



1919 to the New Deal

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The Newark Communist Party

1919 to the New Deal

One Sunday morning in August 1919, residents of Newark's Ironbound were surprised to find under their doors circulars denouncing America and its capitalist society and advocating the overthrow of the government. This was Newark's first reported Communist Party activity. According to the Newark Sunday Call, it was the Russian Worker's Party, operating "unimpeded in the city", that had delivered the flyers to the neighborhood. The Ironbound, at the time, housed 303 industrial establishments and was populated largely by families of Slavic origin, 20,000 of whom were Russian. Known as little Russia, the Ironbound suffered from both high rates of illiteracy and non-citizenship.

Inspired by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the American Communist Party—known in its early years as the Workers' Party—was established in the spring of 1919 and was soon organized in a host of American cities. It got its start after the American Socialist Party expelled seven foreign language branches for advocating a Bolshevik Revolution in America. These branches, totaling 40,000 members, provided the core of the American Communist Party.

Socialist and radical activities had been part of Newark's political landscape for many decades—the Marxist Socialist Party under Eugene Debs had an influential presence in the Newark labor movement. Italian anarchists, Russian Marxists from the failed 1905 revolution, and German socialists from the failed 1848 revolution were all potential sources for the Communist Party.

So too were Eastern European Jews who belonged to Newark's more than 25 Yiddish speaking Workmen's Circle branches. Since the end of the 19th century, the Workmen's Circle had provided working class Jews with cemetery space, health, welfare, and educational programs. Each branch—or lodge—represented either a trade or a town of origin in Poland

or Russia. When the Socialist Party split in 1919, a seven year conflict ensued between the socialist and communist factions of the Circle.

With its many Socialist Party foreign language branches, Newark became an early center of communist activity. Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, Jews and others formed workers party units, each with its own leader and office. These groups, although allied with the new Communist Party, were largely autonomous. However they shared a common desire for immediate revolution by force. The Russian branch was the largest and most active in the city.

In 1919, federal, state and local police agencies were just winding down from five years of countering German anti-American activities. Newark was no stranger to this battleground: it possessed a large, influential and well organized German-American population. Although only a small fraction of German-American Newarkers had been engaged in pro-German activities during the war, anti-German hysteria ran deep in the city, resulting in the renaming of German streets, the elimination of German language classes in high schools and wide spread discrimination, especially in employment.

When World War I ended, the same police agencies that dealt with German anti-American activities easily morphed into anti-communist squads, and began creating files on Workers Party members.

In 1919, however, the anarchists proved to be more dangerous than the communists. On June 2 1919, bombs exploded in eight cities, including New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Washington. The plot was hatched in Philadelphia by a small group of Italian anarchists. The bombs were intended for prominent government officials. One bomb set off at the home of United States Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer killed the bomber but did not harm Palmer. Within ten days Palmer appeared before congress to request a \$500,000 appropriation to hunt for “anarchists, bomb throwers and enemies of law and order.”

A \$300,000 appropriation was granted, but five months later Congress chided Palmer on the lack of results. He handed the investigation over to a 24-year old named J. Edgar Hoover, who didn't fare much better. The anarchists were nowhere to be found. In fact they had escaped the country and to this day have never prosecuted or even positively identified.

Under pressure from Palmer, Hoover ordered his agents to make mass arrests of members of the Russian Workers Party, the group most closely identified with armed insurrection. On the evening of November 9, 1919 federal and local agents raided party offices in 18 cities including Newark, where 72 men were arrested. Palmer took credit for the raid, claiming he forestalled an action planned for the 2nd anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, adding that all aliens engaged in radical activities would be deported to Russia. Five Newarkers were, in fact, deported.

The raids were considered a success and Hoover planned a larger crackdown. The Palmer raids began January 2, 1920 and lasted for four days. Over 5000 arrests were made in 33 cities. In Newark 74 people were arrested and sent to Ellis Island. Only 32 were detained more than a week, all of them Russian Workers Party officials from the two Newark branches—one on Charlton Street in the 3rd ward and the other on Adams Street in the Ironbound. Almost all those in custody had Slavic surnames.

At the Adams Street branch, police seized two black flags with lettering that read: “the spirit of destruction is the spirit of a new life”, as well as large portraits of Lenin and Trotsky and communist literature. According to police, a bomb was discovered hidden in the building’s outhouse.

In an editorial, the *Newark Evening News* debunked the threat of the “the red scare: “What was the result of all the plotting? Hopelessly ineffective bomb outrages that accomplished no part of their object and served only to create anger and disgust.”

Two months later, the Department of Justice, with the assistance of the Newark police, sent 100 agents to raid a dance in the Third Ward. They had arrest warrants for 25 radicals, none of whom was at the dance. Yet the agents arrested 12 men and one woman.

The *Newark News* again mocked the raid as “espionage overdone” the newspaper asked “could any form of propaganda against the United States be worse than these very acts of lawlessness perpetrated in its name.”

The Palmer raids and other police action forced the communists in America to convert their party into a conspiratorial organization. Out of fear of deportation and/or arrest thousands of communists left the party. Those who remained committed to the cause went underground and met privately. For almost two years they ceased open activities.

In December 1921 competing factions of the party agreed to operate in the open but to continue working underground as well. Decisions would be made in private and the party would work within existing labor unions to gain leadership, without enunciating its ultimate aim of revolution through force of arms.

