

THE WITHERING AWAY OF THE AMERICAN LABOR PARTY

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NEW YORK State's American Labor Party (1936-56) existed in a variety of forms: pro-Democratic electoral vehicle (1936), independent third party (1937-44), one of two "third-parties" in the state (1944-47), state branch of the national Progressive Party (1948-52), and ideological interest group with strong pro-communist leanings (1953-56). Most scholarly studies of the party, such as those of Bone, Sarasohn, and Moscow,¹ which end in either 1946 or 1948, have treated only the first three forms. Because of this, the last eight years of the American Labor Party remain unexamined. Text-book treatments skip over the 1948-56 period with passing references to communist domination or infiltration.² This unfortunate lacuna deserves to be filled, and the recent acquisition by the Rutgers University Library of the party's papers for this period provides the wherewithal to do so.³

1948 was a key year in the history of the American Labor Party because of the candidacy of Henry A. Wallace for President. No sooner had the year begun than on January 7, at a meeting of the state executive committee of the party, the ALP split over the question of endorsing Roosevelt's former Vice-President. Anticipating a strong pro-Wallace move, the state chairman, state treasurer, and

¹ Hugh A. Bone, "Political Parties in New York State," *American Political Science Review*, 40 (April 1946), 272-82; Stephen B. Sarasohn, *The Struggle for Control of the American Labor Party, 1936-48* (Unpublished Master's Essay, Columbia University, 1948); and Warren Moscow, *Politics in the Empire State* (New York, 1948), Chapter 7.

² The following account is representative: "As the ALP became increasingly a fellow-traveling vehicle, Social Democrats and non-Communist liberals withdrew to form another satellite party—the Liberal Party—which continued to revolve in Roosevelt's orbit. When the American Labor Party supported Wallace and the third party Progressives, it collapsed." William B. Hesseltine, *Third Party Movements in the United States* (Princeton, 1962), p. 99.

³ The papers, which are now housed in the Special Collections Department, were brought to the Library by Mr. Norman Kaner, of the Rutgers History Department.

at least one hundred members of the state executive committee resigned from the party.⁴ These men, followers of the late Sidney Hillman and leaders of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, had decided that their political future would be safest within the Democratic party. Their resignations were then followed by letters from A.C.W.A. leaders throughout the state, who wrote in this manner:

Effective immediately, I wish to submit my resignation as a State Committeeman and as a member of the New York State Executive Committee of the American Labor Party.

I feel that I no longer can carry out my duties as an ALP officer when I am not in accord with the endorsement of Henry A. Wallace for the Presidency of the United States.⁵

These resignations left the ALP solidly committed to Wallace, and at the January 7 meeting, Mrs. Ada Jackson of Brooklyn introduced a resolution endorsing him, adding that:

I think the time has come, as bitter the struggle may seem, that we have to fight through consistently. Yes, I hate divisions. But when it comes to a choice between right and wrong we have got to stand up, realizing that, just as Mr. Wallace said, the security of any individual still depends upon the welfare of the whole. And if the American Labor Party must take this course, let us stand firm because eventually we will win.⁶

Mrs. Jackson's extemporaneous remarks tell us much about the state of mind of the party at that time. "Bitter struggle" and "divisions" there certainly were, as indicated by the mass resignations. But to promote "right and wrong" and to "stand firm" were also bywords of the ALP's activity. Her remarks, then, adumbrate a dilemma which faced the party at all times in its last years: in order to meet its obligations as a party of protest, it would have to take politically unpopular actions which would result in paralyzing schisms; yet in order to fulfill its other obligation as a power-balancing, electoral vehicle, the party would have to compromise its ideology and third-

⁴ "Proceedings, State Executive Committee, American Labor Party, January 7, 1948," ALPP, Series I (1948-49), F-Na, "Meetings" folder.

⁵ William S. Hilger to ALP, January 19, 1948, ALPP, Series I (1948-49), Wa, "Wallace—Letters" folder.

⁶ "Proceedings . . .," *op.cit.*

party tactics in order to hold itself together. How to reconcile this dilemma was the question which preoccupied the party in its last eight years.

