on the alleged Communist backgrounds” of Local 248 leaders.<sup>32</sup>

Not only did Swofford’s contact with Cappel provide him with an inside scoop on the growing conflict within the state and county CIO, it also served to forge an alliance between the CIO right-wingers and the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. Cappel and Swofford both opposed the alleged dominance of “pro-Communist” union leaders—above all, Harold Christoffel. As the strike at Allis-Chalmers pressed on, Swofford would maintain contact with Cappel and other CIO right-wingers in a mutual effort to unearth and disseminate information that might serve to undermine the efforts of Local 248.

#### *“John Sentinel”*

Swofford claimed to have “struck gold” upon establishing contact with Lee Baker, an employee of the Allis-Chalmers public relations department. Incidentally, Baker was the assistant of Charles Granger, Allis-Chalmers public relations supervisor and former *Sentinel* reporter. Baker informed Swofford that the company retained a researcher who had accumulated a large file of information regarding the alleged Communist backgrounds of the Local 248 leaders. Upon learning about the file, *Sentinel* publisher Frank L. Taylor and managing editor James J. Packman took charge, arranging for the Allis-Chalmers researcher to write a series of articles for the newspaper based on his findings, which became the “John Sentinel” articles. According to Swofford, this period was “cloaked in considerable secrecy.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 8.

<sup>33</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 9.



Prior to the articles being published, the *Sentinel* launched a public awareness campaign, posting printed signs, “including full-size billboards publicizing the coming appearance of the John Sentinel series, which would allegedly expose Communist domination of Local 248, and of Communistic influence in Wisconsin State CIO circles.”<sup>34</sup> In late September, the *Sentinel* began publishing the series, which ran on the newspaper’s front page for 59 consecutive days, each article outlining a different figure or aspect of Local 248 and the Wisconsin CIO. According to Stephen Meyer, “the conservative newspaper clearly intended to arouse Milwaukee citizens and especially labor leaders against the ‘Red Fascist’ menace.”<sup>35</sup>

It was assumed by many, including *Sentinel* staff, that Swofford had authored the articles, resulting from his ongoing investigations of Communism. Later, Swofford was even instructed by Taylor to claim authorship. Eventually, Swofford discovered the true identify of “John Sentinel”: Ellis Jensen, “an ordained Protestant minister who had left his profession.” Swofford wrote, “Jensen is the son of the owner of the Janesville Sand and Gravel Co.”<sup>36</sup> Swofford claimed Jensen told him “of his plans for starting a service to manufacturers, whereby he could conduct investigations of alleged Communists, furnishing the results of his investigations to the manufacturers, with the idea of rooting out subversive elements from the work forces of his clients.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 10.

<sup>35</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 168.

<sup>36</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 10.

<sup>37</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 11.

While working for Allis-Chalmers, Jensen wrote speeches for Harold Story and submitted reports about Communist activity at the plant, such as one entitled “The purpose of the 1941 Allis-Chalmers Strike: Disruption of American Foreign Policy.” He also provided Story with memoranda regarding the backgrounds of various labor figures, including one that claimed to contain compromising information about various UAW leaders and negotiators. The memorandum included specific questions to ask during negotiations that “might indicate to them that you know a good deal about matters they want to keep secret.” Examples of such information included that R. J. Thomas was a former KKK member, that George Addes was a former Pinkerton agent, and that each received \$100,000 through an insurance fraud scheme. Any one of these allegations alone would be shocking, if true. More likely, they were not true and, rather, evidence of the dubious nature of Jensen’s “research.”<sup>38</sup>

While the “John Sentinel” series was released and eventually concluded, Swofford continued to report on the daily developments of the Allis-Chalmers strike, as well as the ongoing CIO power struggle, as both sides held frequent caucuses to map out strategy. Swofford recalled one meeting in particular that “amply illustrated the difficulty in securing information on the progress of the struggle.”<sup>39</sup> A closed CIO County Council special meeting and officer election was held on October 16<sup>th</sup> at the Federal American Legion Post. According to Swofford:

[Fellow *Sentinel* reporter Bob] Riordan took up a station at the head of the stairs (the meeting was in the basement), while Sam Sherman, Milwaukee Journal labor editor, and

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<sup>38</sup> William J. McGowan Papers, Box 1, Folders 22-23, Milwaukee County Historical Society.

<sup>39</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 12.

I went to look around for a vantage point from where we could hear the proceedings. We went outside and around to the back of the building where by kneeling on a grating we could hear what transpired from within through a partly opened window. Inasmuch as the meeting was expected to last for hours, our position was awkward and exposed. We decided to lift the steel grating and drop down into the window well, where we could sit comfortably and be less inclined to be seen. We worked one end of the ten foot grating loose and timed the lifting with the next surge of noise from within. Our first pull failed, and the second sent the grating, one end, clattering down into the window well. Sherman and I raced around the end of the building expecting to see a floor of CIO delegates pour out of the building to examine the course of the noise. Nothing happened, however, and we decided that the noise sounded like a street sound, so we went back and took up our positions. For nearly three hours, Sherman and I hunched down in the window well, taking shorthand notes of the proceedings. We came out with our story.<sup>40</sup>

“CIO LEFTISTS LOSE ELECTION TEST VOTE”—a massive headline adorned the front page of the *Sentinel* the following day. “The long fight of the democratic right wing bloc to clean Communists and fellow travelers from the CIO County Council was apparently nearing its triumphant end early this morning.”<sup>41</sup> The right-wing victory was rooted in the contentious admission of several new unions to the council at a controversial special meeting three days prior to the election, giving the anti-leftists a majority on the council.<sup>42</sup> The *Milwaukee Journal* reported that “The defeat of the left wing group marked the first major break in the nation in the revolt which has been smoldering against so-called Communist domination of the CIO.”<sup>43</sup> In December, CIO right-wingers achieved a similar victory at the Wisconsin State CIO Council convention. In January of 1947, Meyer writes, “the new state executive board selected Walter

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<sup>40</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 12.

<sup>41</sup> “CIO Leftists Lose Election Test Vote,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 17, 1946.

<sup>42</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 173.

<sup>43</sup> “CIO Leftists Lose Election Test Vote,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 17, 1946.

Cappel, an early leader of the conservative UAW caucuses, as the state CIO legislative representative, and Max Raskin, a Milwaukee attorney, as the CIO legal counsel.”<sup>44</sup> The balance of Milwaukee and Wisconsin labor politics had shifted dramatically to the right.

### *The Chicago Incident*

Throughout this period, Swofford claimed to have “kept in close touch with the right wing CIO leadership, talked over their strategy with them, and even attended a right wing caucus meeting, an unprecedented honor for a Hearst reporter.”<sup>45</sup> Incidentally, Swofford’s wife worked as the secretary for Glenn Clarke, a recently elected CIO County Council secretary, who Swofford claimed, “with virtually no labor background, had been the last minute choice of the right wing” for the position.<sup>46</sup> While on a routine assignment in the early spring of 1947, covering a speech by Wisconsin Supreme Court candidate Henry P. Hughes, Swofford ran into Clarke, who “told [him] rather excitedly that the old files in his CIO office were loaded with what he termed Communist front files,” along with “old check stubs containing many suspicious entries.”<sup>47</sup> Clarke agreed to allow Swofford to examine the files. Upon reporting the news to his superiors, Taylor and Packman, Swofford was provided with an unlimited expense account with

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<sup>44</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 192; A 1982 interview exemplifies the attitude of right-wing Socialist Max Raskin to Local 248. He expressed his belief that Harold Christoffel was a Communist and the 1941 Allis-Chalmers strike was called by Russia; Max Raskin, Interview by Barbara Morford, December 31, 1981, tape recording, Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>45</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 13.

<sup>46</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 13.

<sup>47</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 13.

the aim of securing “as much information from the files as possible about Communists in Local 248 and in Wisconsin CIO labor.”<sup>48</sup>

Late one night, Clarke and Swofford snuck into the CIO County and State headquarters and rifled through the steel file cabinets, using a screwdriver to force one of them open. Swofford also went through the desk of Alfred H. Hirsch, editor of the *Wisconsin State CIO News* and alleged Communist.<sup>49</sup> After removing a number of records, they promptly boarded a North Shore train for Chicago in order to examine them without fear of detection, setting up base in a double room on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor of the Hotel Sherman. The following morning, Swofford began to inspect the records. Meanwhile, Clarke requested a new shirt, tie, socks, and underwear, which Swofford purchased for him with *Sentinel* funds. Clarke was also provided with as much as \$50 at a time to entertain himself while Swofford carried out his work.<sup>50</sup>

The married Clarke also requested a certain female acquaintance, Betty Rose, be sent down from Racine to perform secretarial work and act as his companion; Swofford booked Rose a separate hotel room on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor. The group stayed in Chicago for a number of days, returning once to Milwaukee to acquire more records and a CIO typewriter, presumably also covertly removed from the CIO County and State headquarters. Also during this time, Swofford contacted *Sentinel* head photographer Leland M. Benfer, who microfilmed the entirety of the files at a large Chicago microfilming center. Meanwhile, the group worked sporadically in Rose’s

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<sup>48</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 14.

<sup>49</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 14, 19.

<sup>50</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 14.

room on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor. On the group's final night at the hotel, Swofford retired to his room on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor at 5:00 AM, leaving Clarke and Rose alone with a container of iced beer and a bottle of Old Forester whisky.<sup>51</sup>

At 9:00 AM, Swofford was awakened by Clarke and Rose, whose "faces were blackened with soot." Rose said she woke up to a "room filled with smoke and a blaze consuming the drapes at the opposite end of the room."<sup>52</sup> Clarke, however, was naked and nonresponsive. It was only with great difficulty that Rose was able to awaken Clarke, whose first concern was to get some trousers on. He then proceeded to fight the fire, using the beer container as a water bucket, eventually succeeding, but not before considerable damage had occurred: "a ruined sofa, charred end table, a burned lamp and drapes, and considerable damage to the rug, walls and ceiling, in addition to smoke damage to the room generally."<sup>53</sup> Upon being interrogated by the hotel vice-president, the quick-witted Clarke came up with a story to pacify him somewhat. Swofford backed him up, still deeming Clarke useful to his investigation.<sup>54</sup> The group was nonetheless forced to leave the hotel and Swofford was to pay \$100 for damages, plus \$14 for one night's occupancy and an additional \$14 to cover for the following night during which the fire damage would need to be repaired. Swofford relocated to another hotel to continue his

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<sup>51</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 14-15.

<sup>52</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 15.

<sup>53</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 16.

<sup>54</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 16.

work. He believes that Clarke left Chicago that day, but nonetheless had his wife and a friend of hers sent down for a champagne party at another Chicago hotel at Swofford's expense.<sup>55</sup>

### *The Investigation Continues*

Shortly thereafter, Taylor sent Swofford to the Wisconsin Historical Library in Madison, where he ordered 26 years of the *Daily Worker*, "official organ of the Communist Party," to be microfilmed at the cost of more than \$5,000.<sup>56</sup> Continuing his effort to gather as much information as possible, Swofford contacted K. C. Flory, an Allis-Chalmers official, for permission to copy the contents of the company's files on Communism, which took up "12 or 14 steel file drawers about 24 to 28 inches long." This was allowed by Allis-Chalmers under the condition that the company receive copies of all Communist information gathered by Swofford throughout his investigation. The *Sentinel* then paid female students from a local business school to copy a large portion of the thousands of cards in the Allis-Chalmers files by hand. The remainder were copied by one of Benfer's daughters.<sup>57</sup>

Notably, the Allis-Chalmers files "contained information about the sex lives of local Communist Party leaders," as provided to Allis-Chalmers by FBI agent Joe Deane, son-in-law of the vice-president of Cudahy Bros., a local meat packing plant.<sup>58</sup> Upon leaving the FBI, Deane was hired on as legal staff at Allis-Chalmers. According to historian Ellen Schrecker, former FBI

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<sup>55</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 17.

<sup>56</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 19-20.

<sup>57</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 21.

<sup>58</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 23.

agents were ubiquitous in the private sector, particularly in jobs relating to security matters and labor relations. Schrecker writes: “Former agents may well have looked particularly attractive to companies like Allis-Chalmers that used red-baiting tactics to fight labor.” Jack Lee, another former agent, was hired by Allis-Chalmers in February 1947, just days after submitting a report to the Bureau on Communist Party connections to Local 248.<sup>59</sup>

Later, Swofford had a 400-pound microfilm camera delivered from Allis-Chalmers to his office at the *Sentinel* to continue the project, microfilming nine years of weekly editions of the *Wisconsin State CIO News*, which Swofford and Clarke snuck out of the CIO office in the middle of the night to microfilm. They entered the office with a key Clarke had borrowed from the building janitor and then had copied “in violation of the building rules, a fact of which he was proud,” wrote Swofford.<sup>60</sup>

According to Swofford, “the question naturally arises – why did the Milwaukee Sentinel spend thousands of dollars building up a file on Communism after they had run a series of 59 articles covering phases of the alleged Communist penetration in Wisconsin labor unions?” The answer was that the articles had been published “out on a limb” without substantial physical evidence to back them up, thus exposing the *Sentinel* to potential litigation—a threat that could apparently prove significantly more expensive than Swofford’s mission.<sup>61</sup> However, while it seems that Swofford’s primary objective was to preclude the *Sentinel* from involvement in a

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<sup>59</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 218.

<sup>60</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 21-22.

<sup>61</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 20.



costly lawsuit, the scope of this assignment would soon expand to include leveraging the results of his investigation to take down Harold Christoffel.

*The Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee (Washington D.C.)*

In February 1947, as the Allis-Chalmers strike trudged on, a series of congressional committees commenced in consideration of amending the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (NLRA), which had been accused by management conservatives of “tilt[ing] the balance of federal power toward labor unions.”<sup>62</sup> Also known as the Wagner Act, the NLRA signaled to workers that they had the right to organize and bargain collectively with employers, igniting a surge of labor activism and unionization across the country.<sup>63</sup> On February 14<sup>th</sup>, Harold Story testified in Washington, D.C. before the U.S. Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee (LPWC), chaired by Senator Robert Taft, where he spoke on the “misuse of union power by Communist leaders” and provided legislative proposals aimed to “produce a more balanced national labor program.”<sup>64</sup> “To determine whether a union leadership is communistic,” Story stated, “I apply the old sayings of ‘Birds of a feather flock together’ and ‘By their fruits ye shall know them.’ In other words, by ‘communistic leadership’ I mean Communists or party liners.”<sup>65</sup> Whereas the term “Communist” generally referred to members of the Communist Party,

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<sup>62</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 186.

<sup>63</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 53.

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare (hereafter LPWC), *Labor Relations Program*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Washington, D.C., February 14, 1947: 820.

<sup>65</sup> LPWC, 820.

Story's ambiguous designation of "communistic" could be cast upon any person or organization whose goals coincided with those of the Party.

As evidence of the communistic orientation of Local 248, Story referred the committee to the "John Sentinel" series. When asked by Democratic Senator James E. Murray if he considered newspaper articles to be conclusive proof of such charges, Story responded, "I do not; but I consider it very indicative, because newspapers normally will not take a chance with libel suits."<sup>66</sup> Additionally, Story presented the gubernatorial nomination papers of Local 248 member Sigmund Eisenscher, an unabashed Communist who ran on the Communist Party ticket. These papers had already been featured prominently in the "John Sentinel" series months prior. According to Story, they had been signed by a "majority of the top-ranking officers of local 248," including Robert Buse. Eisenscher needed 5,000 signatures to get on the ballot and was able to get 800 from his fellow workers by passing the papers around the Allis-Chalmers picket line in the fall of 1946. Suggesting the possibility that "people signed these petitions just as people sign petitions," rather than with the goal of advancing the Communist Party, Republican Senator George Aiken asked how many votes were ultimately cast for Eisenscher in the general election, to which Story had no answer.<sup>67</sup>

Buse would later claim that Eisenscher received just over 1,000 votes across the entire state, which, despite signing the nomination papers, did not include Buse's own. He declared his belief that "in this American democracy every man has the right to run for office, and in

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<sup>66</sup> LPWC, 820.

<sup>67</sup> LPWC, 823.

order to have that right in Wisconsin he must have a number of signatures on nomination papers. I believe that if a man who is a Communist wants to run for office he has a perfect right to, just as well as a Republican, a Socialist, a Democrat, or what have you.”<sup>68</sup> Before the LPWC, however, Story expressed his own belief: “that when these gentlemen signed these nomination papers, they signed to support the principles of communism.” All 800 signees now had targets on their heads. According to Eisenscher himself, Allis-Chalmers created a pamphlet with their names and circulated 20,000 copies across the country, blacklisting them from getting jobs at other companies.<sup>69</sup> The LPWC began to set the stage for a national discourse on “communistic leadership” in labor, elevating the rationales and sensibilities of Story, while villainizing Harold Christoffel and Local 248.

*Louis Budenz, Professional Witness*

Two days later, on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1947, the *Milwaukee Journal* published an exclusive interview with ex-Communist Louis Budenz, in which he blamed Communists for the 1941 Allis-Chalmers strike: “It is undeniably true that the 1941 strikes at Allis-Chalmers and at North American Aviation in California were ordered by the national executive board after discussions with the political committee of the Communist party. . . . There were discussions with Harold

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<sup>68</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor (hereafter HELC), *Amendments to the Labor Relations Act*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Washington, D.C., March 1 and 3, 1947, 1982-1984.

<sup>69</sup> Sigmund Eisenscher, interview by Dale Treleven, January 26, 1982, tape recording, Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter Eisenscher Interview).

Christoffel, then president of the union at Allis-Chalmers, and he agreed that there were sufficient worker grievances to support a strike.”<sup>70</sup>

After devoting much of his life to the labor movement, Louis Budenz joined the Communist Party in 1935 at the age of 44, becoming a staff member at the *Daily Worker* and working his way up to the position of managing editor. Within the next decade, however, Budenz claimed to have experienced a profound change of heart. He reconverted to Catholicism and quickly became one of the nation’s most outspoken anti-Communists.<sup>71</sup>

According to Schrecker, the Catholic Church played a vital role in the anti-Communist network, leveraging the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists to drive Communists out of the labor movement, and operating “an economic and institutional safety net for repentant former Communists.” “In some instances,” Schrecker writes, “it even facilitated their rupture with the CP and rewarded their contrition with teaching positions in Catholic colleges. Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen specialized in the conversion of high-profile ex-Communists, bringing some of the nation’s top professional witnesses back to the religion that they had left years before.”<sup>72</sup> Budenz was one such example. According to Budenz, “Monsignor Sheen knows the secret of dealing with people who have broken with the Church.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Robert H. Fleming, “Blames Communists for 1941 A-C Strike,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 16, 1947.

<sup>71</sup> Herbert L. Packer, *Ex-Communist Witnesses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 123.

<sup>72</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 74.

<sup>73</sup> Louis Budenz, *This Is My Story* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), 162.

Budenz had already begun to meet with Sheen in 1937. Over dinner at a New York Hotel, he claimed to have experienced an epiphany: “Immediately, I was conscious of the senselessness and sinfulness of my life as I then lived it. The peace that flows from Mary, and which had been mine in the early days, flashed back to me with an overwhelming vividness. There rang in my ears for a moment the prayer which comes from the salutation of Gabriel: *Ave Maria, gracia plena! ‘Hail Mary, full of grace!’*”<sup>74</sup>

According to his autobiography, Budenz spent the next years unsuccessfully trying to reconcile his Communism with Catholicism. Finally, in October 1945, Budenz abruptly cut ties with the *Daily Worker* and the Communist Party and was officially readmitted to the Catholic church through a baptism administered by Sheen. Within a month he found himself employed as a professor of economics at the University of Notre Dame.<sup>75</sup> Before long, he began to supplement his professorship with a lucrative career as a professional informer-witness.

On February 17, 1947, the day after the *Journal* interview was published, Louis Budenz delivered a speech to a packed hall at Mount Mary College, a Catholic women’s college in Milwaukee. In the speech, he reiterated his claims of Communist responsibility for the 1941 Allis-Chalmers strike. In attendance were Swofford, Taylor, Story, and Jensen, as well as other Allis-Chalmers officials. At Taylor’s suggestion, Swofford joined Budenz afterwards on a train to

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<sup>74</sup> Budenz, *This Is My Story*, 163.

<sup>75</sup> “Louis Budenz Turns Catholic,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 11, 1945.