With few exceptions, from 1920 to 1923 there was little communist activity in Newark. Despite this, Commissioner William Brennan emerged during these years as a staunch foe of radicals.

Brennan was a labor leader active in the state AFL. He was elected to first City Commission in 1917 and subsequently reelected three times serving as Commissioner for Public Safety. As Newark’s highest police authority, he thwarted communist activities by denying meeting permits and arresting those who tried to speak

Defending the rights of Newark’s communists was the mission of the American Civil Liberties Union. Founded by Roger Baldwin in 1920 in response to the Palmer Raids,

the ACLU defended civil liberties, particularly the rights of free speech and free assembly. It was a successor to the Civil Liberties Bureau of 1917, which had performed the same functions for World War I conscientious objectors and dissenters

In 1921 Brennan and the ACLU were at odds over a rally for Sacco and Vanzetti, a leftist *cause célèbre*. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were anarchists accused of murdering two payroll guards during a holdup in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Communist, anarchist, labor, and other sympathizers held rallies and fund raisers for the two defendants, from their 1921 trial and conviction, through appeals, and up to the 1927 executions.

The Newark rally was scheduled for Laurel Gardens. It was sponsored by an Italian anarchist group and the Labor Education Society, an *ad hoc* group primarily composed of Communists. Brennan ordered the Newark police to cancel the rally, opining that “this was not a proper sort of meeting for Newark.” The sponsors asked the ACLU to intervene. Roger Baldwin sent a representative to Newark to confer with Mayor Charles Gillen and other city officials. Gillen overruled Brennan, declaring that the event would be rescheduled. But it was too late, the speakers were already across the country appearing at other rallies and the Newark rally was never held.

In 1923, Newark’s communists took on a higher profile, establishing branches of national party adjuncts. That year the Newark branch of the International Labor Defense, or the ILD, was created to raise money to cover bail and legal defense for jailed communists. William Foster, the head of the national ILD was scheduled to be the speaker at the Newark branch’s initial meeting at the Iroquois Hall on Washington Street. Brennan cancelled the meeting and told Foster to leave Newark.

William Z. Foster was successively a socialist, an IWW member, a syndacalst, an anarchist and, at the end of WW One, a labor organizer. He joined the Communist Party in 1921, becoming Party Secretary in 1929. A Stalin loyalist, he remained in the top position until 1957.

The Young Communist League, an adjunct organized to attract younger members to the party, also opened a branch in Newark in 1923. The local group had about 10 members, with Yiddish its *lingua franca*.

And, in the same year, the party newspaper the “Worker”—later, “The Daily Worker”—opened its first office outside of New York City, in Newark.

Newark Communists became involved in local labor unions, particularly with the carpenters and painters. Jews were active in both trades, having acquired the training in Eastern Europe where most shtetl houses were built of wood. A housing boom that dates to well before world war one and continued through the 1920s witnessed the rise of wooden

tenement buildings in the 3rd ward, lower Clinton Hill and Vailsburg. In Weequahic, one, two, and four- family wood houses sprang up. The need for carpenters and painters was evident.

Many of these workers spoke Yiddish and belonged to Workmen's Circle branches of their trades. The working conditions—long hours, low pay, safety hazards and exposure to toxic chemicals—demanded strong unions to deal with predatory contractors. Carpenters and painters joined the AFL unions for protection, but formed their own Yiddish speaking locals. Local 577 of the Painters Union was founded by Samuel Winograd, president of the Workmen's Circle Painters Lodge. He joined the Communist Party in 1919, subsequently founding Local 777. Local 24 of the Carpenters Union likewise had its origins as a Workmen's Circle lodge and in 1923 became affiliated with the Communist Party. Both of these locals were small, fewer than 50 men in each.

Communist influence was also present in the sign painters and cleaners and dyers locals, but these were short lived.

Newark was the second largest fur processing center in the country and, A. Hollander & Sons Fur Company, on East Kinney Street, was the largest fur processor in the world, at one time employing almost 5000 people. The International Fur Workers Union, Local 25, had organized all the other fur shops in Newark except Hollander. Communists were active in both the international and the local from the 1920s through the 1950s. Morris Langer was the leading figure in the Newark local until his assassination in 1933.

He began working as a fur dresser at Hollander in 1910 at the age of 15. In 1913 he joined the newly formed International Fur Workers Union. He became active in union affairs and was elected vice president of Local 25 in 1920. A Socialist, in 1925 Langer joined the Communist Party.

There were about twenty Communists in Local 25, out of a total of 125 members, but almost the entire membership was loyal to Langer. Through 1929, Langer was active only peripherally in the Newark party, spending most of his time organizing fur workers in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. In 1929, local 25 was about 70% Jewish and 25% Italian.

Greeks belonged to the Newark Communist Party. Influential in the restaurant trade, Greeks owned and staffed almost all of Newark's downtown restaurants. Working conditions were inhuman: seven-day weeks, 12 to 14- hour days, hard tile floors, and stuffy kitchens. Lung and kidney diseases were prevalent. The meager wages were usually

paid monthly. Most workers were flat footed and many suffered from kidney ailments and consumption.