The unanimous endorsement of Mrs. Jackson's motion, plus the unanimous selection of Representative Vito Marcantonio, leader of the party's left wing at that time, as state chairman indicated that the party was leaning more toward ideological protest than toward electoral politics. Yet all was not so simple. On the morning of February 19, 1948, Democratic Party leaders in the Bronx awoke to find that their solidly Democratic twenty-fourth Congressional District had been carried by an obscure lawyer running on the ALP label alone. Leo Isacson, who went on to serve only nine months in Congress, had won this election under the sponsorship of a party which later included statements like this in its platform:

We call for the immediate cessation of the piling up of armament expenditures beyond reasonable peacetime requirements for national defense.

We demand the repudiation of the Truman doctrine and an end to military and economic intervention in support of reactionary and fascist regimes in China, Greece, Turkey, the Middle East, and Latin America. . . .

We demand the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee and similar state committees. . . .⁷

The effect of Isacson's election was to convince the ALP leaders that they could combine ideology with political victory. For example, two months after the Bronx election, Leo Lindner told the ALP state committeemen:

We have had enough of a party which was content to be a balance-of-power party; which was content to mark up our averages and our proportions and our percentages and to note how well we had done relative to last year, and how well we did for a Third Party, because this year we realize that the chips are down. This year it won't do us any good to be a "good Third Party"; this year, if we are going to save our country from the warmongers, if we are going to save the country from war and depression, we have got to win.⁸

⁷ The statement is from the platform of the National Progressive Party, as the ALP chose not to write its own platform for the 1948 elections. See ALPP, Series I (1948-49), Wa, "Platform—Wallace" folder and *New York Times*, July 25, 1948, p. 29.

⁸ "Minutes of State Committeemen of the American Labor Party, Tuesday, April 20, 1948," p. 5. ALPP, Series I (1948-49), F-Na, "Meetings" folder.

It turns out, however, that ALP strategists were wrong. Isacson's election was more convincingly explained by his strong pro-Palestine stand in a district 40% Jewish and by the general dissatisfaction in what has been called ". . . a dying Jewish neighborhood where the chill of being trapped penetrates everywhere."⁹

Heady with this success, the ALP went on to play a major role in the Wallace campaign which followed. The party formally organized itself as the New York branch of the Progressive Party and also took part in the formation of a New York State Wallace for President Conference on April 3, 1948, at which Isacson, Marcantonio, and other ALP leaders spoke.¹⁰ At the July Progressive Party Convention in Philadelphia, which nominated Wallace for President, ALP officers and committeemen served on all the committees: Arrangements (Elinor Gimbel), Credentials (Isacson, Charles Collins, Jose Lopez), Nominations (Jackson, Grace Liebman, Morris Pizer), Rules (Marcantonio, Chairman, Saul Mills, John Abt, Paul Kern), and Platform (Lee Pressman, Secretary, Gimbel, W.E.B. Dubois, Estelle Osborne, Alfred Stern, Mary Van Kleek).¹¹ As activists in an on-going political organization, the ALP leaders played a significant role at the convention, although it is the opinion of one delegate and close observer that Marcantonio was not particularly active.¹² Then, with the convention over and the campaign underway, the ALP essentially ceased to exist as such for the remainder of the year and devoted itself and its remaining electoral resources to the national third party cause.

There is little doubt that the 1948 effort hindered the party's future electoral activity. For one thing, the results were meagre. Wallace and Taylor received 509,559 votes on the ALP line, which is more than the 353,426 it polled for James Mead in 1946, the 483,785 for Robert Wagner in 1944, and the 403,626 for Dean Alfange also in 1944.¹³ And although the votes for Wallace if

⁹ Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (Garden City, 1956), p. 9.

¹⁰ "Program, New York State Wallace for President Conference . . . April 3, 1948," ALPP, Series I (1948-49), Wa, "Wallace Material Campaign" folder.

¹¹ "Official Program of the National Founding Convention of the New Party, Philadelphia, July 23-25, 1948," ALPP, Series I (1948-49), Wa, "Wallace—Convention" folder.