Chicago, along with Jensen, in order to retrieve more information on Christoffel and Communism in the Wisconsin CIO.<sup>76</sup>

Budenz admitted to Swofford that the strike might have occurred regardless of the Communist Party due to wage difficulties and injustices. However, Budenz refused to provide an exclusive story, because “he preferred to let out his material piecemeal.” “In other words,” wrote Swofford, “[he] was exploiting his material to the utmost.” Swofford deemed Budenz “a rather contemptible person,” and Jensen agreed.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, the following day, an article written by Swofford appeared in the *Sentinel*, stating: “Budenz Supports John Sentinel Revelations.”<sup>78</sup>

The insistence on releasing information in a piecemeal fashion would go on to become a trademark of Budenz. He personally estimated that he spent 3,000 hours being interviewed by the FBI in the first few years following his defection from the Communist Party. But then, at moments most opportune, new information would suddenly come to mind. He fanned the media flames with a promotional campaign teasing the release of a “list of 400 concealed Communists” and, according to Robert Lichtman, “wrote five books, hundreds of magazine and newspapers articles, and delivered countless lectures throughout the country, all warning in

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<sup>76</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 25.

<sup>77</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 25.

<sup>78</sup> “Christoffel Top Red in Ranks of Labor,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 17, 1947.

shrill terms of an internal Communist peril.”<sup>79</sup> In 1952, he testified under cross-examination to having earned more than \$70,000 since 1946 through his lectures, writings, and testimony.<sup>80</sup>

Even the FBI had doubts about the validity of Budenz’ claims. A 1951 internal report stated that the “reliability of Budenz in instant testimony must be classed as unknown,” citing at least seven instances in which Budenz “either furnishes information differing from that furnished previously . . . or relative to certain occurrences gives testimony which he has never made known before.”<sup>81</sup> According to attorney Robert M. Lichtman:

The evidence suggests [Budenz] fashioned a fail-safe technique, one that enabled him to accuse virtually at will any individual with even modest left-wing coloration. . . . Using his technique, Budenz did not need to know the individual at all; the only persons able to challenge his assertion were Party officials who could not do so without risking self-incrimination (and who in any case, as members of the Communist conspiracy, were not to be believed); and the very absence of evidence supporting his charge tended to prove it.<sup>82</sup>

Lichtman concludes: “The FBI, able to observe Budenz closely and to compare his statements over the years, had doubts about his credibility. But to Hoover’s agency, the adverse impact of potentially false charges on ‘400 list’ individuals, largely left-wing artists and academics, was not a matter of concern.” According to Schrecker, “For the military intelligence agencies and the FBI, with their authoritarian, law-and-order mind-set and their underlying hostility to militant labor, almost any type of industrial conflict involving a left-wing union seemed to have

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<sup>79</sup> Robert M. Lichtman, “Louis Budenz, the FBI, and the ‘List of 400 Concealed Communists’: An Extended Tale of McCarthy-Era Informing,” *American Communist History* 3, no. 1 (2004), 25-26.

<sup>80</sup> “Louis Budenz, McCarthy Witness, Dies,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1972.

<sup>81</sup> Lichtman, “Louis Budenz,” 48.

<sup>82</sup> Lichtman, “Louis Budenz,” 53.

a hidden agenda. None of these agencies made careful distinctions between suspected subversion and legitimate trade union activities.”<sup>83</sup>

Schrecker finds it likely that Budenz’ story about the Communist origins of the 1941 strike was a fabrication. As evidence, she cites an FBI report on the intensive debriefing sessions held upon Budenz’s defection from the Party. During those sessions, Budenz was questioned specifically about the political strikes during that time period but made no mention of Local 248. According to Schrecker, “it is hard to believe that he could have forgotten or his FBI interlocutors could have overlooked a reference to something as important as Allis-Chalmers.”<sup>84</sup> At the time it was one of the largest manufacturing plants in the country. Regardless of his questionable reliability, Budenz would go on to testify against Christoffel on numerous occasions and become the star witness in Christoffel’s prosecution.

#### *HELC and HUAC (Washington, D.C.)*

Responding to the post-WWII strike wave, the United States Congress continued to investigate the state of labor-management relations. On February 24<sup>th</sup>, Harold Story and four other Allis-Chalmers officials testified before the House Education and Labor Committee (HELC), chaired by Republican Representative Fred A. Hartley Jr. Notably, HELC included two freshmen congressmen who would go on to become presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. The Allis-Chalmers team reiterated and expanded upon Story’s statements before the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee. They disregarded the history of labor

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<sup>83</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 108.

<sup>84</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 186.



relations at the plant, focusing rather on their narrative of Local 248's Communist origins and the "political" nature of the ongoing strike. According to Richter, "These charges were given respectful credence by the [committee], figured prominently in the questioning and later prosecution of union witnesses, and also became a major argument for the noncommunist-affidavit . . . of the final Taft-Hartley Act."<sup>85</sup> Based in part on input from Story, this Act would substantially reshape the fabric of U.S. labor-management relations, bolstering the power of employers while rolling back labor's New Deal era advances.

Three days later, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) convened with the goal of exposing Communism in Milwaukee labor. Three Local 248 opposition leaders provided testimony. Leon Venne, the leader of the Rank and File Membership Committee, declared: "Communism is like a cancer; the seed was implanted in 1936 in local 248 and like a cancer it has grown until communism is the thing that is going to destroy local 248 and make it extinct."<sup>86</sup> Walter Peterson, the leader of the Independent Workers of Allis-Chalmers, claimed the "John Sentinel" articles "proved that we have been right all along."<sup>87</sup> Before the hearing came to an end, Republican Representative Karl Mundt congratulated the opposition leaders "on the courageous and Americanlike way in which" they were ridding the company of Communist leadership. He continued: "I think you have set a splendid example for other

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<sup>85</sup> Richter, *Labor's Struggles*, 73-74.

<sup>86</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Un-American Activities (hereafter HUAC), *Hearings Regarding Communism in Labor Unions in the United States*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Washington, D.C., February 27, 1947, 39.

<sup>87</sup> HUAC, 57.

unions, which are also dominated by Communist leadership, and I am sure that in the long pull you are going to succeed.”<sup>88</sup>

Shortly thereafter, R. J. Thomas, Harold Christoffel and Robert Buse traveled to Washington, D.C., having volunteered to testify before HELC in an effort to counter the anti-union narrative that had been established thus far by the three congressional committees. However, according to Christoffel, “We came there with one simple thing in mind: to ask the committee to appoint someone to arbitrate the strike.”<sup>89</sup> Seeking sympathy from Democratic members of the committee, such as Representative Kennedy, Christoffel believed he could convince them to see through the company narrative: “Because clearly all we wanted to do was continue. We just wanted the wage increase which everyone else was getting. . . . We wanted to maintain our union on the similar basis of other unions. All we wanted was the simple things which everybody else had. So we could easily have most any fair person arbitrate the strike.”<sup>90</sup> Of course, Allis-Chalmers preferred to focus on the alleged threat of Communist infiltration. Unfortunately for Local 248, so did the committee. “In contrast to the welcoming reception given to the Allis-Chalmers officials and the UAW local’s dissidents,” writes Meyer, “the three

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<sup>88</sup> HUAC, 60.

<sup>89</sup> Harold Christoffel, interview, 1970, tape recording, Milwaukee Independent School: Labor History Course Materials, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter Christoffel Interview, 1970).

<sup>90</sup> Christoffel Interview, 1970.

UAW leaders faced something akin to an inquisition.”<sup>91</sup> Richter sums up the developments of the hearings:

The committee treated all three [union representatives] with contempt, as irresponsible and subversive. The committee planners, continuing their basic strategy of frightening the country about communists, showed no more interest in the subtleties of union factionalism than they did in the union’s substantive evidence on the 1946-7 strike or the proposed law. Instead, member after member, leaning on the Story-Allis-Chalmers brief, pressed each union witness to answer political questions about the theory and practice of communism at home and abroad.<sup>92</sup>

At the hearing the following day, Saturday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, Christoffel outlined his request for arbitration, claiming “We are ready to accept any third party, we do not care who it is, any honest man or committee to set in and see what these facts are, and that will be the end to these lies which the company brings up about communism to cover themselves, to cover the fact that they are viciously antiunion. And in these activities, certainly, un-American.”<sup>93</sup> He called for the establishment of a fact-finding committee to look past the “smoke screen of communism” and address the actual facts behind the strike.

Republican Representative Claire Hoffman contested Christoffel’s claims, defending the right of Allis-Chalmers to abstain from compulsory arbitration, to which Christoffel responded that the terms of the arbitration would not be compulsory. According to Christoffel, the company would be under no obligation to follow through with any recommendations stemming from the arbitration, yet Local 248 would accept the results regardless of which side they

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<sup>91</sup> Meyer, “*Stalin over Wisconsin*,” 202.

<sup>92</sup> Richter, *Labor’s Struggles*, 84.

<sup>93</sup> HELC, March 1 and 3, 1947, 2083.

avored. Further, the workers of Local 248 would return to work immediately, as soon as such arbitration were to be declared. It was simply a matter of setting straight the public record. “There is nothing, Mr. Hoffman,” pleaded Christoffel, “which is fairer than such a proposition.”<sup>94</sup> Hoffman dismissed the proposal, switching course to a rapid-fire scrutiny of the union leader’s background, stating: “I want to ask you a few questions that may seem unnecessary, but just for the sake of the record, and they are very short and you can answer them very quickly.” A sample of Hoffman’s questions are as follows:

- Are you a member of the Communist Party?
- Were you ever a member of that Party?
- Were you ever a member of the Communist Political Association?
- Have you ever worked with the Communist party?
- Have you worked with the Communist Political Association?
- Have you signed petitions for the Communist Party?
- [For] the Communist Political Association?
- [For] any candidate who was a member of the Communist Party?
- [For ] any candidate who followed the communistic party line?
- Have you ever made a contribution that went into the Communist Party or the Communist Political Association?
- Have you participated in the activities of the Communist Party?
- Have you taken part in Communist Party demonstrations?
- Have you been a member of the Wisconsin Conference on Social Legislation?
- You have been a member of the American Youth Conference?
- Have you been a member of the American Peace Mobilization?
- Did you oppose the defense program of the United States prior to the invasion of Russia in June of 1941?
- Are you a subscriber to the *Daily Worker*?
- Have you sold subscriptions for it?
- Have you supported the Communists, endorsed communism?
- Do you know Ned Sparks?

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<sup>94</sup> HELC, March 1 and 3, 1947, 2091.

- Do you know Fred Blair?

To each of these questions, Christoffel responded in the negative.

The following Monday, Christoffel was summoned back for further questioning. Republican Representative Wint Smith began with a lengthy series of specific questions regarding details from Christoffel's time in the army, such as the name of the ship he sailed on, the date he arrived in Manila, and the results of his IQ test, much of which Christoffel could not recall.<sup>95</sup> Christoffel would later conclude that Smith and others were trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to establish on record the reliability of Christoffel's memory—a prelude to a potential perjury charge.<sup>96</sup> Smith then sought to ensnare Christoffel with a hypothetical: "Would you sooner, in your work, work under a company-dominated union than under the system that they have in Russia, the unions in Russia?" Christoffel responded: "I do not know what systems they have in Russia. I never was there."<sup>97</sup>

Republican Representative Charles J. Kersten followed up with a series of questions regarding Christoffel's alleged, past involvement with Communists and Communist "front" groups, which Christoffel largely denied or claimed to have no recollection of. Hoffman stepped in to inform Christoffel that avoiding a direct answer to a question that he indeed did know the answer to is just as much of a false statement as a direct misstatement, to which he replied:

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<sup>95</sup> HELC, March 1 and 3, 1947, 2104-2106.

<sup>96</sup> Christoffel Interview, 1970.

<sup>97</sup> HELC, March 1 and 3, 1947, 2016.

“All I can answer is to the best of my recollection.”<sup>98</sup> Kersten then brought up the allegations of Louis Budenz regarding the 1941 strike, which Christoffel declared to be “just a tissue of lies, completely; in 1941 the strike was called under the constitution of the union by a vote of the workers, because of the fact that the company had refused to deal with the workers as they should be dealt with.” He denied having ever seen Budenz.<sup>99</sup>

Republican Representative Thomas L. Owens asserted to Christoffel that “despite the fact that this investigation deals with wages and other things that it is beginning to turn on the question of whether or not this is a Communist-controlled strike held at that plant, and even some of your answers that I have listened to carefully have not done a thing to dispel that suspicion.”<sup>100</sup> Republican Representative Carroll D. Kearns concluded: “As an educator, I would evaluate your I.Q. as between 118 and 120 anyway, but you have, in my opinion, been the most successful witness who has appeared here in evading answers to any questions, and from the display you have made here, you certainly have been properly indoctrinated.”<sup>101</sup>

Most committee members refused to give any consideration to Christoffel’s plea for arbitration. In fact, the interests of the committee seemed to be in lockstep with those of Allis-Chalmers. Richter concludes that “Hartley’s committee, like the various ‘un-American’ committees in Congress, the FBI, and other executive agencies of the federal government in

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<sup>98</sup> HELC, March 1 and 3, 1947, 2110.

<sup>99</sup> HELC, March 1 and 3, 1947, 2116.

<sup>100</sup> HELC, March 1 and 3, 1947, 2119.

<sup>101</sup> HELC, March 1 and 3, 1947, 2121.

1946-7, was in the grip of the same illiberal dynamic. All, in varying degrees, wanted to see the end of political activity by unions.”<sup>102</sup> Before long, this goal would largely be accomplished, as right-wing interests clamped down decisively on left-wing unionists like Christoffel. Further, contrary to Christoffel’s intention of aiding the cause of Local 248 through his voluntary appearance before HELC, his testimony would later be weaponized against him, ultimately leading to his imprisonment on charges of perjury.

### *The Investigation Concludes*

After the hearings of Christoffel, Buse and Thomas, proofs of their testimonies were sent to the *Sentinel* by the government printing office, which Swofford immediately began to study “in an attempt to ferret out possible perjurious statements by Christoffel and Buse.” With help from Taylor and Allis-Chalmers officials, Swofford selected a dozen or so points with which it seemed most likely perjury could be proven.

Meanwhile, according to Swofford, “A week of furious activity” ensued.<sup>103</sup> Milwaukee Police Chief John Polcyn gave Swofford access to the department’s subversive files. Head of the department’s Subversive Activities Squad Adrian Mershon connected Swofford with squad member Arthur Zeltner, who claimed to have witnessed Christoffel consorting with Communists on two occasions. At Zeltner’s house, Swofford typed up an affidavit, detailing the sightings of Christoffel mingling with known Communists at a conference held by the Milwaukee State Conference on Social Legislation at the Schroeder Hotel and at the Earl

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<sup>102</sup> Richter, *Labor’s Struggles*, 86-87.

<sup>103</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 28.

Browder Win the War Rally at the Pabst Theater. On both occasions, Zeltner notes specifically that he witnessed Christoffel in conversation with Fred Bassett Blair.<sup>104</sup> The affidavit would be taken in as evidence at a HELC subcommittee meeting held in Milwaukee to investigate “communistic influences in labor.”<sup>105</sup>

Around this time, Swofford received a telephone call from Walter Cappel, who informed him of a box of records that were seized from Local 248 in 1941 that would definitively prove Christoffel was a Communist. The box was located at the regional office of the UAW-CIO, and Cappel gave Swofford keys to the office that he had retained from when he had been a UAW-CIO representative. However, the locks had been changed; Swofford realized he was going to need to find another way in.<sup>106</sup>

Mershon advised him to visit retired Milwaukee Police Lieutenant Louis Dieden, who had been active in subversive investigations. Dieden said it would be an easy task if he happened to know the cop on the beat, but unfortunately for Swofford, he did not. Swofford brought Benfer on his second visit to the office and tried to boost him through the transom. They ended up breaking the transom support but weren’t able to get through. On his third visit, Swofford brought Glenn Clarke and Betty Rose. They attempted to open the door with a case knife, but this was also unsuccessful. Next, Swofford contacted Flory, of Allis-Chalmers, who

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<sup>104</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, HELC Subcommittee, *Congressional Hearing on Communistic Influences in Labor*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Milwaukee, WI, March 17-19, 1947, 435-438. Presumably, Zeltner meant to say the *Wisconsin* State Conference on Social Legislation.

<sup>105</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 28.

<sup>106</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 29.



taught them how they could easily bypass a single lock throw with a modified butcher knife. However, they soon discovered the door had a double lock throw.<sup>107</sup>

Next, Swofford called up Arthur Otter, a right-wing CIO leader with access to the office, who arranged for what he called a “one-man” committee meeting. Basically, Otter waited around at the office one day until everyone left, including the left-wing head of the office Jess Nichols, and then let Swofford and Benfer in. However, the door to Nichols’ office, where the box was thought to be stored, was locked. They tried to force it open without success and almost gave up before trying out the keys from Cappel. It turned out that the inner locks had never been changed. Surely excited, Swofford entered the office and found the Local 248 records, including a notebook of Harold Christoffel containing “some radical notations.” However, Swofford declared, there was still no evidence that Christoffel was a Communist.<sup>108</sup>

By this point, it seemed Swofford had just about exhausted all resources. He had even taken a flight to Minneapolis to track down a former FBI agent with Milwaukee connections named Frank Fudali. But when he finally found Fudali at his lake cottage, he was unable to help. “Such were my efforts to nail down evidence against Christoffel,” concluded Swofford.<sup>109</sup>

*Budenz at HELC (Washington, D.C.)*

On March 13, Louis Budenz testified before HELC, subpoenaed in connection with Christoffel’s testimony 10 days prior. Budenz stated: “It was unfortunate that Mr. Christoffel, as

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<sup>107</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 30.

<sup>108</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 30-31.

<sup>109</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 31.

with so many Communists, have such unfortunate lapses in memory. . . . Mr. Christoffel, likewise, claims he never knew me. The facts are he knew me very well and personally.”<sup>110</sup> He discussed meetings with the CP political committee in 1940, where he alleged discussions were “aimed at stopping aid to Great Britain, were aimed at helping Hitler in his contest with ‘British imperialism’ as it was called. Great Britain was declared to be the chief war-monger and, therefore, the nation that should suffer defeat.”<sup>111</sup> He claimed to have met with Eugene Dennis, Harold Christoffel, Sigmund Eisenscher, and Fred Blair, among others, at the home of Meta Berger, widow of renowned Milwaukee Socialist Victor Berger. There, Budenz asserted, an order was given by Dennis to call a strike at Allis-Chalmers and Christoffel agreed to carry it out.<sup>112</sup> He declared that “Christoffel and Buse are undoubtedly members of the Communist Party,” which he declared to be “one of the worst enemies of free-trade unionism.”<sup>113</sup>

During the hearing, Budenz also outlined the purported strategy of Communists in advocating for labor and civil rights:

They will penetrate any organization that they can. They feel, of course, that there are certain justified grievances, you understand, which then they can use for unjustified purposes. Hitler tried that, too. This man, Hitler, spoke about our difficulties on the question of discrimination here. . . . That is why you see them championing questions like discrimination, the labor-union organization, and other things which, in themselves,

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<sup>110</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor (hereafter HELC), *Amendments to the Labor Relations Act*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., Washington, D.C., March 13, 1947, 3604.

<sup>111</sup> HELC, March 13, 1947, 3609.

<sup>112</sup> HELC, March 13, 1947, 3612-3613.

<sup>113</sup> HELC, March 13, 1947, 3614-3615.

have some color of being correct, but which, as I say, they use and distort. In my opinion, they thereby become the greatest enemies of these causes.”<sup>114</sup>

Kennedy prompted Budenz to provide “the best test by which it is possible to tell a Communist or a Communist organization.” “If organizations appear before us and say that they are not Communist-dominated or Communist organizations,” probed Kennedy, “what test can we put to them to demonstrate whether they are? Is there any test?”<sup>115</sup>

“There is a very decided test,” asserted Budenz. The best way to weed out the true Communists, he claimed, is to ask one question: “When did you criticize Soviet Russia, and the Soviet dictatorship?” According to Budenz, the Communist is prone to deny his Communist membership. He will even agree to a resolution “against the infiltration of Communists in the CIO.” You can never take the word of a Communist, Budenz argued, because they do not place any value on their word. “But there is one point that they will never retreat from, and that is their admiration and adulation, and 100 percent support of everything Soviet.”<sup>116</sup>

Thoroughly convinced by Budenz, Kennedy declared that “in view of the fact that the testimony of Mr. Budenz is in direct contradiction to that of Mr. Buse and Mr. Christoffel, I suggest that this committee indict Mr. Christoffel and Mr. Buse for perjury.”<sup>117</sup> Officially, however, the indictment would have to wait. A special HELC subcommittee hearing was scheduled to take place in Milwaukee just three days later to gather additional evidence.