The Greek unit of the Newark Communist Party made three attempts to organize Newark restaurants in the 1920's and all failed. In 1926, a Communist-organized 17-week strike of over 350 workers almost succeeded, but the owners obtained a court injunction prohibiting picketing. Years later the Greek restaurants were organized, but not by the Communists

1923 was a year of organization building and by 1924 the Newark party was in the open and ready to gain new adherents. After William Foster was denied the right to speak in Newark on behalf of the ILD in 1923, in January 1924, he tried again, and to make a point, he chose to hold a rally at the corner of Broad and Market Streets, Newark's busiest intersection. Although he was denied a police permit, he appeared all the same, and was arrested after his first words. The ACLU filed a \$30,000 civil suit for false arrest.

The following month, the ACLU and the ILD sponsored a joint rally at Broad and Market again with Foster as the speaker. A permit was denied. Thus, in a span of 6 months, Foster made three unsuccessful attempts to speak in Newark. **Brennan told Foster: "You can't talk in Newark..not while we run this town."**

Soon after, Newark Communists applied for and were denied a permit to hold a Lenin memorial rally at the Labor Lyceum on South 14th street. Consequently, they decided to hold the event outdoors, in front of the lyceum. The four speakers included prominent New York Communists. As each began to speak, he was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. Director Brennan and the Newark police had no intention of allowing Communists either freedom of speech or assembly.

Mayor Frederick Breidenback, and commissioners Thomas Raymond and Charles Gillen agreed it was time to rein in the police department because of the negative national press Newark was receiving. When ACLU lawyer John Larkin Hughes suggested a meeting at which he, the police, Newark officials and the defense counsel work out a plan that would allow Communists to meet 'unmolested by the police,' Newark officials readily agreed. The meeting was a watershed for Communist activity in Newark. An agreement stipulated that a permit would be issued for any Communist event provided that the party's name and purpose of the event was on the application. For the next three plus years there was virtually no police repression of Communist events.

In November, Newark's Communists held a large rally—their first of the year—commemorating the 7th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Most Newark Communists were still immigrants—of the rally's three speakers, two spoke Yiddish and one German.

However, change was in the air—the following month an English speaking branch of the Young Communist League was created for the purpose of attracting second generation Americans to the Communist fold. The League’s first program was on the ABC’s of Communism. This branch grew steadily and became a fertile recruiting arm through the 30s.

During 1925 and 1926, national and local prosperity as well as the fractured nature of the Newark Communist Party hampered both its growth and activities. In 1925 there were only 200 dues paying party members in the city, which had eight foreign language branches—Jewish, German, Russian, Polish, Greek, Finnish, Hungarian, Ukrainian.

Most Communist Party events were held at the Labor Lyceum, which was owned by the Workmen’s Circle. They included membership meetings, educational events, rallies and dances. By the mid-twenties most of the foreign language branches of the Newark party met here. Until 1932, the Newark Communist Party was a district of New York and had no professional staff. A succession of individuals served as party secretary on a part time basis, receiving a small stipend.

Party Minutes from New York District 2 disclose official frustration at the seeming chaos in Newark. To correct this, New York ordered a general membership meeting in August 1925 at the Labor Lyceum. All foreign language branches were ordered to attend. Pleas were made in several languages for the members of the branches to obey the orders of the New York Party Secretariat.

A month later Bertram Wolfe, a national Communist leader and its leading theoretician, attended another meeting in Newark to lecture Party leaders on their doctrinal errors. He urged Newark “Comrades” to travel to New York to learn more of the current party line.

During 1926 efforts continued to unify the disparate elements of the Newark Communist Party. It was a slow but steady progression, as foreign speakers learned English and a second generation of Communists chose not to affiliate with the foreign language branches. The Young Communist League was, not surprisingly, the most active adjunct of the party.

In 1927, the Secretariat of the Communist Party sent S.D. Levine to Newark to help manage the party and build the circulation of the *Freiheit*, a Yiddish Communist daily established in 1922. Levine, 42, was an experienced journalist who had spent the war years in Newark writing for the *Forward*, a Yiddish daily Socialist newspaper. He became a Communist in 1919 and was sent to Boston to manage a forerunner of the *Freiheit*. He displayed managerial skill in Boston and was transferred to Newark

Levine’s work in Newark was significant. During his 7 years in the city, he covered all local stories for the *Freiheit* with passion and a trenchant wit. However, it was not as a journalist that he made his mark in Newark. Levine had been sent there to energize and bring unity to the party.

His arrival in Newark coincided with the Communist defection from the Workmen's Circle in late 1927. After a number of bitter disputes, the Communists rented their own space at 93 Mercer Street. With its own headquarters and growing confidence, the Party and its adjuncts began to hold numerous events to educate the masses and gain new adherents.

The Communists grew bolder and returned to Broad and Market Streets for speech making. The majority of Commissioners saw to it that they received police protection from the many hecklers, to the dismay of Public Safety Commissioner Brennan.

Until November, over a dozen meetings and rallies were peacefully held throughout the central city. However, the 10th anniversary celebration of the Bolshevik Revolution proved an exception. Irving Maitlin received a permit to hold a November 10th meeting at the Ukrainian Hall at 57 Beacon Street. The purpose of the meeting was not listed on the application. When street circulars advertising the event disclosed it was Communist sponsored, Newark police chief McRel revoked the permit. Although 300 people appeared at the hall, they could not enter. The locked doors were guarded by police.