¹² Curtis MacDougall, *Gideon's Army* (New York, 1965), II, 522.

¹³ These figures are taken from the 1949, 1947, and 1945 volumes of New York State's *Legislative Manual*.

delivered to the Democrats would have resulted in Truman's carrying New York, a half million votes was far below the estimates of ALP leaders, even the realistic estimates. Furthermore, participation in the Wallace campaign was a catalyst to further resignations and schisms in the party. Although the two most important resignations—those of Michael Quill and Eugene Connolly—were tied to local issues, the Wallace campaign hovered over both.

Michael Quill's attitude toward Wallace changed throughout 1948. When the A.C.W.A. leaders left the ALP in January, Quill had stated that his Transport Workers Union was, “. . . of course, with the ALP.”¹⁴ But this propensity changed rapidly. In mid-March Quill became increasingly convinced that the Wallace campaign would split the American labor movement and leave it impotent. He then issued a statement saying that he was opposed to the Wallace campaign, but he tempered it by adding that this was an economic, and not a political, decision. Supposedly, he still upheld the things Wallace stood for.¹⁵ But by April 20, 1948, Quill was prepared to leave the American Labor Party. The immediate issue concerned the five-cent subway fare in New York City, which the ALP had pledged to defend and which Quill wanted doubled in order to finance a raise for his T.W.U. constituents. Using this difference as his pretext, Quill wrote to Marcantonio announcing his resignation from the ALP in a letter marked by ambiguity. While declaring again his sympathy for Wallace, he attacked the ALP, which, he felt, “. . . will continue to carry on as if the Communist party and the American Labor party were the same house with two doors.”¹⁶ The ALP replied to Quill at a meeting of its state committeemen. Marcantonio, Isacson, Mills, and Paul Ross attacked the T.W.U. leader's actions, and a resolution was passed asking for the preservation of the five-cent fare.¹⁷ Thus, local and national issues were mixed in this split. To what extent Quill was sincerely aghast at communist influence, to what extent he came to the realization that only by a strong show of anti-communism could he gain respect-

¹⁴ “Proceedings . . . ,” *op.cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ The circumstances surrounding Quill's attitude toward the Progressive Party are described in Max M. Kampelman, *The Communist Party vs. the C.I.O.* (New York, 1957), pp. 144-46.

¹⁶ Quill to Marcantonio, April 20, 1948. Portions reprinted in *New York Times*, April 21, 1948, p. 22.

¹⁷ “Minutes . . . ,” *op.cit.*, pp. 4, 8-9, 15, 18, 25-32.

ability, and to what extent the split represented a major difference of opinion over the extremely important issue of subway fares—these are questions which are unanswerable at the present time.

Eugene Connolly's exit from the party was also mingled with local and national concerns. Connolly, one of the top leaders of the ALP in Manhattan, had been closer to Marcantonio than any other member of the ALP. Yet the circumstances surrounding his 1949-51 fight with Marcantonio concerned a reasonably trivial issue. Connolly was a city councilman from Manhattan, along with prominent Negro communist Benjamin Davis. When the New York County Executive Committee of the ALP met on June 3, 1949, and designated Connolly and Davis for re-election, Connolly announced that he would not run again for the Council, opting instead to campaign for the position of Manhattan Borough President. This conflicted with Marcantonio's plans to run a Harlem Negro for that position. The dispute reached fantastic proportions. Each side issued "fact sheets" on the affair determined to show the correctness of its views. Connolly formed the "Committee for Democracy and Unity in the American Labor Party" and attacked Marcantonio, justifiably it would seem, for his dictatorial methods.¹⁸ Marcantonio's supporters replied, attacking Connolly's "disruptive character" and his voting record on the City Council.¹⁹ The result of the squabble was one of the few primary campaigns in the history of the ALP, with Marcantonio's Negro candidate, Ewart Guinier, defeating Connolly by a five to one margin.²⁰ Connolly remained in the party for a little over a year, and then, on January 10, 1951, he resigned from the ALP and registered as a Democrat. Joining him in his resignation were O. John Rogge and Leo Isacson.²¹

What bridged the gap between the 1949 disagreement and the 1951 resignations was the Korean War, which again confronted the party with its central dilemma. During the Marcantonio-Connolly dispute, Marcantonio's supporters had accused Connolly of desiring ". . . the party to be nothing more than a balance-of-power, endorse-

¹⁸ Committee for Democracy and Unity in the American Labor Party, "Fact Sheets" (# 1-3, July 15, 1949, July 22, 1949, August 5, 1949). ALPP, Series I (1948-49), Ne-Nu, "New York County" folder.