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<sup>114</sup> HELC, March 13, 1947, 3621.

<sup>115</sup> HELC, March 13, 1947, 3623.

<sup>116</sup> HELC, March 13, 1947, 3623.

<sup>117</sup> HELC, March 13, 1947, 3616.

*Hearing on Communistic Influences in Labor (Milwaukee)*

In preparation for the upcoming subcommittee hearing, Swofford compiled “an inch thick booklet typed on legal size onion skin paper” to submit to the subcommittee, which “included every allusion to any pro-Communist activity undertaken or pro-Communist expression contained in the minutes of the CIO County Council.” At the same time, Allis-Chalmers officials, including Story, Flory, and Jensen, met with the *Sentinel* team to discuss evidence and develop a strategy. Together, they decided to drop “any attempts to make perjury charges stick against Buse and concentrate on Christoffel.”<sup>118</sup>

On March 16, Taylor and Swofford picked up HELC counsel Irving McCann and Department of Justice official Golden Dagger from General Mitchell Field and brought them to a corner suite at the Plankinton Hotel, where they met with Harold Story, K. C. Flory, Frank Taylor, James Packman, Leland Benfer, and Hugh Swofford, among others. Also present were Charles Kersten, Thomas Owens, and Republican Senator Ben Gettelman. Together, this group of *Milwaukee Sentinel* leaders and staff, Allis-Chalmers officials, and members of Congress discussed the following day’s hearing.<sup>119</sup> Later that evening, Story entertained Dagger and McCann at the University Club, along with the leadership and staff of Allis-Chalmers and the *Sentinel*.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 32-33.

<sup>119</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 33.

<sup>120</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 35.

The following morning, the subcommittee hearings commenced. According to the *Sentinel*, the purpose of the hearings was “to develop evidence that Buse, president of Local 248 UAW-CIO, and Christoffel, honorary president, committed perjury when they testified in Washington.”<sup>121</sup> The congressmen sitting on the subcommittee were Kersten, Owens, and Kennedy. According to Swofford, “One of the principal impressions about the hearings left with many was McCann’s arrogance toward the witnesses to the extent that Kersten . . . cautioned McCann to take it easy.”<sup>122</sup> Swofford wrote that “McCann’s harshness was particularly noticeable in the question of Owen Lambert, a young Communist who, although naïve, seemed sincere.”<sup>123</sup> McCann would develop a reputation for his hostile demeanor later that year after grabbing a labor representative by the throat and hitting him three times for calling committee procedure “gestapo stuff.”<sup>124</sup>

Lambert, an employee at Allis-Chalmers and Local 248 member, claimed to have become a Communist while working at Allis-Chalmers in response to the working conditions, asserting that it is much easier to “understand Communism when you are up against such things as you are at Allis-Chalmers.”<sup>125</sup> He testified that there were “anywhere from 15 to 20” Communists at the plant that he was aware of, but that none of them were Local 248

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<sup>121</sup> “Probers Fly Here,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 16, 1947.

<sup>122</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 34.

<sup>123</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 34.

<sup>124</sup> “Fisticuffs Halt Hearing on Movie Labor,” *San Mateo Times*, August 19, 1947.

<sup>125</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 322.

officers.<sup>126</sup> The three congressmen and McCann argued with the stubborn and self-confident Lambert about Communist theory, the Soviet Union, and America values, seemingly trying to either change his mind or win a debate. “You do not know that in this nation a young man like yourself can rise to the highest place in the land, even to the Presidency of the United States? Do you know that?” asked Owens, to which Lambert replied: “Yes, if the big monopolies would so wish they would permit me to.”<sup>127</sup>

Notably, Lambert insisted that he had no way of proving himself a Communist other than his word; he had signed no card. However, while he could not produce any proof, he asserted that “it seems that the Committee is able to prove anybody is a Communist as long as they believe in or fight for labor.”<sup>128</sup> Although open about his beliefs and activities at Allis-Chalmers as a Communist, he refused to “become a Company stooge” by naming names.<sup>129</sup> When asked if those committing perjury under oath should be investigated, he replied “Yes, even if it is Mr. Budenz.”<sup>130</sup> It is unlikely Lambert’s testimony contributed much to the subcommittee’s objectives.

On the other hand, the testimony of Farrell Schnering was exactly what the committee was looking for. Schnering was an ex-Communist who had been kicked out of the Party for his

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<sup>126</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 323.

<sup>127</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 330.

<sup>128</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 337.

<sup>129</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 344.

<sup>130</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 334.

alcoholism and, like Budenz, turned to the Catholic Church.<sup>131</sup> Eisenscher, who had once roomed with Schnering for several months, described him as “an alcoholic, a woman chaser, and kind of a dissolute character.”<sup>132</sup> Schnering claimed to have known Christoffel since he was a young man and member of the Young Peoples Socialist League. According to Schnering, Christoffel was at the time a “loyal member of the Socialist Party” and “disliked the Communists very much,” sometimes resulting in violent arguments with Schnering.<sup>133</sup>

Later, however, during Christoffel’s early days at Allis-Chalmers, Schnering alleged that “Christoffel was feeling quite despondent as regards [to] the future of trade unionism . . . and that is why we picked him.”<sup>134</sup> According to Schnering, Party District Organizer Eugene Dennis met with Christoffel in 1935 at the state headquarters of the Communist Party in downtown Milwaukee:

Now, the approach to Chris was something like this: “Maybe you don’t like us, and we are not asking you . . . to become a member of the Communist Party, but . . . by your own admission the Socialist Party has failed to apply itself with sufficient energy . . . to help you organize a Union at Allis-Chalmers. By the same token, the organizers for the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers do not show that they are too much interested in organizing a Union. . . . If you want to organize the plant you are going to have to work with us, and we will give you everything we have in order to do it.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Meyer, *“Stalin over Wisconsin,”* 9.

<sup>132</sup> Eisenscher Interview.

<sup>133</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 288-289.

<sup>134</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 290.

<sup>135</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 295.

Schnering claimed that Christoffel accepted the offer and, before too long, Dennis informed Schnering that Christoffel had become a Party member.<sup>136</sup> Further, he stated, "I am convinced in my own mind, and I know it to be a fact, that at the time I left the Communist Party Christoffel was just as much a member of the Party as I had been."<sup>137</sup>

On the second day of the hearing, Swofford's findings from the CIO files were to be presented. According to Swofford, the files had been subpoenaed from Clarke, who submitted them to the subcommittee with feigned protest. Because Swofford knew the location of the pertinent documents, McCann snuck him and Benfer into the hearing room to identify them the night before.<sup>138</sup> Clarke provided brief testimony, limited primarily to confirming that the selected documents indeed came from his CIO files.<sup>139</sup> The documents were then marked for identification and read into testimony by McCann, as the subcommittee searched for evidence contradicting Christoffel's testimony.<sup>140</sup> Kennedy asserted that the records "marked a definite conformity with the party line, and that is one of the proofs that Christoffel was a Communist sympathizer."<sup>141</sup>

Also testifying was Adrian Mershon of the Milwaukee Police Department. He submitted a 1944 investigative report from the Department's Internal Security Squad, showing that

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<sup>136</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 296.

<sup>137</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 298.

<sup>138</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 34.

<sup>139</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 377.

<sup>140</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 376-403.

<sup>141</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 394.



Christoffel had visited the home of Communist leader Ned Sparks on at least three occasions.<sup>142</sup> He also claimed to have evidence associating Christoffel with the American Peace Mobilization, the American Youth Congress, and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, all of which had been associated with the Communist Party.<sup>143</sup>

Lastly, Mershon submitted a signed affidavit from Kenneth Goff, yet another ex-Communist. After defecting from the Party in 1939, Goff would go on to become a fundamentalist evangelist demagogue, white supremacist, and diehard anti-Communist, perhaps best known for his theories on water fluoridization as a Soviet plot intended to “bring about a spirit of lethargy in the nation” and “keep the general public docile during a steady encroachment of Communism.”<sup>144</sup> In the affidavit, Goff claimed to have attended classes with Christoffel at the Eugene Debs Labor School, taught by Fred Blair, Eugene Dennis, and his wife Peggy Dennis. He also stated that Christoffel attended a full quorum meeting of the Communist Party, where the Allis-Chalmers situation was discussed, noting that the plant “had more men of militant nature, than any other factory, generally speaking; and that it could be used as a spearhead for encouraging the Revolution Movement in Wisconsin; and that it could be an active factor in the vast program to keep America out of War – by sabotage.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 405.

<sup>143</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 406-408.

<sup>144</sup> Nathan Pearlmuter, “Evangelist Demagogue, 1952 Model: Both Sides of the Coin,” *Commentary*, October 1952; Kenneth Goff, “Communism - - Poisoned Water,” March 29, 1957, Goff, Kenneth-Denver-1.pdf, Internet Archive, 308, <https://archive.org/details/KennethGoff/Goff%2C%20Kenneth-Denver-1/mode/1up?q=wreck>.

<sup>145</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 410.

Just before the hearings adjourned , Owens made a statement summing up the evidence gathered, which he concluded as indicating falsehoods in the prior testimony of the union leaders:

Whether or not they were so material as to constitute perjury will be something for the Department of Justice; but, I can say personally that although I heard Edgar Hoover say last October 1<sup>st</sup> that Communism was the greatest menace that we have in this country today, I didn't realize until I at least got here and heard evidence of this kind that in one city there could be such a nest of Communism and of people who seem to be inspired towards overthrowing our form of government. . . . It is shocking. It certainly wakes me up. I hope that it awakens the American people to the danger that faces them.<sup>146</sup>

No longer were Christoffel and Local 248 simply engaged in a battle against their employers. According to the HELC subcommittee, they were engaged in a battle against the American way of life. Supposedly, left-wing unions like Local 248 posed a threat to national security and Christoffel's alleged perjurious statements were grounds for criminal prosecution.

*"Red Probe 'Hit Pay Dirt'"*

A *Milwaukee Journal* article published the day after the hearings reported that "Members of the house labor subcommittee were back at Washington, D.C., Thursday, satisfied that they had obtained enough evidence in three days of hearings in Milwaukee to prove that Harold Christoffel and Robert Buse are perjurers."<sup>147</sup> Four days later, the failed strike came to an end. By June, a federal grand jury began hearing perjury charges against Christoffel and Buse, which were as follows:

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<sup>146</sup> HELC Subcommittee, 431-432.

<sup>147</sup> "Red Probe 'Hit Pay Dirt' at Sessions Here, Belief," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 20, 1947.

- 1) Denying under oath they were members of the Communist party and affiliated groups.
- 2) Blocking American war efforts by calling a strike of 7,800 workers making turbogenerators, thus delaying manufacture of vital gunpowder at a New Radford, Va., plant.
- 3) Denying the strike was plotted by the Wisconsin Communist party to hamper the nation's war effort under the pretext of union contract demands.
- 4) Denying they conspired in secret meetings with Eugene Dennis, No. 1 Communist and general secretary of the party, to map strike strategy at the huge Wisconsin factory.<sup>148</sup>

That same month, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, setting into a law a series of amendments to the Wagner Act that incorporated a number of recommendations from Allis-Chalmers leadership. Richter outlines the primary implications of the act:

[It outlawed] such important union practices as closed shops, strikes in violation of contracts, mass picketing, secondary boycotts, and other actions of solidarity. It also banned union contributions to political candidates, forbade employees of the government from striking, permitted states to outlaw union security agreements, and authorized the president to seek a court injunction forbidding for eighty days any strikes that might affect national health or safety.<sup>149</sup>

Most shockingly, the new law included a provision requiring all elected officers of a union to sign affidavits denying membership in the Communist Party in order appeal to maintain legal protections and the services of the National Labor Relations Board. According to Richter, "This provision – and the numerous other restrictions in Taft-Hartley – was justified in the view of congressional figures, Democrats as well as Republicans, by evidence showing the 'political'

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<sup>148</sup> Charles Finston, "U.S. Grand Jury to Act on Buse, Christoffel," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 9, 1947.

<sup>149</sup> Richter, *Labor's Struggles*, vii.

influence in striking unions, notably in Local 248, UAW-CIO.”<sup>150</sup> The law’s passage resulted in the further fragmentation of an already divided labor movement.

### *Indiana Assignment*

In July 1947, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* and six other Hearst newspapers faced a \$13 million lawsuit from three law professors at the University of Indiana. The professors had signed a petition to allow for the Communist Party to be placed on the Indiana ballot “in the interests of freedom.” Naturally, according to Swofford, Hearst publications labelled the professors as “purveyors of Red Fascism on the campus, etc.” A discouraged Taylor told Swofford that Hearst “might as well pay them off because we have nothing.” Swofford, however, suggested he be sent to Indianapolis, just to “look around.” He ended up spending three months in Indianapolis, carrying out an investigation and preparing a comprehensive report that led to a \$25,000 settlement with the law professors, saving the company hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to Hearst attorneys.<sup>151</sup>

However, Swofford later admitted that the case had actually been settled by blackmailing the professors and university executives, threatening that Hearst would smear the school, which, according to Swofford, “was almost a bluff, but it worked.” Nonetheless, although Swofford discovered that one of the professors “had belonged to several Communist Front organizations,” he found two of the professors to be completely without blame, and all three to have been libeled. He would later admit that his part in the investigation led to him

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<sup>150</sup> Richter, *Labor’s Struggles*, 47.

<sup>151</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 36.

experience “conscience trouble,” admitting “it was not particularly clean.”<sup>152</sup> It seems likely that this “conscience trouble” did not originate solely from Swofford’s Indiana assignment. Nearly three years later, during Christoffel’s second perjury trial, Swofford would take the stand in defense of the union leader, claiming that none of the evidence found during his extensive investigation proved him to be a Communist.

### *Conclusion*

While it is clear that Allis-Chalmers conspired directly with the *Milwaukee Sentinel* against Local 248, it is unclear how the newspaper benefited from this arrangement. Certainly William Randolph Hearst had a personal interest in maintaining an anti-labor, anti-Communist, and generally anti-progressive media empire. But, as Swofford revealed, the *Sentinel* placed itself at risk of litigation by publishing Ellis Jensen’s “John Sentinel” articles. It seems most likely that Allis-Chalmers provided the *Sentinel* with a financial incentive. According to Swofford, William Chappelle, publisher of the ironically titled anti-labor newspaper *Labor Views*, received \$15,000 from Allis-Chalmers “for his part in labeling Local 248 Communist-dominated.”<sup>153</sup>

The *Sentinel* rewarded Swofford for his investigation by providing him with nearly \$1,000 in bonuses and advancing him two wage classifications.<sup>154</sup> Additionally, Allis-Chalmers presented Swofford with an Eversharp gold ballpoint fountain pen for Christmas in 1946 and a silver-plated roast and fowl skewer for Christmas in 1947. Milwaukee Police Department Chief

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<sup>152</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 37.

<sup>153</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 41.

<sup>154</sup> “Swofford Affidavit,” 36.

Polcyn told Swofford he received a set of symphonic records from the company.<sup>155</sup> Amidst the purge of the left-wing and Reuther takeover of the UAW, Walter Cappel was given the position of director of the UAW-CIO Milwaukee office.<sup>156</sup> The FBI, Department of Justice, and complicit members of Congress successfully shifted the labor movement towards a state of acquiescence, foreclosing on its potential to advance a progressive agenda that might pose a challenge to widespread social and economic injustices.

On December 4, 1947, Harold Story gave a speech before the National Association of Manufacturers convention at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, where he discussed the shift in public opinion that had paved the way for Taft-Hartley and the company's victory over Local 248:

Fighting Communism in the labor movement has been a difficult job during the past ten years. Until recently, public opinion has blindly and wholeheartedly supported unionism and collective bargaining. Hence, any attack by an employer, upon even a Communist-dominated union leadership, could not be expected to receive a favorable press reaction. Even forceful non-Communist labor leaders have had difficulty in fighting Communism in their unions.

Story contended that the Communists leveraged this public attitude through the use of "red-baiting" psychology, preventing Allis-Chalmers from effectively exposing the Communist leadership of Local 248. However, everything changed during the 1946-47 strike. "Sensing the menace of Communism in the labor movement," Story proclaimed, Milwaukee newspapers "courageously exposed leaders of local 248 as outright Communists," contributing to a reversal

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<sup>155</sup> "Swofford Affidavit," 42.

<sup>156</sup> "Cappel Takes Office Today," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 17, 1947.

of public opinion. It was this reversal, Story continued, “which created the overwhelming bipartisan Congressional sentiment responsible for the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act.”<sup>157</sup>

Thus, Allis-Chalmers’ crusade was a remarkable success for Story, as well as industrialists across the country. Local 248 had been defeated and Story would no longer have to worry about Christoffel. However, the mission of congressmen like Kennedy, Owens and Kersten would not be complete until the union leader was behind bars. The following chapter explores the subsequent trials and tribulations of Harold Christoffel. It also introduces the Civil Rights Congress, an organization that advocated for Christoffel’s freedom, while facing government opposition and navigating legal challenges of its own.

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<sup>157</sup> Harold Story, “The Communist Influence in Labor Unions,” Speech presented at the 1947 Congress of American Industry (National Association of Manufacturers), Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York City, December 4, 1947.

## Chapter Three: Christoffel's Fight for Freedom

### *Introduction*

This chapter traces the legal saga of Harold Christoffel, spanning from his grand jury proceedings in June 1947 to his imprisonment six years later in June 1953. Central to this story is the allegation that Christoffel provided false testimony before the House Committee of Education and Labor in March 1947. Most notably, Christoffel denied he was a Communist—a claim that was fiercely contested by his foes at Allis-Chalmers, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Congress, the Department of Justice, and within the CIO. If Christoffel could not be legally branded a Communist, it would undermine their narrative of Communist control over Local 248, purportedly guided by the directives of Joseph Stalin.

Christoffel's initial trial resulted in his conviction on five counts of perjury. This verdict was successfully appealed and overturned, kindling hopes for potential exoneration. However, the Justice Department decided to retry the case, and Christoffel was once again convicted of five counts of perjury. After an unsuccessful second appeal, Christoffel was forced to spend three years behind bars.

The chapter introduces O. John Rogge, Christoffel's lead attorney for the majority of his legal battle. As repeatedly asserted by Rogge, one of the greatest hurdles to Christoffel's success in court was a constant struggle to acquire necessary funds. Although Christoffel felt Rogge was representing him primarily out of the goodness of his heart as an ally of progressive causes, Rogge would eventually declare otherwise. His lack of financial return from the case seems to have led him to disregard Christoffel's fate, resulting in a legal charge of "inexcusable neglect." Some evidence suggests he may have even been cooperating with the FBI.



The chapter also introduces the Civil Rights Congress, a national civil rights organization with a prominent Wisconsin chapter. This organization played a key role in advocating for Christoffel's freedom through fundraising and publicity drives. However, like Local 248, the Civil Rights Congress faced charges of Communist domination, and was similarly dismantled by anti-Communist and anti-progressive forces.

### *The Wisconsin Civil Rights Congress*

On March 29, 1947, a day-long "Civil Rights Conference" was held at Milwaukee's West Side Turner Hall, organized by Josephine Nordstrand, a Milwaukee activist with ties to the Communist Party. The week leading up to the event was plagued with controversy. The State Executive Committee of the Socialist Party condemned the conference as "another Communist front meeting."<sup>1</sup> On the morning of the conference, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* stated that "three of the six panel discussion leaders . . . had backed off for reasons ranging from acute flu to acute repugnance for Communist front organizations."<sup>2</sup>

The same *Sentinel* issue included a number of articles regarding the perceived threat of Soviet aggression. One warned there was "better than an even chance that Russia will wipe out 90 percent of the population of the United States with a super atomic bomb within five years."<sup>3</sup> Another outlined the "Soviet Union's manipulation of the Communist Party in the United States

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<sup>1</sup> "Chairman Quits as Civil Rights Unit Called Red," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 27, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> "Civil Right 'Lefts' Lose More Backers," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 29, 1947.