The crowd decided to hold the rally in front of the Hall. When the first speaker opened his mouth he was arrested as were the six men who followed him. Among the arrestees was Louis Jaffe, a leader of the Carpenters Union and Morris Langer's closest friend. The arrestees were charged as "disorderly persons" because there was no permit for the event. Total bond was set at \$950 for the 7 men. The Newark Communist Party issued a statement decrying the denial of the constitutional freedoms of speech and assembly. It added that Newark was the only city in the country that interfered with the 10th Anniversary event.

The ILD and the ACLU denounced the arrests. John Larkin Hughes again came to Newark and met with chief McRel, who told him the Communists had violated the agreement made three years earlier by omitting to disclose that the Communist Party was the sponsor of the event. After lengthy negotiations, a new agreement was reached— Communist events would be allowed if all publicity was submitted to the police eight days prior to an event.

Once again, the agreement held for two years, although the heightened visibility of the Communists caused increasing unease in Newark's establishment. The New Jersey Law Journal opined on the Communist threat:

"American values are being threatened by pacifists, the ACLU, and various disgruntled intellectuals particularly from the Communist Party. These threats include birth control and free love, both Communist Party ideas to disintegrate family life." More specifically, the writer complained that "the Young Communist League had been picketing and handing out circulars at Barringer, East Side, West Side and Central high schools against citizens

military training camps which provided physical training for young men because so many were unfit to fight in World War 1. The circulars and picket signs claimed the camp's food was rotten and the boys were regimented to be strike breakers and cannon fodder."

Despite concern about Communist activity in Newark, the real strength of the Party can be judged by the vote in the 1928 presidential election. The Communist Party ticket of William Foster and Benjamin Gitlow polled only 350 votes out of 120,000 cast in the city.

Undeterred by this poor showing, Newark Communists opted to run candidates for the May 1929 City Commission election. They fielded three candidates for the five positions. S.D. Levine, the best known of the three, ran with the slogan "equality for negro workers." He polled 1909 votes, more than the total statewide Communist Party vote in the 1928 presidential election. *The Daily Worker* claimed that most of Levine's vote came from blacks. This was not true. An analysis of the vote shows that most of Levine's votes came from Jewish voters and only 144 came from the black districts of the 3rd ward.

In 1919 Newark's black population was 17,000. By mid-1929 it had more than doubled. During this period, to my knowledge, there was not a single dues paying Black member of the Newark Communist Party.

On the national level, the International Labor Defender, the monthly periodical of the Communist run ILD, featured 291 articles on political repression in the United States from 1926, the year it was founded-to 1929. Only 16 were on Blacks.

This would soon change. At a Cleveland convention in August 1929 the United States Communist Party created the Trade Union Unity League, or the TUUL, partly to organize marginal populations of workers—women, the unemployed, and Blacks.

The TUUL directive to recruit more women was already underway in Newark. For several years, the Young Communist League had successfully recruited women from Newark high schools, especially from Central and South Side. Many of the recruits had parents who were either Communist Party members or sympathizers. The best known YCL member was Lottie Blumenthal, daughter of Samuel Blumenthal, a successful hardware merchant on Mulberry Street. Lottie became a leader of the YCL and one of its chief activists in Newark and New Jersey. After her marriage, Lottie Gordon was active on the national level. When she died less than a decade ago, she was a librarian at the Communist Party headquarters in Manhattan.

Samuel Brodtkin, a close friend and ally of Morris Langer and a leader of the Communist local of the Carpenters Union, along with his wife Rebecca—also a Communist activist—had two daughters, Lucille and Rose who joined the YCL.

The Jack London Club, established in mid-1929 was a literary discussion group that attracted bright high school and college students and was open to all. A poorly kept secret was that the club was an adjunct of the Newark Communist Party. In fact, its meeting room was on the 2nd floor of Cantor's Furniture store on the corner of Prince and Spruce Streets. The only other office on the 2nd floor was that of the YCL. Almost all of my interviewees mentioned the club with praise.

To help organize the unemployed, the party sent a young but experienced Communist organizer to Newark in late 1929. Dominick Flaiani was an Italian immigrant who had come to the states when he was a child and was fluent in English and Italian. His first job was as a fur processor in Brooklyn. It was there that he joined the Communist Party and became an activist.

Flaiani was transferred to Philadelphia where he remained five years. He soon became a leading Communist in the city and a special target of the Philadelphia police. At one point was arrested five times in six days. After being charged with sedition, his lawyers got the charge dropped in return for his departure from Philadelphia. In Newark he was no less outspoken.

A new phase in the history of the Newark Communist Party began in 1930, with the great depression. Growing unemployment and the concomitant dissatisfaction with the capitalist system, created a burgeoning interest in alternative social experiences. Whitaker Chambers said about the appeal of Communism during the Depression—

“The vision inspires. The crisis impels.”

In late January 1930, the *Newark News* published its first big story on unemployment in the city. Welfare Commissioner John Murray called a conference of welfare workers to consider measures to alleviate the city's unemployment crisis. Murray said 30,000 workers or about 15% of the working population were out of work. He said the situation was acute because of its duration. If it continued, Newark would have to declare an emergency.

The American Communist Party was more prescient than the Newark city fathers. Several months before the October stock market crash, the party set up unemployment councils. Less than a week after Murray's welfare conference, Newark's Communists announced the creation of the Newark Unemployed Council with Dominick Flaiani as its head.