¹⁹ Fall Primary ALP Committee of New York County, "Fact Sheet," located in *ibid.*

²⁰ *New York Times*, September 7, 1949, p. 1.

²¹ *New York Times*, January 11, 1951, p. 7.

ment-trading party, rather than an independent political party challenging the two old parties on the basic issues. . . .”²² This was true: Connolly had been on the “right” and Marcantonio on the “left” in 1949. When President Truman announced his support of Syngman Rhee’s government on June 27, 1950, he presented a choice to the ALP: support my policies and retain your influence as a balance of power; attack the war and so totally isolate yourself on the left that your electoral possibilities will disappear. Confronted by this dilemma, factionalism again broke out in the ALP. Marcantonio maintained his consistency by attacking the war on the floor of the House of Representatives, decrying an attempt to, in his words, “. . . aid and abet tyranny and perpetuate aggression against the Korean people who strive for a united and independent nation.”²³ Connolly, Isacson, Rogge, and Lee Pressman were more sympathetic to Henry Wallace, who had announced his support of American policies. The same “right” and “left” had been re-formed.

Like most ideological disputes within the party, this one too took the form of a political question. Marcantonio, fearing that his position on the war would mean a drastic decline in the number of ALP votes in 1950, offered the gubernatorial nomination to Leo Isacson. Isacson responded by saying that he would agree only on the condition that he receive the support of Wallace, i.e., that he run on a platform approving of America’s Far Eastern actions.²⁴ Thus, by its choice for governor, the ALP would again decide to temper or to purify its ideology. Isacson was evidently unsuccessful, for the gubernatorial nomination was given instead to John T. McManus, editor of the *National Guardian*. And the resulting 1950 platform had this to say about Korea:

We of the American Labor Party will not compromise with the scheming of the warmakers. . . . We call for a complete end to the bipartisan Administration war program. We call for immediate negotiation of a settlement of the strife in Korea through the Security

²² Fall Primary ALP Committee, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

²³ *Congressional Record*, Vol. 96, part 7 (June 27, 1950), 9269. A different version—interestingly enough deleting the passage quoted in the text—was issued as a press release and is contained in ALPP, Series I (1950), N-Pre, “News Releases—June” folder.

²⁴ This story is recounted in Warren Moscow, “Korean Situation Widens ALP Split,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1950, p. 2.

Council of a United Nations made truly representative of the great nations of the world by the admission of the representatives of China's 450,000,000 people.²⁵

The increasing political impotence of the ALP throughout the 1948-52 period is best reflected in its continuing role as New York branch of the Progressive Party and in its state-wide electoral activities. One indication of the political future of the party was the 1950 gubernatorial vote for McManus, 209,224, and the vote for senatorial candidate DuBois, 191,094. Another even more important sign was the defeat of Marcantonio for re-election. A consequence of the growing anti-communist hysteria in the United States after World War II was the attempts by legislative bodies to frustrate the electoral tactics of radical political parties. Thus, the repeal of proportional representation in New York City ended the tenure of the communists on the City Council.²⁶ Statewide, the passage of the Wilson-Pakula Law was aimed directly at Marcantonio. The Act forbade any candidate from cross-filing in a party's primary without the permission of the leaders of the party. Under its provisions, if the leaders of the Democrats, Republicans, and Liberals agreed, they could all run the same candidate against Marcantonio while prohibiting the Congressman from contesting the nominations in any party but his own.²⁷ In 1950 they agreed, and James Donovan received three nominations to Marcantonio's one and went on to defeat him in the general election. One of Marcantonio's comments on the election is worth quoting:

My vote was 11,000 larger than the Democratic Party, 15,000 larger than the Republican Party, and 30,000 larger than the Liberal so that line for line I beat every party, but I could not beat the gang-up.²⁸

Not only hostile laws, but also inept activity on its own part

²⁵ "Platform of American Labor Party," ALPP, Series I (1950), N-Pre, "ALP Platform" folder.