<sup>3</sup> Allan J. Funch, "Diplomat Earle Warns: Russ to Kill 90 Pct. Of Us in Five Years," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 29, 1947.

to overthrow the American government.”<sup>4</sup> Earlier that month, President Truman delivered his famous “Truman Doctrine” speech, launching the Cold War and whipping the nation into a frenzy of fear and suspicion. It was a tough time to be a Communist in America, or even to be associated with one.

Despite the controversy, the conference went on as scheduled. The keynote speaker was Albert E. Kahn, a New York author and journalist billed as an exposé of “Fascist intrigue in America and abroad.”<sup>5</sup> According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, Kahn “attacked the Socialist party as ‘allies of J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI and the big corporations,’” “charged that Hoover . . . is ‘deliberately aiding the promotion of fascism’ in the United States,” and defended Gerhart Eisler, a Jewish Communist from Germany, who faced imprisonment after being identified by Louis Budenz as a Soviet agent.<sup>6</sup> Kahn declared that the “Gestapo chased [Eisler] all over Europe. Now the FBI is taking up where the Gestapo left off.”<sup>7</sup> Among the forty attendees was Harold Christoffel, who had just recently been made a target of Budenz’ accusations.<sup>8</sup>

The conference adopted resolutions condemning the House Committee on Education and Labor for “strike breaking and union breaking activities,” castigating Representative Charles Kersten for “conduct unbecoming a congressman,” and calling for the abolition of the House

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<sup>4</sup> David Sentner, “Congress Report Links U. S. Reds to Moscow,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 29, 1947.

<sup>5</sup> “Civil Right ‘Lefts’ Lose More Backers,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 29, 1947.

<sup>6</sup> “Chairman Quits as Civil Rights Unit Called Red,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 27, 1947; “Civil Rights’ Rap Fascism,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Sunday March 30, 1947.

<sup>7</sup> “Civil Rightists Praise Reds—and Only Reds,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 30, 1947.

<sup>8</sup> “Civil Rightists Praise Reds—and Only Reds.”

Committee on Un-American Activities.<sup>9</sup> Most notably, however, attendees voted to “combat the rising tide of fascism” by establishing a permanent Wisconsin Civil Rights committee.<sup>10</sup> Among those selected to direct the committee was Nordstrand, who would soon become the organization’s executive director as it went on to affiliate with the national Civil Rights Congress (CRC). The CRC, both locally and nationally, would go on to play a significant role in the trial (and subsequent retrial) of Christoffel.

### *Josephine Nordstrand*

The niece of prominent Milwaukee Socialist attorney Max Raskin, Nordstrand had already developed a strong reputation for left-wing activism prior to the formation of the Wisconsin Civil Rights Congress. The earliest record of her activist efforts was reported by the *Escanaba Daily Press* in 1934. At a speech in Iron Mountain Michigan, Nordstrand warned of fascism, referring to the rise of Hitler and Mussolini as “a dictatorship of capital—capital which wants to keep on making its profits and fearing the rise to power of the working class.”<sup>11</sup> Clearly, Nordstrand had already become acquainted with Marxist theory and was eager to act upon its principles.

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<sup>9</sup> “‘Civil Rights’ Rap Fascism,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 30, 1947.

<sup>10</sup> “‘Civil Rights’ Rap Fascism.”

<sup>11</sup> “Warns of Fascism,” *Escanaba Daily Press*, August 4, 1934.

She became active with the Socialist Party in Milwaukee but would soon find herself at odds with the party's platform.<sup>12</sup> On September 29, 1938, a *Milwaukee Journal* article stated that Nordstrand was ousted from the Socialist Party by the party's Milwaukee County central committee "because of her stand in favor of collective security and in favor of a united front against fascism." Left-wing Socialists like Nordstrand believed that all anti-fascist forces worldwide needed to unite in order to deter the rising threat of fascism. Above all, this entailed calling on the United States to align itself with the Soviet Union. The Socialist Party, however, viewed such efforts as "a step toward war."<sup>13</sup>

The same *Journal* article described Nordstrand as a "follower of Mrs. Meta Berger, who also faces disciplinary action by the party."<sup>14</sup> Formerly a pillar of the Socialist Party in Milwaukee, Meta Berger was the widow of renowned Socialist leader Victor Berger. At the Party's National Convention in Kenosha earlier that year, a commitment was made to an antiwar policy, calling upon the working class "to reject the 'communist proposal for a collective security program.'"<sup>15</sup> Meta Berger responded to the policy with a letter insisting upon the necessity of collective security to preserve world peace:

We Socialists have always wanted peace—but I think I can say without fear of dispute that none of us want the peace that is Austria's. The war in Spain, the war in China, the

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<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Eisenscher, interview by Dale Treleven, January 26, 1982, tape recording, Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter Eisenscher Interview).

<sup>13</sup> Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 196.

<sup>14</sup> "Woman to Fight Socialist Ouster," *Milwaukee Journal*, September 29, 1938.

<sup>15</sup> "Socialists Hit at New Dealers," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 23, 1938.

annexation of Austria—these are the brazen attacks of international gangsters; and if the gangster governments are victorious, it will mark the inevitable end of the peaceful and democratic nations.

Berger's letter contained a list of "comrades" who also subscribed to her statement, which included Harold Christoffel, who was also a member of the Socialist Party at the time, but was becoming increasingly disillusioned due to the party's alignment with the AFL and lack of support for industrial organization.<sup>16</sup> The letter was condemned by Socialist Party leadership as "practically a statement of the Communist position in favor of so-called collective security rather than a statement of Socialist position."<sup>17</sup> But Berger, like Christoffel, refused to let accusations of "Communism" deter her from fighting for what she believed in. She resigned from the Socialist Party in May 1940, declaring that she could not "run with a pack that howls for the blood of Red witches when the very hunt is a violation of the liberties by which we socialists will survive."<sup>18</sup> Christoffel left the party two months later.<sup>19</sup>

Berger's country house in the village of Thiensville, just north of Milwaukee, became a meeting hub and place of respite for Communist leaders Peggy and Eugene Dennis. Louis Budenz had referenced the home as the location where Dennis ordered Christoffel to carry out the 1941 Allis-Chalmers strike—an "absolute fabrication," according to Eisenscher, who was

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<sup>16</sup> "Socialists Hit at New Dealers."

<sup>17</sup> "Socialists Hit at New Dealers."

<sup>18</sup> "Meta Berger, Long School Leader, Dies," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 17, 1944.

<sup>19</sup> "Christoffel and Ludwigsen Quit Socialist Party," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 5, 1938.

also alleged to have been at the meeting.<sup>20</sup> According to Fred Blair, Berger was poised to become the head of the Wisconsin Communist Party until a heart attack took her life in 1944.<sup>21</sup>

In the wake of her Meta Berger's death, Nordstrand carried forward her legacy of progressive, anti-fascist activism. As a result of her efforts, she was frequently labeled a Communist—perhaps most notably by ex-Communist Ferrell Schnering in 1939—a charge she repeatedly denied.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, "John Sentinel" described Nordstrand as "the busiest Communist front promoter in Milwaukee."<sup>23</sup> Throughout her career as an activist, she pushed for public housing, defended tenants, protested "anti-alien" bills, took a stand against racial segregation and discrimination, spoke out against police brutality, and advocated for fair employment practices, among other efforts.<sup>24</sup>

For years, Nordstrand had led the Wisconsin State Conference on Social Legislation (WSCSL), an organization advocating for progressive reform. The WSCSL had strong ties to the Wisconsin State and Milwaukee County CIO and was the chief beneficiary of local CIO support.

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<sup>20</sup> Eisenscher Interview.

<sup>21</sup> Fred Blair, interview by Paul Buhle, July 26, 1983, tape recording, Oral History of the American Left Collection, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>22</sup> "Accuse Critic of Red Baiting," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 10, 1939.

<sup>23</sup> John Sentinel, "Red Control of Local 248 No Accident, But Planned," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 26, 1946.

<sup>24</sup> "City Housing Authority Voted; 'Strings' Bar U. S. Aid for Projects," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 6, 1938; "Fought Police, Court Is Told," *Milwaukee Journal*, August 13, 1952; "Shy at Protest on Alien Bills," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 16, 1939; "Negro Housing Project Leads to Noisy Protests," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 8, 1944; "Rights Group Draws a Slap," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 21, 1952; "City FEB Debated; Referendum Sought," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 25, 1946.

Eventually, however, the WSCSL was faced with accusations of being a Communist front. In January of 1947, as the CIO's rightward shift commenced, the *Journal* reported that the "flow of money and other forms of support from state and county CIO councils [to the WSCSL] was choked off."<sup>25</sup> Nordstrand redirected her energies towards the Civil Rights Congress, which emerged on the national scene in 1946.

### *Against Racial Injustice and Political Repression*

The national Civil Rights Congress (CRC) was formed in 1946 through the amalgamation of three organizations focused on black equality, labor rights, and civil liberties: the National Negro Congress, the International Labor Defense, and the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties. Until its dissolution in 1956, the CRC campaigned against racial injustice and political repression through demonstration and litigation, taking on landmark cases in state and federal courts and achieving a series of legal victories that broadened the rights and civil liberties of all Americans.<sup>26</sup> One of the more impactful political actions of the CRC was its initiative to hold the federal government accountable for the persistence of black lynchings and Jim Crow racism. This was carried out most notably through the publication and proliferation of the landmark 1951 book-length petition *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government against the Negro*

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<sup>25</sup> "Donations List Edited by CIO," *Milwaukee Journal*, January 9, 1947.

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford [N.J.] : London; Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Associated University Presses, 1988), 13.

*People*. The controversial petition was signed by leading civil rights activists such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, as well as Harold Christoffel.<sup>27</sup>

Historian Gerald Horne contrasts the CRC with the more prestigious and still-existing National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The two organizations generally sought similar goals through similar tactics, but differed in a number of key ways. While both organizations engaged in court action, the CRC placed a greater focus on collective action, frequently spearheading demonstration, picketing, and petitioning efforts.<sup>28</sup> Left-wing political activist and CRC member Robert Treuhaft described the NAACP as “a somewhat elitist organization,” whereas the CRC “was organized to have a broader, and more active, activist approach to fight for civil rights—not only in court but in the streets—to picket, to do things that were considered beneath the dignity of an organization like the NAACP.”<sup>29</sup> More generally, according to Horne, “unlike the NAACP, CRC saw [incidences of racism] not as being ‘isolated’ acts but as ‘conscious policy . . . to keep the Blacks in a state of subjugation.’” Horne continues, “CRC saw racism itself as having ‘ideological purposes,’ not the most negligible of which was making a cowed underclass of low-paid labor.”<sup>30</sup> This class-oriented analysis is reflective of another notable aspect of the CRC: its close ties to the Communist Party.

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<sup>27</sup> William L. Patterson, *We Charge Genocide* (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1951).

<sup>28</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Robert E. Treuhaft, “Left-Wing Political Activist and Progressive Leader in the Berkeley Co-op,” interview by Robert G. Larsen, 1988-1989, Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley Oral History Collection, Online Archive of California, [https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt4x0nb0bf&brand=calisphere&doc.view=entire\\_text](https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt4x0nb0bf&brand=calisphere&doc.view=entire_text).

<sup>30</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 16.



Unlike the NAACP, which barred Communists from membership, Communists played a leading role in the CRC, which sought to link the prosecution of Communists (both alleged and actual Party members) to Black civil rights and the struggles of labor, contributing to its reputation as a “Communist front.”<sup>31</sup> Horne contests this label, noting that despite Communist influence, CRC policy was not always aligned with that of the Party. He argues that the “attack on CRC as a ‘Communist front’ was meant to destabilize a ‘popular front’ of communists and non-communists and to remove from progressive forces some of their most skilled and energetic organizers.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, just as the guise of anti-Communism was utilized to purge leftists from the labor movement, it was also leveraged to dismantle left-leaning political organizations like the CRC. As such, it is no coincidence that a campaign to support Harold Christoffel was one of the national organization’s leading efforts nationally and the Wisconsin chapter’s most prominent campaign.<sup>33</sup>

### *Prelude to the Trial*

The federal grand jury to evaluate the charges of perjury against Harold Christoffel convened in Washington, D.C., on June 17, 1947. Thirty-seven witnesses were scheduled to testify, largely a familiar cast of characters, such as Rep. Charles Kersten, Rep. Fred Hartley, Louis Budenz, Adrian Mershon, Arthur Zeltner, and Glenn Clarke, as well as various union

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<sup>31</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 18-19.

<sup>32</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 282.

officials.<sup>34</sup> Notably, Fred Blair and Sigmund Eisenscher were also questioned before the court. However, under the consultation of an attorney from the Civil Rights Congress, both refused to answer questions on the grounds they might incriminate themselves.<sup>35</sup> The grand jury hearing resulted in the indictment of Christoffel on six counts of perjury, each of which threatened the union leader with two to ten years in prison—sentences that could be ordered either consecutively or concurrently.<sup>36</sup> According to the charges, Christoffel perjured himself with the following claims:

- 1) That he was not and never had been a member of the Communist Party.
- 2) That he never had been a member of the Communist Political Association, as the party was known for a short period in 1944-45.
- 3) That he never had worked with the Communist party or with the Communist Political Association.
- 4) That he never had participated in the activities of the Communist Party.
- 5) That he never had supported the Communists, nor endorsed Communism.
- 6) That he did not know Ned Sparks, former secretary of the Communist Party in Wisconsin, nor Fred Bassett Blair, present state party chairman.<sup>37</sup>

Christoffel responded to the indictment with a public statement, declaring that the enemies of labor responsible “do not have anything to hang their hats on except the statement of stoolpigeons and pro-Fascists and otherwise discredited Americans such as Budenz, Schnering and Goff.” He continued, “This new development, which was not unexpected, makes us all the more determined to defeat the Allis-Chalmers Co. and its fascist-minded hirelings in and out of

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<sup>34</sup>“Tell Activities of Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, June 24, 1947.

<sup>35</sup> “Perjury Jurors Query ‘Reds,’” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 1, 1947.

<sup>36</sup> “Perjury Jurors Query ‘Reds.’”

<sup>37</sup> “Convicted, Christoffel Jailed Pending Sentence in Perjury,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 4, 1948.

Congress who are out to destroy the labor movement.”<sup>38</sup> As with the dismantling of Local 248, Christoffel was aware that the result of his prosecution would have implications that reverberated across the labor movement. As a result, his case generated significant national attention.

Representing Christoffel was attorney O. John Rogge, a former Assistant US Attorney General, who had been dismissed in 1946 as the result of his perceived overzealousness in making known the “fascist threat to democracy and Nazi penetration in the United States.”<sup>39</sup> In a memorandum to the Attorney General earlier that year, Rogge wrote: “In my opinion, international fascism, though defeated in battle is not dead. . . . On the contrary, it is now in the process of post-war reconversion, a reconversion uncomplicated by strikes, price ceilings, or shortages. The old familiar fascist faces are once again spouting the old familiar fascist lies.”<sup>40</sup> Rogge was fired for having “‘willfully violated’ justice department regulations” by disclosing confidential information about a Nazi propaganda campaign to defeat President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, 1940 and 1944. He claimed the Attorney General sought to suppress this information, accusing his former boss of “‘gagging’ those who attacked fascism.”<sup>41</sup> Following his dismissal, Rogge went into private law practice, developing a reputation as a champion of progressive causes, such as that of Christoffel.

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<sup>38</sup>“Christoffel to Face Arraignment Today,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 24, 1947.

<sup>39</sup> O. John Rogge, *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties* (New York: Gaer Associates Inc., 1949), 27-28.

<sup>40</sup> Rogge, *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties*, 17.

<sup>41</sup> “Rogge Denies Clark Charge,” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 12, 1946.

According to the *Journal*, Rogge attempted to have Christoffel's trial moved from Washington, D.C. to Milwaukee, contending that "it would not be practical to transport so many witnesses to Washington." He also argued that "the present atmosphere in Washington is hysterically against communism and that with so many government workers on the jury panel it would be impossible for Christoffel to have a fair trial," especially given President Truman's anti-Communist Loyalty Program.<sup>42</sup> Historian Landon R. Y. Storrs writes that Truman's Loyalty Program resulted in "an estimated 2,700 dismissals and 12,000 resignations" between 1947 and 1956, while "exert[ing] its chilling effect on a far larger number of employees than those who were dismissed."<sup>43</sup> Rogge reasoned that these dismissals tilted the jury pool in a conservative direction, thereby weakening Christoffel's chances of a favorable outcome.

Government prosecutor John S. Pratt labeled Rogge's motion for relocation absurd, and it was dismissed by the Federal Judge, Edward Curran. As a result, Rogge asked the court for permission to take depositions from upwards of 300 defense witnesses in Milwaukee, which was also denied.<sup>44</sup> Instead, the court reduced Christoffel's bond from \$5,000 to \$1,000, indicating the balance could be used to transport witnesses to Washington. The bond had been put up by the Local 248 defense fund to keep Christoffel out of jail. Still loyal to Local 248, Christoffel refused to make use of the money without union permission. Walter Reuther-appointed Local 248 administrator Pat Greathouse denied Christoffel's request to utilize the

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<sup>42</sup>"Christoffel Loses Plea to Shift His Trial Here," *Milwaukee Journal*, January 9, 1948.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Stewart Kirkendall, ed., *Civil Liberties and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, Truman Legacy Series 9 (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2013), 70.

<sup>44</sup> "Christoffel Loses Plea to Shift His Trial Here."

\$4,000.<sup>45</sup> As a result, without adequate funding for witness transportation, Rogge and Christoffel found themselves at a distinct disadvantage going into the trial.

### *The (First) Trial of Harold Christoffel*

The trial began on February 16, 1948. Rogge's defense strategy took a two-pronged approach. On one hand, he sought to contest the perjury charges, as expected. On the other hand, however, Rogge aggressively attacked the case's very foundation, arguing against the validity of the charges due to a lack of quorum during Christoffel's testimony before HELC. The committee required a quorum of thirteen out of twenty-five members to be present in order to establish a legally-constituted body before which perjury could be committed. If fewer than thirteen members were present, as Rogge contended, the actions of the committee lacked legitimacy under the law. Consequently, the swearing in of Christoffel would be deemed illegitimate, precluding the possibility of a perjury charge. Although an employee of the committee was able to produce an attendance tally from the opening of the session in question, Rogge objected that this was immaterial: "Let's specify the hour. How many were there in the afternoon when Christoffel was sworn, and how many were there when he testified?" The employee was unable to answer but admitted that committee members had gone in and out of the hearing throughout the day.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Rogge, *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties*, 180; Pat Greathouse to Harold Christoffel, 17 February 1948, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 63.

<sup>46</sup> "Christoffel's Perjury Trial Opens in Dispute," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 17, 1948.

A parade of government witnesses took the stand to provide evidence of Christoffel's perjury, once again including the familiar Budenz, Zeltner and Clarke, as well as a range of new characters. Carl Haferkamp, a former Allis-Chalmers employee and Local 248 member, claimed before the court to have seen Communist publications in Christoffel's home on several occasions. However, he also admitted, under cross-examination, to having told a fellow passenger on the train to D.C. that he had "waited for six years to hang these guys,"—meaning Robert Buse and Christoffel—"and now I'm going to do it," revealing a level of personal bias against Christoffel shared by most witnesses for the prosecution.<sup>47</sup>

Mary Fisher, the divorced wife of a Local 248 member, claimed to have danced with Fred Blair at a party at the union's headquarters, where Christoffel was also in attendance. Additionally, she claimed to have seen Christoffel handing out copies of the *Daily Worker* alongside Josephine Nordstrand at union functions.<sup>48</sup> However, Fisher's timeline regarding the party didn't add up. According to the *Sentinel*, Rogge successfully argued that she "was somewhat confused as to which headquarters of the union was the scene of the party, and the year in which the union moved from old to new quarters."<sup>49</sup> By the time Local 248 had moved into the headquarters Fisher described, Christoffel had left Milwaukee to serve in the Army. By the time Christoffel returned from service, she had divorced her husband and ceased visits to

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<sup>47</sup> "Recess Trial of Christoffel," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 26, 1948.

<sup>48</sup> "Reveals Christoffel Tried to Help Blair," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 25, 1948.

<sup>49</sup> Robert J. Riordan, "How Chris Tried to Get Blair Job," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 26, 1948.

the Local 248 headquarters.<sup>50</sup> As such, there was no way Christoffel could have been present at the party Fisher described.