In early February 1930 an organizational meeting of the unemployed took place at Communist Headquarters on Mercer Street with over 300 people in attendance, half of them Black. Flaiani led a discussion on ways of bringing jobless demands to the attention of the “bosses and their government.” The next meeting was scheduled for February 11.

Newark Commissioner and Public Safety Director William Brennan was in attendance. Concerned about the Communist attempt to organize Blacks, Brennan quickly engineered a

counter- attack. He spearheaded the enactment of a new policy that authorized police to prevent or disband any unemployed meetings, to arrest and prosecute Communists propagandizing Blacks and to use physical force to subdue any resistance to this policy.

Like Brennan, 4th precinct police judge Nicolas Albano was fiercely anti-Communist. In advance of the February 11 unemployed meeting, he issued warrants for known Communist leaders who were likely to attend. On the night of the meeting, as the hall filled up, twenty plain clothes police armed with the warrants sat in the packed room and another 40 uniformed police stood outside. Over 500 attendees heard President Hoover referred to as “Wall Street’s messenger boy” and New Jersey Governor Larsen called ‘indifferent to the unemployed’.

At a signal, the police moved to the front of the hall, arrested the speaker and eight others on the dais, and ordered the audience to leave. Those arrested included Morris Langer, S.D. Levine, Dominick Flaiani, and a Black, Dozier Graham.

Graham, 63, was a mild mannered retired Baptist minister who days before had joined the Unemployed Council. He was disabled and needed a cane to walk.

Also arrested was 18 year old Sylvia Ostrow, a Young Communist League member who had been handing out flyers advertising the rally outside the hall. The 9 men were held on \$10,000 bail each and Ostrow on \$1000.

S.D. Levine described the subsequent events in the *Freiheit*;

“We were all loaded on the patrol wagon and taken to the 4th precinct station. The other arrestees were taken into the station but I was pushed into a wall of the garage by a policeman twice my size who punched me in the face and stomach. When I fell to the ground he kicked me. After he rested he resumed punching me. When my face swelled up he was satisfied. I was then taken into the station but was not placed with the other prisoners so they couldn’t see my face

The newspapers said I was injured falling down the steps.

At the arraignment the next morning, Albano didn’t mince words: “if you people are dissatisfied with this country go back where you came from.” All were charged under a 1902 New Jersey sedition law that carried a maximum sentence of 15 years. In explaining the much lower bail for Sylvia Ostrow, Albano opined: **“apparently the girl has not been spanked enough while growing up.”** He added that a higher bail would be inappropriate because she was still in her formative years.

In an editorial, the *Star Eagle* attacked the police for brutality and Albano for setting such high bail. The paper said that the police had helped red propaganda, and that the language used by the Communists was no worse than that used in the United States Senate.

The men remained in jail unable to make bail. Ostrow's father bailed her out that day. However, she was rearrested almost immediately when she began handing out circulars protesting the high bail of the other prisoners. She appeared before Judge Harold Simandl who, concurring with Albano, ordered Sylvia and her father back to court in two days, at which time he sentenced Mr. Ostrow to spank his daughter in the court room.

The *Newark News* called the punishment "savage" and prominent citizens and clergy vigorously protested. Simandl, who apparently had not thought out the sentence, was said to be embarrassed. He called Sylvia back into his chambers the next morning and tried to get her to recant her actions, but she ridiculed him. The judge was forced by public opinion to set her free.

One week after the arrests, Abraham Isserman, ILA lawyer and secret Communist asked county judge, Walter Van Riper to reduce the bail from \$10,000 to \$3000. Isserman was a 30 year old Newark civil rights lawyer who over his long career was best known for his defense of Communists.

As unemployment deepened, evictions for non-payment of rent increased. Since Party headquarters was in the Third Ward, Communists were on the scene as soon as they heard of an eviction. They summoned neighbors, drew a crowd, made speeches, and led loud marches through the neighborhood holding protest signs.

The first of these protests was the most publicized because of the harsh police and judicial action against the perpetrators. Levinson Grant, Black, a widower with five children lost his job at Christmas. He couldn't pay the rent and the family was evicted from their house at 19 Livingston Street .

The Communists were forewarned of the eviction and were at Grant's house with protest signs at the ready, stating "work or wages" and stop the eviction. They demanded immediate reinstatement of the family. A crowd of 200 soon gathered and began to march down Livingston Street.

The police arrived and demanded the marchers halt. The Communists refused. Policemen waded into the crowd and beat the marchers back with nightsticks. The four organizers were taken to the 4th Precinct Police Court where Judge Albano charged them with loitering and disorderly conduct. Bail was set at \$100 each.

Two days later, the men were tried before Albano, who found them guilty and sentenced each to 90 days in jail. For good measure, he increased their bail to \$250. **In sentencing the men Albano said: "I am not here to decide the virtues or evils of Communism, but to maintain peace and quiet in this precinct. You came to preach to certain persons who have not the intellect to understand and who may misinterpret. Here is where the danger lies."**

The ACLU again intervened. Roger Baldwin came to Newark to set up a local committee due to “the ill conceived police drive against Communists in Newark.” The committee included prominent clergymen, defense attorneys, Communists and police. An agreement was reached to allow street meetings if a permit was issued and ‘all city ordinances obeyed.’ This agreement was useless as the police could halt any event on the grounds it was blocking traffic. And indeed they did so.