²⁶ Belle Zeller and Hugh A. Bone, "The Repeal of P.R. in New York City: Ten Years in Retrospect," *American Political Science Review*, 42 (December 1948), 1127-48.

²⁷ The law and its effects are discussed in Alan Schaffer, *Vito Marcantonio, Radical in Congress* (Syracuse, 1966), pp. 185-86, 206-07.

²⁸ Marcantonio to Jack Hall, December 26, 1950. Marcantonio Papers (New York Public Library), Personal, Box 1, "1950 Campaign" folder. Also quoted in *ibid.*, p. 207.

hindered ALP electoral activity in these years. Because of its protest actions the party was no longer able to run candidates for office who were known as non-communists. The McManus and DuBois campaigns in 1950 and the Corliss Lamont campaign in 1952 were signs that the ALP was retreating to candidates who were generally known as strong communist sympathizers. By being committed to the Progressive Party, the ALP supported and worked for Vincent Hallinan and Charlotta Bass, 1952 candidates for President and Vice-President respectively. The ALP arranged rallies, speaking tours, and campus appearances for the candidates, a typical one on October 9, 1952, featuring addresses by ALP stalwarts Guinier, Lamont, and Marcantonio.²⁹ While Eisenhower was promising to go to Korea and Stevenson was describing his views, Hallinan was urging an immediate cease fire in Korea, charging “. . . that there is a conspiracy of silence among the Republicans and Democrats to conceal the truth about the fighting in Korea.”³⁰ It is true that Hallinan took a much more definite stand on the Korean War than either of the two major candidates. It is also true that this position was one most Americans were not prepared to hear, and the party suffered another electoral defeat, amassing only 64,211 votes for Hallinan and Bass.

While the Korean War was being fought, domestic American politics saw the development of a strong anti-radicalism campaign, as represented in McCarthyism, the Smith Act prosecutions, and the increased activity of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Because of the Party's communist membership and its radical protest activities, this campaign was bound to affect the ALP adversely. As it did, a cycle became established in which the ALP became even more of an ideological vehicle. Thus, during his 1952 senatorial campaign, Corliss Lamont entitled his acceptance speech “Halt the Subversion of the American Bill of Rights,” and this theme was repeated throughout his campaign (for example on July 17 at Brighton Beach, September 24 at the Hotel Astor, and

²⁹ Henry H. Abrams to Vincent Hallinan, October 3, 1952. ALPP, Series I (1952), F-Ho, “Hallinan-Bass, 1952” folder.

³⁰ “People's Choice,” October 24, 1952. ALPP, Series I (1952), F-Ho, “Hallinan-Bass” folder.

October 8 over radio station WNEW).³¹ The concern of the Party with the anti-communist crusade can also be seen in Marcantonio's role as counsel for the Communist Party in the Smith Act and Subversive Activities Control Board hearings,³² in the Party's *amicus curiae* brief in support of a rehearing of the Dennis Case,³³ and in luncheons and rallies designed to inform the public about the government's plans.³⁴

As the party turned more toward protest and less toward political campaigning, further resignations from those who favored the latter course became inevitable. By far the most serious resignation was the one on November 4, 1953, from the man who was the most well-known member of the party, Vito Marcantonio himself.³⁵ Marcantonio seems to have been preparing for a return to active politics. Upon his defeat for re-election to Congress, he had formed the Vito Marcantonio Political Association which essentially was composed of his personal political following and which could exist outside the ALP. Earlier in his Congressional career Marcantonio had combined this "machine" with the balance-of-power threat the ALP possessed to win concessions from the major parties in his quest for re-election.³⁶ Because the ALP had decided to de-emphasize these electoral tactics in favor of educational campaigns, and because of its internal divisions, it was no longer an asset. Marcantonio's resignation, then, was based more on practical realities than on an ideological change. But whatever the reason, his action had a devastating effect on the party. Arthur Schutzer, the state executive director of the party and the man who signed all the correspondence, and Clementina Palone,

³¹ ALPP, Series I (1952), Pu-Sta, "State Convention 8/28/52" folder; and ALPP, Series I (1952), Hu-Lea, "Corliss Lamont" folder.