John Oswald, a former Local 248 committeeman, testified that Christoffel called on union stewards and committeemen to solicit subscriptions to the *Midwest Daily Record*, another Communist newspaper. Between 1937 and 1940, Oswald had challenged and been defeated by Christoffel three times in union elections, before being hired by the advisory force of Allis-Chalmers management. Rogge suspected he may have been on the payroll of Allis-Chalmers all along.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, thirteen members of HELC testified to having been present at the opening of the March 1 session, where Christoffel allegedly committed perjury. Fred McStroul, a suspended Local 248 member and close friend of Christoffel, challenged their version of events. He testified that although a quorum had existed earlier in the day during the testimony of R. J. Thomas, he had counted the number of committee members “two or three times” during the hearing of Christoffel and recalled that there were only nine present.<sup>52</sup> Fred Blair was also summoned by the prosecution, but once again refused to answer any questions.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Rogge, *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties*, 186-187.

<sup>51</sup> Rogge, *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties*, 187.

<sup>52</sup> “Congressmen Tell of Christoffel Quiz,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 19, 1948.

<sup>53</sup> “Blair Won’t Tell If He Knew Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 19, 1948.

## *A Struggling Defense*

The prosecution soon concluded their case. It was now Rogge's turn to summon witnesses. With a lack of funds available to transport witnesses from Milwaukee, Rogge and Christoffel planned out an eleven-day speaking tour to generate funds. \$500 was quickly raised in advance of the tour, allowing for the transportation of a small number of supportive witnesses. According to the *Journal*, "Six witnesses, members of local 248 when Christoffel was president, testified . . . that the defendant was known for his truthfulness and that they never heard him speak in favor of Communism. Each said that he himself was not a Communist." Under cross-examination, however, it was revealed that three of them had signed the nomination papers of Sigmund Eisenscher, discrediting them in the eyes of Christoffel's opponents.<sup>54</sup> In his closing statement, prosecutor Frank H. Patton lambasted the testimony of the defense witnesses, describing it as "the most rehearsed thing I ever heard in a courtroom."<sup>55</sup> Rogge declared the government witnesses to be "a bunch of characters they brought in here to smear an honest trade union leader . . . by telling a bunch of lies." According to Rogge, "[There wasn't] one of them who didn't have his own ax to grind."<sup>56</sup>

Rogge regarded Christoffel's decision to defer to Local 248 regarding permission to use the \$4,000 bail refund to transport witnesses as a possible nail in the coffin, claiming that the

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<sup>54</sup>"Ends Defense for Christoffel," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 2, 1948.

<sup>55</sup>"Christoffel Fails to Take Stand in Own Defense," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 3, 1948.

<sup>56</sup>"'Guilty!' – 78 Times the Jurors Said – 'Guilty!'," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 4, 1948.



ability to introduce additional witnesses “might well have turned the case in his favor.”<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, it was testament to Christoffel’s integrity. Even without the additional witnesses, it would be a close case. According to Rogge, “the jury stayed out five hours and was at first divided, six to six.”<sup>58</sup>

Halfway through their deliberation, with a lack of agreement on any of the six counts, Judge Curran threatened the jury with an “Allen charge” —a controversial court procedure utilized to “prod a jury for speedier action on a verdict.”<sup>59</sup> Two and a half hours later, the jury found Christoffel guilty on all charges, although the judge dropped the Communist Political Association charge due to insufficient evidence. Sentenced to two to six years in federal prison, Christoffel was “hustled out of the courtroom by two deputy United States marshals.” Rogge immediately made his way out of the courtroom and into the adjoining circuit court of appeals, where he filed to arrange for an appeal hearing based on the discrepancy on quorum definition between him and the judge, among other disputes.<sup>60</sup> Christoffel spent two weeks in jail awaiting approval from the UAW to maintain use of the \$5,000 bail, which was ultimately granted, despite tension between Christoffel and the union.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Rogge, *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties*, 189.

<sup>58</sup> Rogge, *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties*, 189.

<sup>59</sup> “Convicted, Christoffel Jailed Pending Sentence in Perjury,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 4, 1948.

<sup>60</sup> “Christoffel Gets 2 to 6 Years; Rush Appeal to Head Off Cell,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 5, 1948.

<sup>61</sup> “Freedom Won by Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 18, 1948.

### *Alienation from the International*

In November 1947, three months before the start of the trial, a heated debate took place at the UAW-CIO convention over a decision to comply with the Taft-Hartley Act's requirement for members to sign "non-Communist" affidavits. The affidavits were opposed by left-wing caucus leader R. J. Thomas, who had earlier charged that the act would "entangle the legitimate union organizations in a hopeless maze of legal technicalities and obstructions. . . . Any attempt now to weaken the fight, any attempt to pursue a policy of 'living within the law' by signing the disgraceful yellow dog affidavits means in effect to reconcile the CIO to the slave law. . . . Such a course would be fatal to the further progress of the labor movement."<sup>62</sup> UAW President Walter Reuther, however, who had achieved a narrow victory over the incumbent Thomas in 1946, pursued a policy of compliance "under protest."<sup>63</sup> The *Milwaukee Sentinel* described the scene of the convention, where Christoffel, "shouting against the affidavits because 'we must stand against the employers,' was booed off the floor when he refused to abide by the convention time limit."<sup>64</sup>

By the end of the convention, a three to one majority voted in approval of compliance with the Taft-Hartley affidavits and Reuther gained control of the entire UAW executive board. Reuther would go on to wield the Taft-Hartley Act as a tool to eliminate left-wing opposition

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<sup>62</sup> Frank Emspak, "The Break-Up of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), 1945-1950" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1972), 172-173.

<sup>63</sup> Emspak, "The Break-Up of the CIO," 173.

<sup>64</sup>"UAW Boos Christoffel!," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 11, 1947.

within the UAW and raid other unions that refused compliance.<sup>65</sup> According to Frank Emspak, “In those local unions such as Local 248 (Allis Chalmers) where unsettled conditions existed and the membership elected officers in opposition to Reuther, the UAW executive board took over the administration of the local.”<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, on December 1, 1947, what remained of the defeated Local 248 was put under the administratorship of Reuther ally Pat Greathouse.<sup>67</sup> These developments demonstrated an increasing level of tension between Christoffel and the now-dominant Reuther caucus.

This tension continued to play out throughout Christoffel’s trial. Prior to the Reuther caucus takeover, the UAW executive board had pledge to contribute \$10,000 towards Christoffel’s defense, as well as an additional \$3,000 in the event of an appeal and another \$2,000 if the case were to reach the United States Supreme Court.<sup>68</sup> In February 1948, however, Reuther’s newly elected anti-Communist board cut back on the original commitment, limiting it to a total of \$10,000, regardless of the outcome. According to the *Sentinel*, \$5,000 had already been spent prior to Christoffel’s initial trial with another \$3,000 outstanding in unpaid bills.<sup>69</sup> In March, Rogge sent a letter to Emil Mazey, the new UAW secretary-treasurer, expressing his frustration with the lack of funds provided to defend Christoffel: “We have expended every effort in Mr. Christoffel’s defense. On a time basis, we have already given in

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<sup>65</sup> Emspak, “The Break-Up of the CIO,” 178-180.

<sup>66</sup> Emspak, “The Break-Up of the CIO,” 180.

<sup>67</sup> Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions*, 278.

<sup>68</sup> “Begrudge Aid for Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 5, 1948.

<sup>69</sup> “Christoffel’s Defense Fund Slashed,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 17, 1948.

excess of the \$15,000 maximum for which UAW-CIO obligated itself. The trial lasted almost three weeks. The case is now on appeal in the Court of Appeals. We have already expended money in court costs on appeal and we have, of course, expended time. . . . We have performed our part of the agreement with UAW-CIO. We expect UAW-CIO to do likewise.”<sup>70</sup> Mazey responded with indignation, insisting that he thought it “particularly ungracious that either you or Mr. Christoffel should, at this time, complain about the generosity of the Union in this matter. . . . You state you are a ‘strong supporter of labor’. I think a \$10,000 legal fee in this matter was a generous payment by the Union, even without regard to considerations of friendship to the cause of labor.”<sup>71</sup> Mazey would go on to “highly recommend UAW locals deny Christoffel’s requests for assistance.”<sup>72</sup>

### *A Struggle for Freedom*

Just days after being released from jail, Rogge and Christoffel began their speaking tour across the Midwest, sponsored by the Civil Rights Congress.<sup>73</sup> On March 30, 1948, the duo spoke at the Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee before an estimated crowd of 800, with Christoffel declaring his perjury charges to be “part of a Red-baiting hysteria that is sweeping the country” and asserting that non-Communists must join forces with Communists to take a stand against it.

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<sup>70</sup> O. John Rogge to Emil Mazey, 16 March 1948, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 58.

<sup>71</sup> Mazey to Rogge, 25 March 1948, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Mazey to Ned D. Coleman, September 1948, Mss 1046, Box 4, Folder 1, Harold Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>73</sup> “Christoffel Talks Start in Cleveland,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 21, 1948.

According to the *Sentinel*, he proclaimed: “If to be a progressive and a liberal means being a communist, then I plead guilty on that score, for I have always striven to be a Messiah of the workers.” Rogge charged that Christoffel was a “victim of a clever public relations program by the Allis-Chalmers CO and misrulings by Judge Curran.” Josephine Nordstrand criticized the *Milwaukee Journal* and praised the recent Communist coup d’etat in Czechoslovakia.<sup>74</sup>

According to the *Sentinel*, Nordstrand claimed that the Milwaukee meeting “contributed \$635 plus pledges and small change to finance Christoffel’s appeal.”<sup>75</sup> However, according to Rogge, the total receipts from the entire tour were less than a thousand dollars. On April 13, Rogge sent a letter to Christoffel explaining the gravity of the financial situation: “[The amount raised] will not be enough to pay the printing bill on the record and the briefs. In order to carry the case forward, it will require a minimum, in my opinion, of some \$5,500.00. The money will have to come from some place.” He assured Christoffel he would be moving forward with the case regardless, but that his firm would “soon reach the point where we shall not be able to meet with our obligations unless the fees are forthcoming in some of our cases, and your case is the one in which we have expended our greatest effort.”<sup>76</sup> A constant scramble for funds would remain the prominent theme of Christoffel’s struggle for freedom.

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<sup>74</sup> “Chris Urges Non-Reds Stand with Communists,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 30, 1948; “Hysteria Seen by Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, March 30, 1948.

<sup>75</sup> “Chris Urges Non-Reds Stand with Communists.”

<sup>76</sup> Rogge to Christoffel, 13 April 1948, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 66.

The following month, the CRC was officially “identified” by the Justice Department as one of 32 “fronts of the Communist Party.” According to the *Sentinel*, General Tom C. Clark “singled out for special comment the Wisconsin Civil Rights Congress, operated by Mrs. Josephine Nordstrand, as an example of the [organization’s] branches set up throughout the country.”<sup>77</sup> The following week, the Wisconsin CRC held a July 4<sup>th</sup> “Freedom Day” picnic at Pleasant Valley Park in Milwaukee, where a drawing was held for an electric iron. Five deputies arrived and arrested Nordstrand for “operating a lottery for a prize,” despite the protests of Fred Blair and Sigmund Eisenscher, also in attendance.<sup>78</sup> Although the charges were dropped the following month, they reflected an increasingly hostile atmosphere for the organization moving forward, as the rising threat of McCarthyism loomed over the country.<sup>79</sup>

In November, the federal circuit court of appeals unanimously affirmed Christoffel’s perjury conviction, reiterating the ruling of Judge Curran that a sufficient quorum had been reached at the beginning of the afternoon session on March 1, 1947.<sup>80</sup> In January 1949, Christoffel filed an appeal to the United States Supreme Court.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, Christoffel continued to traverse the country in search of funds. In April, Christoffel wrote a letter to Rogge, congratulating him for getting the Supreme Court to review the case. In the letter, he

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<sup>77</sup> “Eight Milwaukee Groups Branded as Subversive,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 29, 1948.

<sup>78</sup> “Civil Rights Congress Loses Right to Gamble at Park Rally,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 6, 1948.

<sup>79</sup> “Raffle Case Thrown Out,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 22, 1948.

<sup>80</sup> “Court Affirms Perjury Guilt of Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 22, 1948.

<sup>81</sup> “Christoffel Appeals Perjury Conviction to Supreme Court,” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 28, 1949.

revealed that he had been on tour for more than a year—ever since the initial Midwest tour with Rogge—speaking at hundreds of union meetings. “I want to put up a fight for this money as I think we have a good chance of winning,” he wrote, “and in order to show up Reuther as a company serving poney.” The letter also conveyed Christoffel’s anguish in being away from home for so long:

After being away from my family while in the army, it has been hard to be separated from my wife and kids most of the past year; especially while being faced with a much longer separation. But the fight on my case is to me just the continuation of the fight we started at Allis Chalmers in the early thirties. My contribution to the struggle for a better place to work at Allis Chalmers and now my case is just my bit for a better world. I also want you to know that the expenses while on tour have been low. Besides the welfare for my family, the expenses have been held to four dollars a day. You know that meant that I skipped many a meal and ate a sandwich in order to stay within that allowance. I have been fortunate in having practically no hotel expenses staying with friends in every city I visited. Thus to me the money raised is more than just money. Every dollar represents heartaches and hardships for the individual workers who donated, for the most of the unions that contributed, for my family and myself.<sup>82</sup>

Already forced to give up his career and way of life, Christoffel also had to sacrifice precious time with his wife and children in order to wage this legal battle, desperately seeking to preserve both his freedom and the dignity of workers around the country. Fortunately, good news was just around the corner: “Members of Congress today lashed the Supreme Court’s 5 to 4 decision yesterday reversing the perjury conviction of Harold Christoffel, Milwaukee labor leader,” wrote the *Milwaukee Sentinel* on June 29. The court had actually concurred with Rogge that “there may not have been an actual majority of House Labor Committee members present

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<sup>82</sup> Christoffel to Rogge, April 9, 1949, Mss 1046, Box 4, Folder 1, Harold Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

when Christoffel allegedly perjured himself.”<sup>83</sup> In fact, according to the court’s opinion, evidence from the trial showed “as few as six” committee members present at the time of the alleged perjury. Accordingly, the court deemed it “unthinkable that such a body can be the instrument of criminal conviction.”<sup>84</sup> Representative Kennedy railed against the reversal: “What a travesty on justice, that a Communist witness testifies untruthfully before a recognized committee of the House and then escapes the consequences of perjury by a technical claim that a specified number of Congressmen were not present at a particular moment.”<sup>85</sup>

#### *J. Edgar Hoover vs. Harold Christoffel*

Behind the scenes, Christoffel’s enemies were acting quickly to amend the situation in their favor. On July 11, 1949, Alexander M. Campbell, Assistant U.S. Attorney General for the Criminal Division, sent a letter to J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, informing him of Christoffel’s conviction reversal:

It is now important to determine whether evidence is available to justify a retrial, and the purpose of this memorandum is to request additional investigation as hereafter set forth. . . . Under the ruling of the Supreme Court it will not be practicable to retry the case unless at least 13 members of the Committee (a quorum) can testify that they were personally present at the time Christoffel gave the testimony upon which the indictment of perjury is based.

Campbell urgently requested that the 13 living members present at the start of the March 1, 1947 session—Thomas L. Owens died from a heart attack in 1948—be interviewed to

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<sup>83</sup>“Chris’ Ruling ‘Tore Down Bars,’ Congressmen Say,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 29, 1949.

<sup>84</sup> *Christoffel v. United States*, No. 528 (US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit June 27, 1949).

<sup>85</sup> Ira Stoll, *JFK, Conservative* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 237.



determine “whether at a retrial of the case they can testify that they were actually present and heard the testimony of Christoffel before the Committee, particularly the specific statements upon which the charges in the several counts in the indictment are based.”<sup>86</sup>

Christoffel was aware the FBI played a significant role in his prosecution and the breaking of the 1946-47 strike, as he alleged in a speech that same month, entitled “The F.B.I. – Super Labor Spy.” In the speech, he asserted that “several ex-FBI, or perhaps not so ex-FBI men, were put on the Company payroll” after the 1941 strike, while the *Sentinel* “also put some so-called ex-FBI men on their labor staff.”<sup>87</sup> He credited these “so-called ex-FBI agents” with making photo-static copies of the Eisenscher nomination papers and distributing them amongst Allis-Chalmers workers, to employers and government officials across the country.<sup>88</sup> He described the role the FBI played “as the snoopers, spies and stoolpigeons for the anti-labor congressional committees.”<sup>89</sup> And he described how, during his trial, “the FBI illegally investigated the entire jury panel so that not only were all the prospective jurors intimidated but the prosecution knew which individuals would most likely go along with their attempts to

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<sup>86</sup> Alexander M. Campbell to J. Edgar Hoover, July 11, 1949, Mss 1046, Box 7, Folder 12, Harold Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>87</sup> Transcript of speech by Harold Christoffel, “The F.B.I. - Super Labor Spy,” July -17 1949, Mss 1046, Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, 1

<sup>88</sup> Christoffel, “The F.B.I. – Super Labor Spy,” 3.

<sup>89</sup> Christoffel, “The F.B.I. – Super Labor Spy,” 5.

jail a labor leader.”<sup>90</sup> Further, he proclaimed, “throughout the trial, an FBI agent openly and brazenly sat with the Government prosecutors.”<sup>91</sup>

While the full scope of FBI involvement may never be revealed, many of the claims in Christoffel’s speech have since been documented. Allis-Chalmers indeed hired at least two “former” FBI agents, as mentioned in Chapter Two. The *Sentinel’s* labor editor Robert Riordan had been an FBI agent. And from at least 1947 through 1950, there is a record of correspondence between J. Edgar Hoover and various Department of Justice officials involved with the case, detailing their collaboration in gathering evidence against Christoffel, arranging for and interviewing government witnesses, and digging up dirt on defense witnesses. They reveal that a certain “Special Agent,” whose name has been redacted, was present to provide “very valuable assistance to Mr. Pratt and Mr. Patton” during Christoffel’s grand jury proceedings.<sup>92</sup> Following Christoffel’s first trial, a letter was sent to Hoover by someone whose name has been redacted, describing the “unusually efficient services rendered” to government prosecutors Patton and Pratt in the Christoffel case by a special agent of the FBI’s Milwaukee Field Office: “Not only in the thoroughness of his investigation of the case, but by reason of his wide knowledge of Communist practices, [redacted] was able to render unusual assistance during the course of the trial. Messrs. Pratt and Patton were so much impressed with

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<sup>90</sup> Christoffel, “The F.B.I. – Super Labor Spy,” 8.

<sup>91</sup> Christoffel, “The F.B.I. – Super Labor Spy,” 9.

<sup>92</sup> T. Vincent Quinn to J. Edgar Hoover, December 13, 1947, Mss 1046, Box 7, Folder 12, Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

[redacted] intelligent cooperation that it is thought appropriate to direct it to your attention.”<sup>93</sup>

Such correspondence also reveals that the agent’s outstanding assistance in the first trial resulted in a request for his presence during Christoffel’s second trial in 1950.<sup>94</sup>

### *In Defense of Communists*

Christoffel’s Supreme Court victory was short-lived. In August, Pratt announced the Justice Department’s decision to retry the case. Even more foreboding, two of the Democratic Supreme Court Justices who sided with Christoffel in the five-to-four decision died unexpectedly in the summer of 1949, providing the government with a fresh opportunity to turn a verdict against him if the case were to reach the high court once again.<sup>95</sup>

According to the *Journal*, Rogge sought to have bail reduced once again from \$5,000 to \$1,000, with the difference serving as his legal fee, to which Federal Judge Richmond B. Keech, in “the midst of laughter,” responded that “it was not his function to help collect a fee.” Instead, Rogge said he would be replacing the UAW money with a \$5,000 bond from the Civil Rights Congress, so that he could “fight it out with the international union,” who he claimed still

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<sup>93</sup> [identity redacted] to Hoover, March 24, 1948, Mss 1046, Box 7, Folder 12, Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander M. Campbell to Hoover, December 23, 1949, Mss 1046, Box 7, Folder 12, Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>95</sup> “Accuses Foes of Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, December 16, 1949.

owed him \$5,000.<sup>96</sup> An agreement would soon be worked out, in which Rogge would receive \$600 of the bail money.<sup>97</sup>

Meanwhile, Christoffel was announced as executive director of the newly formed National Nonpartisan Committee to Defend the Rights of the 12 Communist Leaders, an organization co-chaired by Paul Robeson, renowned black singer, actor, and Communist activist. The organization was committed to the defense of Communists on trial for allegedly violating the 1940 Smith Act.<sup>98</sup> According to Ellen Schrecker, the Smith Act allowed the government to reference “the most incendiary passages in the works of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and other communist heavies” as evidence of the Communist Party’s advocacy of revolutionary violence and intent to overthrow the government.<sup>99</sup> A flyer from the Civil Rights Congress argued that the Communist Party leaders had been indicted “not for what they have done, but for what they are alleged to be thinking.” It warned that the “unconstitutional indictments of the leaders of the Communist Party is a threat to the liberties of all Americans,” especially those who “hate Jim Crow and fight it, fight anti-Semitism, actively seek world peace, strike for higher wages, and oppose Taft-Hartley.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “Plan Retrial of Christoffel Perjury Case,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 12, 1949.