Clearly frustrated, the ACLU decided to attack the issue of freedom of speech and assembly in Newark by creating a test case they would appeal right up to the United States Supreme Court.

In mid-July the ACLU sent four carefully briefed, elegantly attired professors, two each from Columbia and New York University to Newark to hold a street meeting. They hoped to be arrested but were instructed to avoid being arrested for blocking traffic.

The meeting was held on Springfield Avenue and Broome Street at the center of the Black neighborhood in the 3rd Ward. Before the proceedings even began, the police arrested Party member Saul Stark for handing out leaflets advertising the event.

ACLU lawyer Nunn mounted a soap box and began to introduce the speakers. 3rd Ward Police Captain Fohs ordered him to stop. Nunn said he represented the ACLU and that the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and assembly. Fohs said he was not there to engage in a constitutional debate but to enforce Brennan’s order that no meeting be held without a permit.

While this discussion was continuing a squad of ten policemen was telling the rapidly growing crowd to move on. Alexander Taylor, public relations director of the ACLU did not move quickly enough and found himself in the same paddy wagon as Saul Stark. The two were a study in contrasts—Stark in shabby pants and torn shirt and Taylor immaculately dressed in a light tan golf suit and knickers.

Nunn again mounted the soap box and was told he faced arrest for obstructing traffic. Nunn knew that was a “no-no” and suggested reassembling in a vacant coal yard a half a block away.

The crowd had now swelled to over 500 and it followed Nunn into the yard. One of the professors yelled through a bullhorn—**“Step right in ladies and gentlemen. Four college professors will offer a complete college education in one evening free of charge.”**

Nunn began his introductions, prompting Fohs to telephone chief McRel, who ordered him to make no arrests. Newark needed no further negative publicity. The ACLU team did not know this and as each professor stepped up to address the audience, he asked to be arrested. To their chagrin no arrests were made.

Commissioner Brennan died in may 1930, and his protégé, William Egan was appointed to replace him. A union man, Egan had served as city clerk before his elevation. An active democrat he eventually became Essex County Democratic Chairman.

Egan's first directive as Public Safety Director was issued after the ACLU fiasco. He prohibited further "test case" meetings and warned the ACLU that any attempt would be met with arrests for disturbing the peace.

The ACLU abandoned the Newark Communists to Egan and McRel. The Party was left to its own devices as it continued its efforts to organize the unemployed and gain black members.

Knowing that they could no longer hold street meetings, Newark Communists held rallies in Military Park. During the next three years, two memorable events took place.

The first was an unemployment demonstration to coincide with similar ones being held in large cities throughout the world. The press dubbed the event "Red Thursday."

The rally started at noon with about hundred Communists and sympathizers plus several thousand spectators. The speakers stand was in front of the Wars of American Monument. Sixty police were in the park with 300 in reserve.

Workers on lunch hour from Public Service and American Life Insurance watched the proceedings from the windows and roofs of their buildings.

Speakers included Flaiani, S.D. Levine, and Leonard Patterson, a newly recruited Black member of the Young Communist League. Levine attacked the police for brutality and Flaiani called for a Bolshevik regime. As Patterson started to speak, boos came from 60 odd workers on the roofs. The rally ended with a list of demands, including jobs, no evictions, and more relief for the unemployed. Throughout the event many of the spectators laughed at and razzed the speakers.

The *Newark News* editorialized that Newark's "Red Thursday" was tepid throughout, unlike the bloody riots that had broken out at the events in New York and Washington. Speakers were unable to rouse the crowd in the Park to any enthusiasm and roars of laughter were more common than cheers.

The second event on May Day was also held at the Wars of America Monument. It was scheduled for 1pm to escape lunch hour catcalls.

The rally was significant because for the first time, red flags of revolution were unfurled in Newark. The largest flag had the hammer and sickle and the word "Newark" on it.

The speakers heard harangues against capitalism and praise for the Soviet Union. Lottie Blumenthal, 17, of the YCL was the first speaker. She wore the YCL uniform, khaki hat, blue skirt with a red and yellow monogram "YCL" sewed on the sleeve of her blouse. She spoke for ten minutes on the evils of capitalism and the oppression of blacks in Newark.

When the rally ended, the Communists started to parade back to their Mercer Street headquarters—red flags flying. They had no permit for a parade and the police stopped it, using the opportunity, to seize the Communist flags and tear them up.

In late May, 1930 the first of the trials for the nine men arrested at the February unemployment rally began. Actually only three trials took place—those of Flaiani and S.D. Levine for sedition and Dozier Graham for incitement to riot.

Flaiani's was the first and most sensational—making the front pages of the Newark papers and the front section of the *New York Times*. The prosecution charged that Flaiani argued for an overthrow of the government and urged Blacks to commit criminal acts. When the defense tried to depose its witnesses, Judge Walter Van Riper prohibited it from doing so by because the witnesses declared they were atheists and refused to swear on the bible. In a later trial, S.D. Levine's witnesses were also disqualified for the same reason.

The jury deliberated for less than two hours and found Flaiani guilty of sedition for urging the destruction of the United States Government by force (S.D. Levine was found guilty of sedition, as well). After the verdict, the prosecutor spoke of deporting Flaiani to Italy. Judge Van Riper said he was undecided.