<sup>97</sup> “Budenz Takes Stand Monday,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 5, 1950.

<sup>98</sup> “Red Aid Post to Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, September 14, 1949.

<sup>99</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 186, 195.

<sup>100</sup> Civil Rights Congress, *It’s Time to Call a Halt*, 1950, Civil Rights Movement Archive, [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/510000\\_crc\\_fascism.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/510000_crc_fascism.pdf).

Leaders on trial included some of the most prominent Party figures, such as William Z. Foster and Eugene Dennis. Due to his increasingly precarious health condition, charges against Foster were dropped and the group became known as the “Communist Party Eleven.”<sup>101</sup> Christoffel’s leadership within the defense organization, as well as his ties to the Civil Rights Congress, exemplified the fact that even while being attacked in court as a “Communist” and insisting his lack of Party membership and past collaboration with the Party, he refused to back down from his belief that in order to combat the “anti-Communist” witch hunt that was dismantling the political left entirely as a progressive force, non-Communists and Communists would need to stand strong together.

### *Retrial*

The second trial was similar to the first in many regards. Many of the same witnesses were called back. Rogge sought to have the trial moved to Milwaukee due to lack of funds, stating: “I feel that if we could have brought the witnesses here at the first trial the jury verdict would have been not guilty. But I haven’t even had the money to prepare for this trial.” Once again, Rogge’s motion was denied.<sup>102</sup> The main issue, once again, was whether or not a quorum had been reached. Thirteen current and former congressmen who had participated in the HELC hearings testified that they were present when Christoffel allegedly committed perjury. Five of them even claimed that a 14<sup>th</sup> member had been present—the late Thomas L. Owens.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 108.

<sup>102</sup> “Set Trial Day for Christoffel;” *Milwaukee Journal*, January 13, 1950.

<sup>103</sup> “List a Quorum on Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 2, 1950.

In order to address the quorum issue, Rogge sought the testimony of Nellie Israell of Washington, who he claimed had been “studying the committee” during Christoffel’s testimony. However, Mrs. Israell’s husband revealed that she had left for California upon receiving a subpoena and that he was unaware of her whereabouts.<sup>104</sup> Rogge insisted that a fair trial necessitated her testimony and contact was made and Judge Letts ordered the government to purchase her a plane ticket back to Washington. Contact was made with Mrs. Israell and the judge ordered a recess until her arrival.<sup>105</sup>

Before the court, Mrs. Israell claimed to have been reluctant to testify in fear that her family would be “dragged into this.” Describing herself as a “student of the legislative process,” Mrs. Israell stated she had sat through most of the Taft-Hartley committee hearings. According to the *Journal*, she “said she believed that no more than six congressmen were present at the beginning of the hearing at which Christoffel testified.” If Mrs. Israell’s version of events was accurate, at least seven congressmen would have had to have misrepresented the truth. “I think the perjury is on the other foot,” Rogge concluded to the court, requesting a wholesale perjury investigation of the HELC representatives who testified.<sup>106</sup>

The following day, the government called witnesses to rebut Mrs. Israell’s testimony, three of which challenged her statement regarding the number of spectators present as

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<sup>104</sup> “Point Scored for Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 15, 1950.

<sup>105</sup> “New Christoffel Trial Delay; Court Waits for Witness’ Return,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 15, 1950.

<sup>106</sup> “Witness Tells Quorum Lack,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 20, 1950.

Christoffel took the stand before HELC.<sup>107</sup> She claimed there to have been no more than 20 to 25 present. But Representative Hoffman contended that there were at “least 75 to 100 spectators present when Christoffel was sworn ‘and never less than 50 to 75’ at any time.” Representative Gwinn estimated that “Between 40 and 75 persons were present.”<sup>108</sup> Prosecutor Patton said Mrs. Israell was in need of a psychiatrist.<sup>109</sup>

Kennedy claimed to have no recollection on the number of spectators. Rogge tried to argue that Kennedy attended the wedding reception of Senator William Langer’s daughter, who was married at 4:30 PM on the afternoon of Christoffel’s alleged perjury. Kennedy had testified earlier in the trial that he “could not recall” whether he had attended the wedding, but now made it clear that he hadn’t.<sup>110</sup> One can only speculate as to whether or not Kennedy was actually present on the afternoon of March 1, 1947, but he is notably absent from the hearing transcript during that time.<sup>111</sup>

“It is the final irony of the Christoffel affair,” Rogge proclaimed to the court, “that a charge of perjury against an innocent man rested ultimately upon the willingness of his accusers to perjure themselves.” There was one way to prove once and for all that the thirteen committeemen had lied about the presence of a quorum, he reasoned. Upon the conclusion of

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<sup>107</sup> “‘Liar’ Thrown at Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 21, 1950.

<sup>108</sup> “Christoffel’s Defense Rests,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 21, 1950.

<sup>109</sup> “Trade Words on Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 22, 1950.

<sup>110</sup> “Christoffel Dismissal Hinted,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 9, 1950.

<sup>111</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, HELC, *Amendments to the Labor Relations Act*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., March 1 and 3, 1947.

Christoffel's testimony before HELC, an executive session of the committee had commenced. According to Rogge, the minutes of the executive session would prove a lack of quorum.<sup>112</sup> Judge Letts agreed with Rogge regarding the importance of the executive session minutes, demanding that the minutes book "must be here in this court."<sup>113</sup> Throughout the course of the trial, he twice issued subpoenas to HELC to release the minutes, but the committee refused to cooperate, adopting a resolution maintaining that the court had no right to make such a demand. "It is difficult to understand the reluctance of the [H]ouse in this respect," responded Judge Letts. "To deny this evidence would not be justice for this defendant. I may have to adjourn this case until the house takes some action. I hope it will co-operate."<sup>114</sup>

The House promptly changed its tune, now insisting that the minutes could not be produced because they were never kept in the first place.<sup>115</sup> The committee also declined to provide the original minutes book, submitting photostatic copies instead, thus refusing to let the court examine whether the minutes continued into the executive session. Nonetheless, Judge Letts ruled this limited level of cooperation sufficient and the original minutes book was

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<sup>112</sup> Christoffel Defense Committee Press Release, 6 February 1950, A43, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 11.

<sup>113</sup> "Crisis in Chris Case Passes," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 11, 1950.

<sup>114</sup> "Records Fight Imperils Trial," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 9, 1950.

<sup>115</sup> "Crisis in Chris Case Passes."



never seen.<sup>116</sup> Whether or not a proper quorum was actually present for Christoffel's testimony remains unknown.

### *Swofford's Redemption*

Just over a year before the second trial, in December of 1948, Christoffel had written a letter to Rogge about a mysterious man who claimed to have information relevant to his defense:

This man, who does not want me to use his name, says he has some very important information on my case. I do not know him personally nor have I ever spoken to him. He contacted another good union man here in Milwaukee who has acted as intermediary. I understand that this man worked with the Company forces on a high level, and knows the 'inside' of the frameup on my case. For some reason, which is not too clear, he wants to 'repent' for his part in this whole affair by giving us the information he has. He is very secretive and wishes to speak to no one here in Milwaukee but only to you personally... Thus you see I don't know just what information this fellow has, but it appears important enough to ask you to speak to him. I naturally cannot vouch for this fellow, on the other hand I cannot see any ulterior motive in this strange, secretive affair... In order that any information that this man may have could be used, I suppose it would have to be in affidavit form.<sup>117</sup>

It seems highly likely that this man was none other than Hugh Swofford. Why it took more than a year to acquire an affidavit is anyone's guess, but on January 13, 1950, Swofford typed up 42-page affidavit outlining in detail his efforts on behalf of the *Sentinel* and Allis-Chalmers, as described in Chapter Two. The affidavit begins:

The following is a true account of my experiences as a reporter investigating subversive activities for the Milwaukee Sentinel, and which I now believe involved me, innocently at the time, in a conspiratorial arrangement between said Milwaukee Sentinel, certain

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<sup>116</sup>"Photographic Copies to Be Made of Minutes of House Group," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 14, 1950.

<sup>117</sup> Christoffel to Rogge, December 2, 1948, Mss 1046, Box 3, Folder 22, Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

officials of the Allis Chalmers Manufacturing Company, certain official representatives of the U.S. Department of Justice, and certain members and representatives of the Federal House Welfare and Labor Committee, as well as certain members of a subcommittee of said committee, for the primary purpose of removing one Harold Christoffel from the Milwaukee scene.<sup>118</sup>

Swofford would soon attempt to reveal the scope and nature of this conspiratorial arrangement before the jury in Christoffel's second trial. First, however, Swofford's former accomplice Glenn Clarke returned to D.C. to testify against Christoffel once again. He was faced with a series of questions from Rogge based on Swofford's affidavit. Clarke contested Swofford's narrative regarding their time spent in Chicago. He admitted to taking CIO Council records to the Sherman Hotel with Swofford, but denied being paid any money, having Swofford purchase him clothes, or stealing any files. He also claimed that "the only record burned in the hotel room fire was a printed circular."<sup>119</sup>

The following week, Swofford was called as a defense witness to challenge the testimony of Budenz and Clarke, as well as the government narrative. According to the *Evening Star*, a Washington D.C. newspaper, "The defense scored a dramatic point when Hugh Swofford, former reporter on the Hearst-owned *Milwaukee Sentinel*, told the jury of intrigue that led to the removal of 7,000 documents from CIO files and their eventual transfer to the Allis Chalmers plant management." He described the scene at the Sherman Hotel, where "Mr.

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<sup>118</sup> Hugh Swofford, "Swofford Affidavit," January 23, 1950, F. 15, Box 7, Nat Ganley Papers, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, 1-2 (hereafter "Swofford Affidavit"), 1; It appears Swofford confused HELC with the House Welfare and Labor Committee.

<sup>119</sup> "Puts Red Tag on Christoffel," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 6, 1950.

Clark[e] drank heavily and spent much of his time paying attention to a girl whom he had engaged to do stenographic work.”<sup>120</sup>

When asked by Rogge if he found any evidence of Christoffel being a Communist, Swofford responded “I did not.” However, government prosecutor Pratt objected to the answer. Judge F. Dickinson Letts sustained the objection and Swofford’s response was stricken from the record. Given the extent of Swofford’s investigation, he was likely one of the foremost experts on Communist activity in Milwaukee. But his conclusions regarding whether or not Christoffel was actually a Communist were disregarded by the court.

When asked by Pratt if he had been fired from the *Sentinel*, Swofford answered, “no,” but that he left the paper due to family trouble and “growing dissatisfaction with type of work I was doing. Conscience trouble. I was losing a taste for that type of work.”<sup>121</sup> When asked what he meant by “conscience trouble,” Swofford stated that he had been “doing things which I began to see were not right.”<sup>122</sup> Additionally, he claimed to have disliked “alliances formed between Hearst and other organizations.”<sup>123</sup>

The prosecution sought to contest the reliability of Swofford’s testimony. It does bear questioning whether Swofford may have had a hidden agenda. Perhaps he was simply trying to

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<sup>120</sup> “Letts Gives in to House in Its Refusal to Obey Christoffel Subpoena,” *Evening Star*, February 14, 1950; Perhaps relatedly, Clarke’s wife sued him for divorce two months later, accusing him of “striking his wife and having absented himself from home without explanation”; “Wife Sues Clarke,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 4, 1950.

<sup>121</sup> “End Deadlock on Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 14, 1950.

<sup>122</sup> Rob F. Hall, “Hearst Man Bares Plot on Christoffel,” February 2, 1950.

<sup>123</sup> “Chris Loses Tilt, Runs Out of Witnesses,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 15, 1950.

get back at his former employer, or maybe he had been a closet leftist all along. Given available evidence, however, it is difficult to discern any incentive for Swofford to testify in Christoffel's defense other than his professed desire to cleanse his conscience. Despite the testimony of dubious figures like Budenz, Schnering, and Goff, no proof of Christoffel's Communist Party membership has surfaced. For Swofford, it was not a contradiction to vehemently oppose Communism, while also taking a stand against an unjust persecution fueled by an overzealous and cynical Communist witch hunt.

A July 1951 letter from Wisconsin CIO News editor Alfred Hirsch to Rogge lends credence to this conclusion, confirming that Swofford's political sympathies were not in line with those of Christoffel and his associates. In the letter, Hirsch informs Rogge that Swofford might soon be paying him a visit. Christoffel had been hoping to collaborate with Swofford for publicity purposes, leveraging his story to expose the conspiracy against him to the greater public. However, having recently spoken with Swofford, Hirsch warned Rogge to "be a bit careful how you talk to him." Hirsch continued: "He is against a lot of things you and I are not. However, he is also against lots of things you and I are also against. Including A-C, the tie-up with Hearst, Congressmen, etc. etc."<sup>124</sup> Presumably, Swofford never abandoned his anti-Communist streak. However, his conscience began to weigh on him as he witnessed the unsavory activities and questionable tactics of his former allies, particularly in relation to their conspiracy to place Christoffel behind bars.

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<sup>124</sup> Alfred Hirsch to John Rogge, July 17, 1951, Mss 1046, Box 3, Folder 2, Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

Swofford's defense of an alleged Communist was a brief affair. It did not open the door to further involvement with the political left. In fact, it does not appear that Swofford ever followed up with Hirsch and Christoffel in their plans for collaboration. Among other endeavors, Swofford would go on to launch a New York-based public relations firm and work as the scientific advisor for the U.S. Army Research Office.<sup>125</sup> Ultimately, Swofford was a politically conservative anti-Communist who regretted his collaboration with bad faith actors and whose conscience led him to carry out an admirable deed, regardless of the politics surrounding it. Nonetheless, his act of goodwill proved to be in vain.

### *Inexcusable Neglect*

Despite the testimony of Hugh Swofford and Nellie Israell, Christoffel was once again convicted of five counts of perjury on February 23, 1950. Subsequently, he was transported to the district jail to await sentencing.<sup>126</sup> Three weeks later he was sentenced to two to six years in prison.<sup>127</sup> A notice of appeal was filed by Rogge's colleague, Herbert J. Fabricant. This time, however, bail was increased to \$10,000.<sup>128</sup> Friends of Christoffel flew \$5,000 to Washington, believing it could be combined with the other \$5,000 already put up by the Civil Rights Congress. However, they discovered that the original \$5,000 had been furnished in the name of Rogge, and that he was unavailable to "sign a new obligation pledging the bonds for this new

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<sup>125</sup> Overseas Press Club of America, *1966 Directory* (New York: Overseas Press Club of America Inc., 1966), 146.

<sup>126</sup> "Christoffel Is Guilty, Verdict," *Milwaukee Journal*, February 23, 1950.

<sup>127</sup> "Two to Six Year Term Is Given to Christoffel," *Milwaukee Journal*, March 14, 1950.

<sup>128</sup> "Authorize Bail for Christoffel," *Milwaukee Journal*, April 6, 1950.

bail.” According to the April 7, 1950 edition of the *Journal*, Rogge had been overseas in Europe, “making ‘peace pleas’ for the last several weeks in Moscow and elsewhere, leaving his client Christoffel stuck in jail for over a month.<sup>129</sup> Finally, on April 8, the Civil Rights Congress posted \$10,000 in Treasury bonds for Christoffel’s release.<sup>130</sup>

Rogge’s European travels also prevented him from submitting the necessary appeal papers in accordance with the judicial deadline, posing a serious threat to Christoffel’s freedom. In October, after several extensions had already been granted to the May 29 deadline, Rogge asked the court to permit a late submission, arguing that he was guilty of “excusable neglect.” He claimed to have delegated the job of preparing the appeal to his associate, Herbert J. Fabricant, who failed to submit the appeal papers due to worry over his wife’s “difficult” pregnancy. However, he also mentioned to a reporter that Christoffel hasn’t given him any money for the appeal.<sup>131</sup>

The court found his excuses inadequate. The following May, Rogge would be charged with “inexcusable neglect” of Christoffel’s defense by the Court of Appeals and cited for disciplinary action by the Washington Bar Committee. Chief Judge Harold M. Stephens would grant Christoffel the right to appeal, despite his attorney’s failure, stating: “To dismiss the appeal and thereby subject [Christoffel] to imprisonment without consideration of the

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<sup>129</sup> “Confined Holiday Faces Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, April 7, 1950.

<sup>130</sup> “\$10,000 Bond Frees Chris,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 9, 1950.

<sup>131</sup> “Delay Sought for Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, October 17, 1950.

substantial questions in the case would be a miscarriage of justice which should not be permitted to occur.”<sup>132</sup>

### *Financial Rifts*

It was clear that Christoffel’s case continued to face serious financial hurdles. In May 1950, Rogge had sent a letter to Christoffel calling for a meeting in which the “recurring item that will have to be discussed is one of funds.” In order to “properly” handle the case, Rogge claimed that he would need to receive \$4,000 by June 25—\$2,500 for appeal-related printing expenses and \$1,500 for personal fees. He stated: “I cannot continue to operate effectively unless I do realize something both for expenses and also something on account of fee. . . . It is hard for me to write these things. And yet I cannot do my best work, indeed I cannot handle your case properly, unless I have the amount requested.”<sup>133</sup> In August, Rogge sent a letter to William L. Patterson, executive secretary of the Civil Rights Congress, expressing that he had received none of the \$4,000 requested from Christoffel: “For some reason or other, I have been unable to get across the idea that a lawyer also has overhead and has to be able to live.” He continued: “I have done the best I can. I am sorry that it has not proven quite good enough. I will never be able to make it quite good enough without at least the amount that I have requested for expenses and fee.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> “‘Error’ Is Aid to Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 12, 1951.

<sup>133</sup> Rogge to Christoffel, 26 May 1950, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 6.

<sup>134</sup> Rogge to William Patterson, 2 August 1950, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 52.

The letter was copied and sent to Christoffel, who responded in October, stating: “It is difficult to ask you to carry on the fight on my case while I have not been able to send you the necessary funds. It has become increasingly difficult to raise funds. Unions are faced more and more with wage fights, as well as internal problems sapping their funds. The results of Taft-Hartleyism are becoming more evident and are awakening the workers. But maybe this awakening will make it possible to raise funds this fall if I am free to do so.” The same forces that dismantled Local 248 and threatened Christoffel’s freedom had disrupted union power and unity across the country. He enclosed a check for \$110: “It is very little. We had hoped to raise over a thousand, but have just not been able to do so. I am writing to the CRC to see what they can do to help.”<sup>135</sup> Of course, the CRC was also grappling with the nation’s increasingly pervasive atmosphere of McCarthyism. In a letter to Christoffel the following January, CRC national organizational secretary Aubrey Grossman stated that “the promise I made—to pay half of your expenses—is impossible for me to fulfil, at this moment.”<sup>136</sup>

That same month, Rogge sent a letter to Patterson, reiterating his need for funds: “I have repeatedly asked someone from Civil Rights Congress to sit down with me and discuss this matter, but have not been successful in accomplishing this. On the basis of this record a new request seems fairly futile but nevertheless I urge upon you to get in touch with me to make some provision on account of expenses and fee.” In the letter, Rogge also declared a lien on the

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<sup>135</sup> Christoffel to Rogge, 4 October 1950, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 53.

<sup>136</sup> Aubrey Grossman to Christoffel, 10 January 1951, A39, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 25.



original \$5,000 bond provided by the CRC, which he intended to enforce “in view of the shabby treatment [him and his firm] have gotten.”<sup>137</sup>

### *Snatching the Gold*

A few days after Rogge was charged with “inexcusable neglect,” Grossman wrote to Christoffel with plans to secure new legal representation.<sup>138</sup> Rogge, however, seemed insistent on saving face and maintaining control of the case. That same day, he wrote Christoffel, declaring that he would be “going down to Washington today and stay[ing] there until the appeal is perfect.” “I can now say to you, Chris,” wrote Rogge, “that I have never let you down in any manner.” He concluded the letter with an appeal for Christoffel to assist with his claim for the CRC’s \$5,000 bond.<sup>139</sup>

In August 1951, government prosecutor Pratt moved to revoke the new, \$10,000 bond provided by the CRC, claiming that “the civil rights group had failed to produce in court defendants and other convicted Communists who had been involved in other cases.”<sup>140</sup> In particular, four members of the Communist Party Eleven had jumped bail after the Supreme

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<sup>137</sup> Rogge to Patterson, 11 January 1951, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 54.

<sup>138</sup> Grossman to Christoffel, 14 May 1951, A39, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 26.

<sup>139</sup> Rogge to Christoffel, 14 May, 1951, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 54.

<sup>140</sup> “U.S. Moves to Revoke \$10,000 Christoffel Bail,” *Milwaukee Journal*, August 7, 1951.

Court confirmed their convictions.<sup>141</sup> As a result, Christoffel's bond was ordered revoked by the federal district court.<sup>142</sup> The following month Christoffel himself put up a new \$10,000 bond. According to the *Journal*, he refused to tell a reporter the source of the bond, but prosecutor Pratt expressed intent to collaborate with the FBI to find where it came from.<sup>143</sup> The source remains unclear, but Christoffel successfully avoided being sent back to jail.

From July through October, Rogge would send seven more letters to Christoffel requesting money, culminating in an October 22 message declaring "with great reluctance" his intent to impress a lien on the revoked \$10,000 bond.<sup>144</sup> Two days later, he announced he would be suing Christoffel and the Civil Rights Congress unless the \$10,000 bond be directed to apply on the nearly \$20,000 he claimed to be owed.<sup>145</sup> Patterson wrote to Christoffel about having "heard by the grapevine that [Rogge] is trying to 'snatch' the gold." However, he asserted, "The old vulture will not feed off that fund."

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<sup>141</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 241.

<sup>142</sup> "U.S. Moves to Revoke \$10,000 Christoffel Bail," *Milwaukee Journal*, August 7, 1951.

<sup>143</sup> "Bond Revoked for Christoffel," *Milwaukee Journal*, September 20, 1951.

<sup>144</sup> Rogge to Christoffel, 22 October 1951, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 56.

<sup>145</sup> "Fees Pile Up on Christoffel," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 24, 1951.

*“Rogge the Rat”*

According to historian Philip Deery, from 1951 onward “Rogge can be hitched to the anticommunist wagon.”<sup>146</sup> The same man who had once preached that “the Government is doing the dirty work for big business” and challenged J. Edgar Hoover to “debate with him on which is the greater threat to America, Communism or Fascism” ended up switching sides.<sup>147</sup> An FBI memorandum from June 14, 1950 claims to have gleaned from anti-Communist labor reporter Victor Riesel that Rogge had contacted Walter Reuther, anti-Communist labor leader David Dubinsky, and ex-Communist CIA collaborator Jay Lovestone, and others in an attempt “to initiate a financial drive for the introduction of a new political party.” Although the memorandum states that “so far none have given him any encouragement,” it also mentions that Rogge “is supposed to have received \$60,000 for his activities” from an unknown source.<sup>148</sup>

In July of 1950, Rogge stopped by the FBI Office in Washington, D.C. to let Hoover “know personally that if he could be of any assistance that he would be happy to do so.”<sup>149</sup> This was the same time period in which Rogge had been neglecting his legal responsibility to Christoffel, according to the Court of Appeals. Not only did Rogge fail to meet his client’s needs,

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<sup>146</sup> Phillip Deery, *Red Apple: Communism and McCarthyism in Cold War New York*, (New York: Empire State Editions, an imprint of Fordham University Press, 2014), 138.

<sup>147</sup> J. Edgar Hoover to the Attorney General, November 13, 1947, O. John Rogge files, part 2, page 70, Federal Bureau of Investigation; Edward Scheidt to J. Edgar Hoover, October 31, 1947, O. John Rogge files, part 2, page 72, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>148</sup> L. B. Nichols to Clyde Tolson, June 14, 1950, O. John Rogge files, part 2, page 170, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>149</sup> Office of Director memorandum, July 28, 1950, O. John Rogge files, part 2, page 173, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

for some reason he was offering assistance to one of the key figures involved in the conspiracy to imprison Christoffel.

An FBI memorandum from J. Edgar Hoover on March 14, 1950 provides insight as to the “peace pleas” Rogge had been making in Europe and Russia while Christoffel was stuck in jail. According to the memo, Deery writes: “On January 26, 1950, the Yugoslav delegation to the United Nations paid Rogge’s law firm a retainer of \$10,000.”<sup>150</sup> Under the leadership of Communist revolutionary Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia had split off from the Soviet sphere of influence in 1948—a potential Cold War victory for the United States, but a point of contention for the Soviet Union, the Communist Party USA, and the Peace Information Center, an American anti-war organization chaired by W. E. B. Du Bois, and of which Rogge had been a charter member.<sup>151</sup>

In November 1950, Rogge delivered a speech in Warsaw at the Second World Peace Congress, an event sponsored by the World Peace Council, an international, Soviet-sponsored organization advocating for nuclear disarmament. For Rogge, according to Deery, this speech “was his crossing of the Rubicon.”<sup>152</sup> To the booing and jeering of many of the delegates in attendance, Rogge spent forty minutes defending the Yugoslav government, taking sides with the United States in the recently ignited Korean War and criticizing international Communists

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<sup>150</sup> Deery, *Red Apple*, 146.

<sup>151</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace* (1952; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77.

<sup>152</sup> Deery, *Red Apple*, 141.

for their hypocritical use of violence and blind obedience to the Soviet Union.<sup>153</sup> By December 1950, Rogge began furnishing the FBI with documents relating to the Peace Information Center and the World Peace Congress, presumably in an attempt to link the Center with the Congress, and ultimately with the Soviet Union.<sup>154</sup>

On February 7, 1951, Deery writes, Du Bois “was indicted and arraigned for ‘failure to register as an agent of a foreign principal.’” In November, with Du Bois and four co-defendants facing fines of up to \$10,000 each and up to five years in prison, Rogge would serve as the star witness for the prosecution.<sup>155</sup> However, Du Bois and his co-defendants scored a victory and the case was dismissed. Nonetheless, according to Deery, “It was now open season for spraying venom toward Rogge. In the left-wing press he was labeled a stool pigeon, a paid agent, a provocateur, and a renegade, and accused of betrayal.”<sup>156</sup> Du Bois would include an entire chapter on Rogge in one of his memoirs, referring to him as “Rogge the Rat.”<sup>157</sup>

That same year, American Communists Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sentenced to death for espionage. Rogge took up representation of Ethel’s brother, David Greenglass, who had “confessed, turned prosecution witness against his former comrades, and was spared the

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<sup>153</sup> Deery, *Red Apple*, 152-153.

<sup>154</sup> SAC (Special Agent-In-Charge), New York to Hoover, December 16, 1950, O. John Rogge files, part 7, page 43, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>155</sup> Deery, *Red Apple*, 156.

<sup>156</sup> Deery, *Red Apple*, 156-157.

<sup>157</sup> Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace*, 81.

electric chair.”<sup>158</sup> Thus, financial disputes were unlikely to have been the only source of tension between Rogge and Christoffel. Du Bois had been an ally of the CRC, and the organization worked closely with the Rosenberg Committee in its efforts at sparing the couple from execution.

In November 1951, Christoffel sent Rogge a letter of dismissal: “You have placed me in circumstances where I am forced to get new counsel effectively immediately.”<sup>159</sup> Rogge would be replaced by a team of lawyers: Daniel D. Sobel of Milwaukee, David Scribner of New York, Ernest Goodman of Detroit and David Rein of Washington.<sup>160</sup> In September 1952, however, Christoffel’s appeal was rejected. The perjury conviction was upheld.<sup>161</sup> Representative Kennedy reacted with a press release asserting, “The Communists, when I demanded that Christoffel be indicted, called ‘Witch Hunter,’ but I knew I was right. Now everybody should know.”<sup>162</sup> Despite having voted against Taft-Hartley, Kennedy had sided with the Republicans against Christoffel from HELC to his imprisonment, thus facilitating the passage of Taft-Hartley, as well as the ascendancy of the anti-progressive agendas of McCarthy era Republicans. This was reflective of a nationwide movement of Socialists and liberals embracing right-wing, anti-Communist rhetoric in rejection of the Popular Front vision of the Communist Party.

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<sup>158</sup> Deery, *Red Apple*, 138.

<sup>159</sup> Christoffel to Rogge, 30 November 1951, A42, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 56.

<sup>160</sup> “Four Will Take Over as Christoffel Counsel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, December 17, 1951.

<sup>161</sup> “Reject Appeal of Christoffel,” *Milwaukee Journal*, September 18, 1952.

<sup>162</sup> Sean J. Savage, *JFK, LBJ, and the Democratic Party*, SUNY Series on the Presidency (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 8.

The following week, Rogge sent a letter to Christoffel, stating: "Balance Due: \$18,826.96."<sup>163</sup> Christoffel responded: "You know, John, that I personally never agreed to pay you anything on this case. You know my financial circumstances at the time you originally agreed to represent me. You came into the picture because the UAW-CIO made certain commitments to you. Since then, my financial circumstances grew steadily worse. This you also knew. Under the circumstances, I see no point in any further communications pertaining to this matter."<sup>164</sup> Christoffel's new legal team was unable to reverse the tide. On June 22, 1953, after six years of fighting to maintain his freedom, Christoffel began serving a sentence of 16 months to four years in prison at the federal reformatory in Lorton, Virginia.<sup>165</sup>

### *The Unraveling of the Civil Rights Congress*

As Christoffel's fight came to an end, the CRC found itself in an increasingly precarious situation. A well-coordinated system of FBI spies and informants had been deployed in CRC chapters across the country, eroding trust within the organization.<sup>166</sup> Phones were bugged, mail was monitored, and activities were surveilled.<sup>167</sup> John Gilman, who succeeded Josephine

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<sup>163</sup> Rogge to Christoffel, October 1, 1952, Mss 1046, Box 3, Folder 6, Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>164</sup> Christoffel to Rogge, November 5, 1962, November 20, 1962, Mss 1046, Box 3, Folder 6, Harold R. Christoffel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>165</sup> "Need for 1-Man Probe? Christoffel Case Cited," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 22, 1954; "Christoffel Request for Parole Denied," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 24, 1954.

<sup>166</sup> John Gilman, *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice: The Story of John Gilman* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2009), 67.

<sup>167</sup> Gilman, *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice*, 69.

Nordstrand as executive director in 1954, detailed the atmosphere of suspicion and constant FBI harassment in his autobiography *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice*. According to Gilman, examples of such harassment included agents following his children to school, dissuading clients from patronizing his linoleum business, circulating false letters in his name to tarnish his reputation, and calling his phone at 3:00 AM, “put[ting] on all kinds of scary noises.”<sup>168</sup>

Meanwhile, the FBI extorted CRC members into turning on the organization. According to Horne, “CRC-Wisconsin was probably riddled with more informers and infiltrators than any other chapter.”<sup>169</sup> One CRC member was targeted because her husband had been laid off. According to Gilman, she claimed to have received \$50 a month for six months from the FBI. Another member had been accused of rape but allowed to remain free if he spied on the organization for the FBI. A Mexican member’s wife and five children were faced with deportation if he didn’t cooperate with the agency. Likewise, the German wife of another member was threatened with deportation. Lastly, of the spies and informants Gilman himself became aware of, was Theodore Livingston, a black, Trotskyite CRC member who had been on parole for theft as a postal worker.<sup>170</sup>

Livingston was expelled from the CRC in January 1954 for being “an FBI spy and [*Milwaukee*] *Journal* informer” by the unanimous decision of a jury of seven black CRC Advisory Committee members—according to Gilman, the all-black jury was intended to prevent the FBI

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<sup>168</sup> Gilman, *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice*, 111-119.

<sup>169</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 281.

<sup>170</sup> Gilman, *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice*, 118-120.



from smearing the decision as “white chauvinism.”<sup>171</sup> According to the *Journal*, Livingston claimed that his expulsion was engineered by the “Gilman-Nordstrand group within the CRC.” He also revealed that he had recently made an unsuccessful attempt to remove Nordstrand from her position as executive secretary, due to what he referred to as her “obvious bungling and inefficiency.”<sup>172</sup>

Regardless, Nordstrand ended up taking a break from the organization, from which she would not return. Around the same time as Livingston’s expulsion, Gilman wrote a letter to Patterson, informing him that he had taken over her position: “You probably knew that Mrs. Nordstrand was badly in need of a vacation and rest. Well, she was granted that vacation upon her request and that of the State Advisory Committee. In her place, I was elected Executive Secretary and have been carrying on this job with the help of the wonderful leadership which she left behind.”<sup>173</sup> Patterson agreed she was in need of a “well-deserved vacation.”<sup>174</sup> Perhaps she was experiencing burnout from nearly two decades as an extremely active labor and civil rights advocate.

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<sup>171</sup> John Gilman to Patterson, 28 January 1954, P216, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 37-38.

<sup>172</sup> “‘Left Wingers’ Oust a Leader,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 5, 1954; P216/Wisconsin - Milwaukee - Correspondence, 1953-54.

<sup>173</sup> Gilman to Patterson, 28 January 1954, P216, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 37-38.

<sup>174</sup> Patterson to Gilman, 4 February 1954, P216, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 35-36.

In his autobiography, however, Gilman wrote that Nordstrand “had to leave town because she had an affair with a black man, and his wife found out and stabbed him.”<sup>175</sup> It is unclear what happened between January and May of 1954, but Nordstrand’s relationship with the organization appears to have drastically soured. Gilman requested that Patterson “notify all chapters in the country that Josephine Nordstrand was forced to resign from the CRC and cannot be trusted in any way should she come around to any of their offices.”<sup>176</sup>

Gilman professed to “have had great difficulties in rebuilding the organization due to the disruptive elements and also the shape the organization was in when Mrs. Nordstrand was asked to resign.”<sup>177</sup> He admitted to Patterson in 1954 that he “was not the best person to be in charge,” as his linoleum business took up most of his time. “To do a decent job at the CRC one must give much more time than I am devoting,” he wrote.<sup>178</sup> A report from that year revealed that Milwaukee membership was at a low, FBI harassment and infiltration were rampant, contact with Wisconsin chapters outside of Milwaukee had been disrupted, the publication of a

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<sup>175</sup> John Gilman, *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice: The Story of John Gilman* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2009), 105.

<sup>176</sup> Gilman to Patterson, 26 May 1954, P216, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 31-32.

<sup>177</sup> Gilman to Patterson, 26 May 1954, P216, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 31-32.

<sup>178</sup> Gilman to Patterson, 26 May 1954, P216, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 31-32.

newspaper had stalled due to lack of funds, and the few people available to carry out assignments had become exasperated.<sup>179</sup>

Meanwhile, the national organization had been facing severe financial difficulties. Grossman was sincere in informing Christoffel in 1951 that the CRC had no choice but to abandon their financial commitment to his case. A 1952 report to all chapters from Patterson and Grossman declared that Patterson had not been paid in 18 weeks, the telephone had been turned off, the rent was many months behind, loans had become due, and the “financial support now being furnished by the chapters (and this is true for the past period) is practically nil.”<sup>180</sup> According to Horne, the CRC’s “listing by the attorney general as a subversive organization and the constant drumbeat of allegations about their being a ‘Communist front’ ensured that suppliers would be reluctant to handle their accounts, halls would be reluctant to rent to them, their contributors would be harassed.” These problems only continued to worsen until the organization’s dissolution in 1956.<sup>181</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Despite the expert testimony of Hugh Swofford, the court concluded that Harold Christoffel was indeed a Communist. The narrative of Allis-Chalmers, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and the United States government was upheld. Labor agitation at Allis-Chalmers was attributed

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<sup>179</sup> “Summary Report of Activity in Milwaukee,” P218, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 35.

<sup>180</sup> Patterson and Grossman to All Chapters, 28 April 1952, J46, Fight for Racial Justice and the Civil Rights Congress, New York Public Library, *Archives Unbound*, 31-32.

<sup>181</sup> Horne, *Communist Front?*, 49.

not to the legitimate grievances of rational workers seeking to improve their lives and working conditions, but rather to the infiltration of Communists, purportedly subservient to a foreign power seeking to undermine the American way of life. Similarly, the Civil Rights Congress was branded as a front for the interests of the Soviet Union. The organization's attempts at exposing the horrors and hypocrisies of American racial injustice and political repression were dismissed as efforts to weaken the country and bolster the position of its Cold War adversary. The propagation of such narratives fueled a vicious cycle of fear, paranoia, and mass hysteria, opening the door for further suppression of dissent and erosion of civil liberties.

Perhaps Christoffel could have avoided imprisonment if he had had more support from the UAW-CIO or had been able to raise more money. Maybe the jury would have been swayed in his direction if Rogge had been able to introduce a few more defense witnesses. And maybe Christoffel's greatest mistake was being represented by O. John Rogge, an attorney who at best was guilty of neglecting the case and at worst was working directly with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to ensure a guilty verdict. Regardless, the impact on the greater American labor movement would have likely been negligible. Local 248 was one of many left-wing unions in the United States and Christoffel was one of many left-wing union leaders. Likewise, the Civil Rights Congress was one of many progressive organizations facing anti-Communist persecution. This isn't just a story about the dismantling of Local 248, the imprisonment of Harold Christoffel or the dissolution of the Civil Rights Congress. Rather, their fates were reflective of a large-scale effort across the country to terminate a rising movement that challenged the status quo of labor exploitation, racial subjugation, socioeconomic inequality, and American imperialism.

## Conclusion

### *Communist Domination?*

In December 1949, more than two years after the failed strike, the employees of Allis-Chalmers were forced to attend the “Freedom Forum,” a series of compulsory lectures prepared by George Stuart Benson, president of the far-right Harding College in Arkansas. Historian Tula A. Connell describes Benson as “a one-time missionary who had produced films emphasizing that the free enterprise system and the ‘big heartedness of employers’ were behind workers’ high living standards.”<sup>1</sup> According to *Arkansas Times* writer and Harding College alumnus Michael D. Brown, Benson also stood in steadfast opposition to integration, warning it would bring “increased destruction to property, increased gonorrhoea and syphilis, and increase pregnancies,” and linking “mixed marriages” to broken homes and increases in crime.<sup>2</sup>

Four times a day, a group of 45 lecturers presented before groups of 35 to 40 workers, attacking social legislation and tying public housing, unemployment insurance, social security, and socialized medicine to Communism. According to the presentation, “Washington, to use the word symbolically, is peddling the drug of socialism under the label of liberalism.” New Local 248 president Charles Schultz criticized the lectures, asking, “Why is the company

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<sup>1</sup> Tula A. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution: Challenging Liberalism in 1950s Milwaukee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 135-136.

<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Brown, “Despite School Sentiment, Harding’s Leader Said No to Integration,” *Arkansas Times*, June 6, 2012.

belatedly taking up this program against communism in the face of the fact that the people of the United States (especially the CIO) have recently rejected communism?"<sup>3</sup>

An examination of the case of Harold Christoffel offers a likely answer to Schultz's question. Allis-Chalmers, like many companies across the country, embraced anti-Communism not simply because of the supposed threat Communism posed to the future and stability of the United States, but because it could be wielded to drive a wedge into a burgeoning movement of leftist-oriented labor and political organizing that posed to threaten their supreme authority over workplace proceedings and unencumbered ability to maximize the extraction of surplus value from laborers. Essentially, anti-Communism served as a convenient tool to unravel the advances made by militant unions like Local 248 in establishing a degree of authority and control over the workplace, accompanied by an increased sense of dignity for workers. Even the anti-Communist *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporter Hugh Swofford could sense that many of his allies in the anti-Communist movement had ulterior motives.