The next day, Newark's most influential Protestant and Jewish clergymen visited Van Riper, pleading with him to show leniency to the 26 year old Flaiani. What Flaiani said, they argued, would only be a crime if violence resulted, and none had. Van Riper was again non-committal.

Morris Langer issued a statement denouncing the clergymen's intercession and declaring that Flaiani, an atheist, had not asked for their help. He added a comment that could hardly help his comrade's case:

“If the Communists had their way, there would be no ministers to go anywhere for anybody.”

A week later, Dozier Graham, now a candidate for the United States Senate, was tried for incitement to riot. He was convicted in less than a half-hour. He was sentenced to seven years however two days later his sentence was suspended.

ACLU appealed both Flaiani and Levine's verdicts to the New Jersey Supreme Court on the grounds that Van Riper had refused to hear defense witnesses because they were atheists. The trials of the other six men, including Langer, were postponed awaiting the Supreme Court decision. In November the court overruled Van Riper and overturned the verdicts. The indictments against the other defendants were dropped.

Emboldened by the supreme court decision, Newark Communists returned to militancy. In January 1931, they held demonstrations on the lawn in front of City Hall during Monday City Commission meetings.

In early January, 100 Communists, among them women and children, gathered on the lawn of City Hall carrying signs and shouting charges of graft and corruption. They demanded work and food. 1,000 spectators swelled the crowd.

20 detectives attempted to break it up. A free for all broke out and police reserves were called out. After a demonstrator reportedly took a swing at Deputy Chief John Harris, police attacked the organizers with blackjacks, injuring three men. Mounted police charged into the crowd scattering it.

In a 2008 interview I conducted, Lucille Brodtkin Friedman recalled the day. “It was snowing outside. My mother bundled up my sister and me. It was early in the morning. We took a bus downtown. My mother told us we were going to a demonstration. We had heard about these from both our parents and were very excited. When we got to city hall, my mother was handed a sign and we joined a crowd marching in front of city hall. My mother and all the protestors were yelling—I don’t remember what. Police were pushing the demonstrators in all directions but my mother and the others stood their ground. All of a sudden large horses ridden by policeman rode into the crowd. My mother grabbed our hands. I was terrified. My mother shouted shame on you to the assailants. A policeman grabbed her and said “lady you have a big mouth!” and arrested her. My sister and I panicked but my mother asked Ida Langer to take us home and look after us.”

Twelve demonstrators were arrested including Rebecca Brodtkin and Samuel Blumenthal, Lottie Blumenthal’s father.

Public Safety Director Egan prohibited further City Hall demonstrations. Nevertheless, another was announced. Police chief McRel denied the permit and declared **“No hunger march to City Hall! No demonstration at City Hall! No speaking at City Hall! I will see to it that no such things are done.”**

It was a repeat of the first event except that the police were more brutal in breaking up the march. Mounted police again entered the battle, dispersed the crowd and arrested six Communists. Saul Stark suffered a fractured skull and Bernard Rosanski’s ribs were broken when a horse trampled him.

In May 1931 the American Communist Party mounted a nationwide campaign for the Scottsboro boys, nine Black teenagers who were pulled off a freight train in Scottsboro Alabama and unjustly accused of raping two White women. They were hastily tried without adequate defense—before an all white jury—and found guilty. All were sentenced to electrocution, except a thirteen year old.

The Communist Party’s ILD represented the boys’ during their appeals. The Party held rallies throughout the country to raise funds. In Newark, two small indoor meetings were held in May. Police Chief McRel denied a permit for a street rally at 12th and Market

Street. In August, however, a permit was granted for a rally in Military Park to commemorate the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti and to protest the Scottsboro prosecutions. Over 500 people attended.

The Scottsboro case was the reason Jack David and his best friend Jimmy Friedman joined the Communist Party. When I interviewed Jack in 1997 he told me: “Jimmy and I were horrified, and we constantly discussed this travesty of justice. During the summer, we were walking in Weequahic Park discussing Scottsboro when we passed the tennis courts and saw a group of people our age engaged in a game. The scene was an epiphany for us. Here were young people unconcerned about real life in America, oblivious to our country’s injustices. Then and there we made a pact to join the Communist Party and fight for a better world where a Scottsboro would not occur.”

In 1932, Jack David was summoned to the office of Captain John A Brady of the 4th Precinct. Jack knew that his mother’s brother Joe Mann, a bar owner, former political boss of the 3rd ward and the first Jewish Freeholder, was Brady’s political godfather and was responsible for Brady’s rapid rise through the ranks. Brady warned Jack—“Stop propagandizing Blacks in Newark!” The Captain hesitated to make sure his warning had sunk in. Then he continued: “Your uncle was good to me,” said Brady, “I’ll get you a job here in City Hall.” Brady made a phone call and told Jack to go downstairs and take the civil service exam. Jack said: “how do you know I’ll pass it.” Brady replied:” don’t worry you will!” Jack declined the offer and remained a Communist until he died nine years ago.

Finally recognizing the potential of the Newark Party, the Central Committee brought in a full-time organizer, Rebecca Grecht in May, 1932 and established Newark District 14.