This does not mean the charges of Communism were entirely unfounded. We know that Party members like Sigmund Eisenscher and Owen Lambert were members of Local 248. In a 1982 interview, Eisenscher estimated there may have been as many as 100 workers at Allis-Chalmers who were members of the Party or the Young Communist League.<sup>4</sup> In fact, a 1932 article from the *Daily Worker* made public the fact that Wisconsin Communists had voted in

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<sup>3</sup> "Union Terms A-C Lectures GOP Strategy," *Milwaukee Journal*, December 20, 1949.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Eisenscher, interview by Dale Treleven, January 26, 1982, tape recording, Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter Eisenscher Interview).

favor of carrying out a “special concentration” at Allis-Chalmers to organize the workers and increase Party membership.<sup>5</sup> According to Ellen Schrecker, “Within the labor movement the party threw some of its best cadres into the early organizing campaigns of the CIO. They were effective, experienced organizers who played important roles in building unions in the maritime, automobile, steel, and electrical industries, as well as among white-collar and professional workers.”<sup>6</sup>

Schrecker contends that the Communists tended to recruit few ordinary workers into the Party through its labor organization campaigns, but the situation may have been different at Allis-Chalmers, where the management was so dogmatically inflexible.<sup>7</sup> According to the HELC Subcommittee testimony of Owen Lambert, who claimed to have joined the Party in response to conditions at the plant, “It is much easier to understand Communism when you are up against such things as you are at Allis-Chalmers.”<sup>8</sup> While Eisenscher was a trained Party organizer upon entering the Allis-Chalmer plant, he insisted that most Party members at the plant didn’t arrive as Communists; rather, their experiences working at Allis-Chalmers compelled them to join the Party. According to Eisenscher:

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<sup>5</sup> “Wisconsin Communists Vote to Concentrate upon Allis Chalmers,” *Daily Worker*, May 16, 1932.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen Schrecker, “Labor and the Cold War: The Legacy of McCarthyism,” in *American Labor and the Cold War*, ed. Robert Cherny, William Issel, and Kiernan Walsh Taylor (Rutgers University Press, 2020), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Schrecker, “Labor and the Cold War,” 8.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, HELC Subcommittee, *Congressional Hearing on Communistic Influences in Labor*, 80<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup>. sess., Milwaukee, WI, March 17-19, 1947, 322.

[The workers of Allis-Chalmers] could see how we worked. They read our press. They saw us in motion. . . . They could hear us speak. And it didn't take too much understanding to figure out that certain people were Communists because they were identified by how they worked. And how they fought. The consistency. The loyalty to party principles and to working class principles. . . . So we didn't have to go pounding our fist on tables to bring people in to the Party. They came to us.<sup>9</sup>

As Stephen Meyer writes, "For depression-era industrial unionists, the Communist Party's Popular Front policies offered an opportunity to pursue their labor union objectives."<sup>10</sup>

When the Socialist-tied AFL refused to support Christoffel in his pursuit of industrial unionism, the Communists filled the void. "Since the traditional Milwaukee Left, that is, the Socialist Party, was so connected to the craft union old guard," writes Meyer, "the young Turks and shop veterans could move only further to the Left to secure advice on their vision of industrial unionism."<sup>11</sup> According to Eisenscher, "[industrial unionism] was our policy as well, so there was, of course, a great deal of cooperation. . . . We mobilized our own people to give support—whatever few we had at that time. And it was because of this, really, that's how Harold got acquainted with Communists and developed a kind of working relationship with them because he knew that they would support what he was trying to do."<sup>12</sup>

When asked about the greatest contribution of the Communist Party to the labor movement, Eisenscher contended that the Party "gave the labor movement its vision. As well as its strategy for success in building a labor movement to begin with. Because of all the forces

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<sup>9</sup> Eisenscher Interview.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Meyer, *"Stalin over Wisconsin": The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900-1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 221.

<sup>11</sup> Meyer, "Stalin over Wisconsin," 221.

<sup>12</sup> Eisenscher Interview.



involved, the Communist Party was unique in its understanding of the class nature of our society. And this was basic in the labor movement because if you don't understand the class nature of our society, you are very weak in confronting the employer class."<sup>13</sup> Schrecker echoed this sentiment, describing the Communists and their allies as "labor's most militant voices":

Their ideology encouraged them to champion workers against bosses. They understood how capitalism operated and were often willing to challenge management at every level. . . . In addition, because they recognized the importance of retaining the loyalty of their rank-and-file members, they tried to create a broader community that would keep those members involved with the union. A typical left-wing local, like the one Harold Christoffel organized at Allis-Chalmers, ran dances, held classes, *and* aggressively pursued grievances. Moreover, as long as the [Party] retained a presence, its opponents also had to work the grass roots.<sup>14</sup>

With regard to the government's charges that Christoffel supported the Communists, worked with the Communist Party, and/or participated in Party activities, it seems fairly certain that Christoffel misrepresented the truth during his questioning by HELC. Even more certain is the fact that Christoffel lied about not knowing Fred Blair. According to Buse, "Almost everybody knew Fred Blair. He was around like horse shit."<sup>15</sup> Local 248 Committeeman Gerald Mayhew claimed that "half of West Allis" had seen Christoffel with Blair.<sup>16</sup> Even excluding the biased testimony of anti-Communist figures like Budenz, Goff and Schnering, it is apparent that Christoffel worked closely with the Communists, including Blair. Of course, the HELC hearings

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<sup>13</sup> Eisenscher Interview.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 382.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Buse, interview by Dale Treleven, Robert Buse Interview, February 4, 1982, tape recording, Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society.

<sup>16</sup> Gerald Mayhew, interview, 1970, tape recording, Milwaukee Independent School: Labor History Course Materials, Wisconsin Historical Society.

were set up as a trap to remove Christoffel from Local 248 and more generally to undermine the entire labor movement. He had entered the hearing with the intention of soliciting help in arbitrating the strike, unaware of the premeditated plot to ensnare him with a perjury charge. As such, he was forced into an untenable position: either admitting his Communist ties and thereby placing an even greater target on Local 248 or denying such ties in a bid to preserve union credibility amidst a looming specter of McCarthyism.

However, despite government claims, there is a lack of evidence that Christoffel ever actually joined the party. On this count, at least, it appears that he was wrongfully charged, as corroborated by the testimony of Hugh Swofford. Those who so vigorously sought to frame Christoffel as a Communist, from Louis Budenz to John F. Kennedy, Walter Reuther to Robert Ozanne, did so to suit their personal and political agendas. But it is difficult to perceive any incentive for the decidedly anti-Communist Swofford to have declared a lack of evidence of Christoffel's alleged Party membership other than his stated intention: to cleanse his conscience.

This does not mean that Christoffel was not a Communist. Owen Lambert testified that the only way he could prove himself a Communist was his word. Lambert had never signed a Party membership card yet considered himself a devout comrade. It is entirely plausible that Christoffel felt the same way. From a historical perspective, however, it is less helpful to dwell on the McCarthyist question of whether or not figures such as Christoffel were indeed Party members—which will likely never be answered conclusively—than to examine what it meant to be a Communist, what it meant to be associated with Communists, and what it meant to be

labeled a Communist in the post-WWII era. More succinctly: what did it mean to participate in the Popular Front?

### *Dissolution of the Popular Front*

Historian Michael Denning provides insight into the significance of the Popular Front, which he describes as a “radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching.”<sup>17</sup> According to Denning, “The heart of the Popular Front as a social movement lay among those who were non-Communist socialists and independent leftists, working with Communists and with liberals, but marking out a culture that was neither a Party nor a liberal New Deal culture.”<sup>18</sup> The Popular Front was grounded in the labor movement, particularly the millions of CIO workers across the country—likely “the largest sustained surge of worker organization in American history.”<sup>19</sup>

The public culture of the Popular Front revolved around three political forms: “a social democratic electoral politics; a politics of anti-fascist and anti-imperialist solidarity; and a civil liberties campaign against lynching and labor repression.”<sup>20</sup> The anti-fascism and anti-imperialism, in particular, was manifested through a politics of international solidarity, which naturally included solidarity with the experiment in socialism that was Soviet Union. Because of

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 9.

this, historians have often viewed the Popular Front “not as a social movement, but simply a strategy of the Communist Party, a political line dictated by the Moscow-controlled Communist International to the various national Communist Parties to accommodate the foreign policy of Stalin’s USSR.”<sup>21</sup>

Denning argues that such historians overemphasize the centrality of the Communist Party to the Popular Front. It was not simply a strategy of the Communist Party, but rather “a broad and contentious social movement, in which Communists played important, sometimes decisive roles.”<sup>22</sup> While the Communist Party most certainly embraced a strategy of solidarity with the larger Popular Front social movement in 1935, the various threads of that movement had already been emerging and interweaving in decades prior. As such, Denning contends that “Popular Front history is not a subset of the history of the Communist Party (the tactic or lien of one period); rather the history of the Communist Party is a subset of the history of the Popular Front social movement, one of the most important and influential social movements in US history.”<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, anti-Communism was not simply a tool to suppress the Communist Party or even to roll back the gains of unions; rather, it was a tactic to wipe out a flourishing social movement that threatened power structures supporting racism, fascism, and imperialism.

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<sup>21</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 479.

Denning also contests common understandings of the Popular Front that conceptualize it “through a core-periphery model, in which the core was the Communist Party and the periphery was the surrounding circles of ‘fellow travelers’ with greater or lesser degree of affiliation to the Party.” He argues that this approach “leads to a remarkably inadequate understanding of the depth and breadth of the social movement.” According to Denning:

In cultural studies, [the core-periphery model] has often led to a fetishization of Party membership, and an overemphasis on the narrative of affiliation and disaffiliation. However, Party membership was not that central; many people passed through the Party at different times, and the large majority of Popular Front radicals were never members. Indeed, many figures thought of themselves as generic “communists,” using the term with a small c, the way earlier and later generations thought of themselves as generic “socialists,” “feminists,” or “radicals.”<sup>24</sup>

In a 1982 interview, Harold Christoffel recounted how the “Communist” label was cast widely upon the left-wingers of the Popular Front era, hinting at such accusations as a point of pride:

“In those days you didn’t put your head under a bushel because somebody said he was a Communist or he was a ‘Red’... The only ones who aren’t called Red aren’t doing anything.”<sup>25</sup>

Denning’s analysis provides a more nuanced framework for understanding Harold Christoffel’s likely existing, but loose connections to the Communist Party. It also shines a light on the absurdity (or ingenuity, in many cases) of Cold War anti-Communist fervor, which made no attempt at distinguishing between Communist Party members and members of the Popular Front.

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<sup>24</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xviii.

<sup>25</sup> Harold Christoffel, interview by Dale Treleven, January 27, 1982, tape recording, Wisconsin Labor Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society.

To enemies of the Popular Front and opportunists seeking to consolidate power by jumping on the anti-Communist bandwagon, anyone loosely affiliated with the Front could be labeled a “Red.” For example, Allis-Chalmers was able to utilize this tactic of “red-baiting” to dismantle a unified and militant union, remove its leaders, and advance legislation establishing a more satisfactory business environment. William Randolph Hearst and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* were in the business of selling newspapers, and anti-Communist sensationalism was sure to draw attention. According to historian Stewart Hall Holbrook, Hearst editorial writer Arthur McEwen revealed that the Hearst newspaper formula revolved around the “gee-whiz” treatment: “The gee whiz, said he, was a reader’s emotion when he saw the front page of a Hearst paper, any Hearst paper. Page two fetched a ‘Holy Moses!’ Page three brought a climactic ‘God Almighty!’”<sup>26</sup> The front-page “John Sentinel” series was a prime example of this strategy. Additionally, as one of the wealthiest men in America, Hearst’s attacks on the Popular Front were likely rooted in his staunch opposition to New Deal taxation and regulation policies, which he deemed “essentially Communism” and the work of “Stalin Delano Roosevelt.”<sup>27</sup>

Louis Budenz renounced his Communist allegiance in exchange for a professorship at Notre Dame and a career as a professional witness-informant. Unable to generate a satisfactory income as a legal representative for the struggling Popular Front, O. John Rogge reignited his career by actively opposing the Communist Party. Walter Reuther leveraged the accusations of

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<sup>26</sup>Stewart H. Holbrook, *The Age of the Moguls* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1953), 311.

<sup>27</sup> David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: First Mariner Books, 2000), 513.

Communist domination of Local 248 in order to undermine the militant left-wing caucus of the UAW and consolidate power within the union, ultimately achieving victory as UAW president and securing a compatible UAW board.

In the face of rising anti-Communist sentiment across the country, John F. Kennedy had fashioned himself as a Democratic Cold Warrior. By the time of his campaign for Senate in 1952, he successfully positioned himself to the right of his Republican opponent in regard to the Cold War issue, achieving victory by attracting votes from New Deal Democrats and right-wing Republicans alike.<sup>28</sup> Playing a key role in the indictment of Harold Christoffel was a surefire way to boost his anti-Communist bona fides.

J. Edgar Hoover's championing of the anti-Communist cause allowed him to vastly expand the federal government's internal security system, widening the jurisdiction of the FBI, eliminating legal restrictions on the organization, and, thus, transforming it into an internal security empire, over which he reigned as director until his death in 1972.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, it wasn't solely the responsibility of any one individual to bring about the downfall of Christoffel or the disintegration of the Popular Front. McCarthyism swept through American society like a cascade of falling dominos, involving thousands of institutions and actors. As Schrecker writes, "The political repression that occurred during the McCarthy era was a collective enterprise. Each of its components reinforced the others, even when, as was

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 262.

<sup>29</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 105-106.

sometimes the case, it looked as if they were operating independently.”<sup>30</sup> It was the cumulative effect of fear, suspicion, and political opportunism that fueled a fervor that only the most ardent members of the Popular Front could resist succumbing to.

Few, if any, Popular Front devotees benefited personally from attempts at maintaining Popular Front solidarities. Communist Party members and their allies were faced with blacklisting, FBI surveillance, political intimidation, social ostracism, government prosecution, and sometimes deportation. Many Communist organizers like Fred Blair and Sigmund Eisenscher felt the need to go underground in the early 1950s to avoid anti-Communist repression.<sup>31</sup>

After six years of fighting to preserve his freedom, Christoffel spent three years behind bars. Post-incarceration, Christoffel got a job at an electrical works in Oconomowoc. However, due to his past, the IBEW refused to accept him into the union. Nevertheless, recognizing his knowledge and work ethic, the owner of the electrical works gave him a job as an expediter, a job with which he wouldn't have to join the union.<sup>32</sup> His talent and years of experience as an accomplished union leader and organizer would never be put to use again.

A machinist by trade, Robert Buse was one of many former Local 248 members blacklisted from industrial work. One employer said he wouldn't hire Buse if he gave him

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<sup>30</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 85.

<sup>31</sup> John Gilman, *Footsoldier for Peace and Justice: The Story of John Gilman* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2009), 126-127.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Buse, interview, 1970, tape recording, Milwaukee Independent School: Labor History Course Materials, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter Buse Interview).



\$1,000. He eventually left his trade, becoming a route salesman for a fish company. But blacklisting restricted more than just the career prospects of Popular Front members. When Buse tried to take out a loan to put plumbing in his house a few years after the strike, he discovered that the Chamber of Commerce had put out a report that prevented a downtown investment firm from loaning him money.<sup>33</sup>

Later, in 1962, Buse was elected chairman of the park and recreation board in the Milwaukee suburb of Greenfield. As a neighborhood Boy Scout commissioner, assistant scout master, and active church member, he was nominated by his alderman for a part-time job as Greenfield's juvenile and recreation director. However, the chairman of the fire and police commission contacted the *Milwaukee Journal* to inquire into Buse's background, resulting in a smear campaign rooted in the 1947 allegations of Louis Budenz and the nomination papers of Sigmund Eisenscher, which Buse had signed. A crowd of 30 attended a council meeting to oppose Buse's nomination, which was subsequently rescinded. The following month, Greenfield Mayor Donald J. Hansen demanded Buse step down from the park and recreation board, resulting in his removal from the position by Common Council.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Buse Interview.

<sup>34</sup> "Buse Backed for Youth Job," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 26, 1962; "Civil Service Stall Charged," *Milwaukee Journal*, June 30, 1962; "Appointment of Buse Apparently Killed," *Milwaukee Journal*, July 5, 1962; "Greenfield Votes to Oust Buse," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 6, 1962.

## *McCarthyism's Legacy*

Historian S. Ani Mukherji describes the radical vision of the Wisconsin Popular Front movement: “They fought for militant multiracial unions, adequate affordable housing, and basic protections for the unemployed. Their politics united diverse working people including immigrants, African Americans, and the unemployed. They stood in solidarity with the incarcerated, condemned state violence, and wove connections of mutual aid.” But this progressive vision for a more equitable future was dismantled through the collaboration of right-wing anti-Communists with liberals and Socialists who sought to distance themselves from the Communist label. “By the late 1950s,” Mukherji writes, “this countersubversive crusade encompassed attacks on the remaining Socialists and liberal advocates of the public good.”<sup>35</sup>

According to Schrecker, “the overall legacy of the liberals’ failure to stand up against the anti-communist crusade was to let the nation’s political culture veer to the right. Movements and ideas that had once been acceptable were now beyond the pale. Though Communists and their allies were the direct victims, the mainstream liberals and former New Dealers within the Democratic party were the indirect ones.”<sup>36</sup> Now the left end of the political spectrum, liberals found themselves more open to attack and less able to defend themselves. Progressive issues which they once championed alongside the Communists increasingly put them at risk of being targeted by the anti-Communist crusade. As Robert Clayton Pierce writes, “Any proposed social legislation that had any support from radical groups was fair game, no matter how meritorious

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<sup>35</sup> S. Ani Mukherji, “Reds among the Sewer Socialists and McCarthyites: The Communist Party in Milwaukee,” *American Communist History* 16, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2017): 141.

<sup>36</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 412.

the plan might be.”<sup>37</sup> For example, Popular Front demands for a Western European-style social democratic welfare state fizzled as the scope of accepted political debate narrowed. Calls for universal health insurance disappeared, leaving the United States as the only major industrial nation without such a system.<sup>38</sup> Civil Rights advocacy, as exemplified by the CRC, was framed as the work of outside agitators, resulting in the bolstering of segregation.<sup>39</sup> The detachment of the Civil Rights Movement from organized labor was mirrored by a severing of race from class, as middle-class leaders who took over the movement concentrated on legal and political rights, largely discarding the Popular Front’s calls for economic justice.<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, the labor movement experienced a wave of centralization and bureaucratization. Union membership ceased to be an essential aspect of worker identity, as the rank-and-file became increasingly apathetic.<sup>41</sup> On top of eliminating labor’s left wing, Taft-Hartley had restricted the kind of organizing tactics responsible for the mass increases in unionization seen in the mid-to-late 1930s, resulting in a stagnant labor movement. As a result, writes Schrecker, “when the industrial sector’s postwar economic boom faltered and the traditional well-paid blue-collar jobs that the labor movement’s core members relied upon began to disappear, organized labor was unable to mobilize the economic and political clout

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Clayton Pierce, “Liberals and the Cold War: Union for Democratic Action and Americans for Democratic Action 1940-1949” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979), 395.

<sup>38</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 383-384.

<sup>39</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 391.

<sup>40</sup> Schrecker, “Labor and the Cold War,” 18.

<sup>41</sup> Schrecker, “Labor and the Cold War,” 18.

needed to protect its earlier gains.”<sup>42</sup> Union membership amongst the overall labor force declined dramatically over the years, from 34.2% in 1945 to 9.4% in 2022, a record low since the enactment of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935.<sup>43</sup>

Although the intensity of anti-Communism reduced significantly by the 1960s, enough damage had already been dealt; the Popular Front had been permanently dissolved and the shadow of McCarthyism has continued to linger over the socio-political reality of the United States. The Cold War, too, eventually came to a close, but US Cold War institutions of hegemonic, anti-leftist, domestic and geopolitical control persist, unchallenged by any contemporary analogue to the Popular Front. Meanwhile, the Popular Front movement has largely been whitewashed by mainstream historians or left out of the history books altogether. When Harold Christoffel entered the hearing room of the House Committee on Education and Labor on March 1, 1947, he likely had no idea what was in store. The hearing proceedings were not the cause of the rise of McCarthyism, but they did signal the dawn of a new world.

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<sup>42</sup> Schrecker, “Labor and the Cold War,” 15.

<sup>43</sup> Paul D. Romero and Julie M. Whittaker, “A Brief Examination of Union Membership Data” (Congressional Research Service, June 16, 2023), 3.

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