Grecht joined the communist party in 1921 at the age of 20. She held many party posts, particularly in New York, where during the 20s she ran for the New York Assembly five times on the Communist ticket . She was active in both the Passaic Textile Strike and the Boston Shoe Strike.

Grecht’s first report to the Party’s National Committee complained that the District had no contacts in Newark’s manufacturing industries, and that its work with the unemployed was haphazard and practically at an end. She claimed she had began work in the Black district and had staged a successful eviction action. She took credit for six new Black Party members.

Grecht was a difficult taskmaster and demanded that each party member bring Blacks into the party. Since dues for the poor were only two cents a week, party members often pressured Blacks to join, filled out and signed applications, provided dues books and sometimes even paid the first week’s two cents out of their own pockets. Grecht quickly caught on and demanded that new members attend at least one meeting before being issued

a dues book. That book had to be obtained by the prospective member at the Communist Headquarters and approved by Grecht.

She also criticized Newark Communists for their willingness to heed Egan's order not to hold street meetings.

As a result of Grecht's efforts, three election rallies were held during the summer at Charlton and Spruce Streets in the center of the 3rd Ward's Black neighborhood. The police used nightsticks to break up all three and arrested a total of 23 Communists, among them Samuel Brodkin, Louis Jaffe and his wife Esther, and Ida Langer wife of Morris Langer. Also arrested was Charles Mitchell the Black 12th District Congressional Candidate, who was a recent recruit to the Party.

It is no wonder that in her next report to the central committee, Grecht complained that it was more difficult than ever to carry on work in Newark because of police terror. She bemoaned that a number of comrades have grown apathetic because of their fear of arrest.

The *Newark News* and civic groups criticized Egan and his men for not allowing Communist election events. Other Newark Commissioners intervened and in October Grecht reported to the Central Committee that permits had been granted for campaign rallies in the Ironbound, Lower Clinton Hill, the 3rd Ward and Lincoln Park.

The Communist Party was unable to get their presidential candidate William Foster and vice presidential candidate, James W. Ford on the 1932 ballot in most states, including New Jersey. However, because Ford was the first Black on a presidential ticket, he came to Newark to speak to a full house of 800 supporters at Krueger Auditorium. According to S.D. Levine, a group of workers carried Comrade Ford on their shoulders onto the stage as "young communists, toting banners and singing revolutionary songs led the way."

Ford was preceded at the podium by Rebecca Grecht, who excoriated the suppression of free speech. "The streets belong to us, she said, and we intend to use them for our meetings!" Ford criticized a recent New Jersey law in which unemployed men could be forced to work in public works in return for food allowances.

At the end of 1932 Grecht reported to the Central Committee that the Newark Communist Party membership was approximately 300. On the labor front, she said that there were no party cells in industry. She added that during the last six months there had been no strikes in the district.

However, a deadly strike began in February 1933, when Local 25 of the International Fur Workers Union made another unsuccessful attempt to organize A. Hollander & Sons fur processing plant. Morris Langer led the effort, assisted by Dominick Flaiani.

On February 27, Natale Ballero, 26, a striking employee was shot twice in the back at point blank range by his friend and co-worker Rocco Capo, a non-striker. Ballero was a

Communist. Capo was not. There were five eye-witnesses to the murder at the 14th Ward Social Club on 15th and Littleton avenues. The two had fought earlier over the strike. Capo left the club and returned with a pistol.

More than 100 Communists attended the March 3rd funeral. Flaiani tried to address the crowd at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery on South Orange Avenue but the superintendent prevented him. Police ordered the group outside. Once on the street, Flaiani made brief comments condemning Hollander.

In a speech the following day before 150 strikers Morris Langer predicted that Ballero's murder would not drive them back to the Hollander plant. Three weeks later, Langer was fatally injured when a bomb attached to his ignition went off as he started his car.

Langer lingered for three days before he succumbed to blood poisoning. Over 1,000 joined the funeral procession, which marched to Military Park where an additional 1200 people assembled. A large banner over the workers read, "The pelts of the Hollander firm are dyed in worker's blood." Among the 7 speakers were Dominick Flaiani and Rebecca Grecht. According to the *Freiheit*: "the large mass swore with raised fists to uphold the battle Langer gave his life for." The killers were never found and the crime is still unsolved.

Capo fled Newark to New Orleans after he murdered Ballero. However, he was arrested for a liquor violation, and the FBI identified his prints. He was extradited to Newark in early May and brought before Judge Daniel Brennan (no relation to Commissioner William Brennan). He pleaded not guilty and was held without bail. His trial set for June 5.

During the intervening eleven days there was only one report on the case and that was by S.D. Levine in the Yiddish language *Freiheit*. It claimed a deal had been made. The prosecutor recommended a plea of *non vult* and Judge Brennan accepted it. With this plea, Capo admitted his guilt, avoided a trial and in effect threw himself on the mercy of the court. According to Levine, the *non vult* plea meant that the State Parole Board could parole Capo before his minimum term expired.

One week later, Brennan sentenced Capo to twelve to fifteen years. Levine was correct, and the parole board released Capo after nine years.

As a coda, I quote judge Daniel Brennan's comment after sentencing Rocco Capo:

"I wish to explain this comparatively lenient sentence. This defendant apparently was terrorized by a communistic group that is a challenge to the entire social organization here. I do not condone what he did, but I must consider this provocation."

WARREN GROVER