³² Schaffer, *op.cit.*, pp. 202-03, 208.

³³ *Eugene Dennis et al. v. United States of America*, On Writ of Certiorari to the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, Application of American Labor Party . . . for Leave to File a Brief Amici Curiae . . . (Supreme Court of U.S., #336, October Term, 1950). ALPP, Series I (1952), Leg-Mad, "McCarran-Smith Act" folder.

³⁴ Invitations are in the Party's files for a luncheon on June 29, 1951, and for many rallies, a typical one taking place on May 6, 1954. See Arthur Schutzer to Leo Isacson, n.d., *ibid.* and "Press Release—Wednesday, April 28, 1954," ALPP, Series I (1954), A-B, "Administration—Misc." folder.

³⁵ Statement of Vito Marcantonio, November 4, 1953. Marcantonio Papers, Box 1, ALP folder. Quoted in Schaffer, *op.cit.*, p. 209.

³⁶ As examples, see the discussions of the 1940 and 1942 campaigns, described in *ibid.*, pp. 97-98, 124-27.

State Vice-Chairman, resigned. The latter probably spoke for both when she noted that “. . . such confusion has been created that I have seen . . . my work and my energy . . . become ineffective. . . .”³⁷

By 1954 the American Labor Party had become almost entirely a protest group. One of the last attempts to question this policy occurred at a New York County Executive Committee meeting on March 3, 1954. A plan submitted by the new State Chairman, Peter K. Hawley was introduced which aimed at a further intensification of the educational efforts. One executive committee member promptly criticized the plan and advocated instead a return to basic political activity. After an emotional discussion of the objection, it was withdrawn and Hawley's plan was unanimously accepted.³⁸ The results of this action could be seen eight months later in the general election. By failing to poll at least 50,000 votes for its gubernatorial candidate, the ALP lost its ballot status as a political party, symbolically ending any electoral desires which may have remained.

It took two more years before the protest activities of the party also ceased. For one thing, the 1954 debacle led to still further resignations, including that of the party's last remaining major figure, Paul Ross.³⁹ Because of this type of declining support, the activities of the party in 1955-56 had to be curtailed. The modesty of the party's last efforts is indicated in a strategy letter written by the new Executive Secretary of the party, Morris Goldin:

The ALP has two major electoral objectives for 1955-56. The one for 1955 is the election of a Negro to the Supreme Court in New York State and the raising of the demand for representation, judicially, for the Puerto Rican people, probably on the municipal level.

For 1956 our objective is to make coexistence a major issue in the campaign between parties and candidates, in a manner which will influence the choice of the candidates and parties' votes, and will influence the votes of individuals on the basis of this issue.⁴⁰

³⁷ Clementina J. Palone to Edward Kuntz, November 18, 1953, and Arthur Schutzer to Edward Kuntz, November 10, 1953. ALPP, Series I (1953), I-N, “K-Misc.” folder.

³⁸ “Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, ALP, NYC County, March 3, 1954,” pp. 7-10. ALPP, Series I (1954), El-Ex, “Executive Committee” folder.

³⁹ Paul Ross to Morris Goldin, January 4, 1955. ALPP, Series I (1955), E-L, “Executive Committee” folder.

⁴⁰ Morris Goldin to “Iggy,” April 4, 1955. ALPP, Series I (1955), E-L, “ALP-Electoral Policy” folder. These objectives were incorporated into a formal statement

Although called by Goldin "electoral objectives" these goals were in reality educational because of the lack of electoral influence in the party. And not only were these objectives modest, they were also not particularly successful. Although a Negro was elected to the New York Supreme Court,⁴¹ the ALP had little to do with it, and coexistence never became a major campaign issue in 1956. Recognizing its now almost complete political impotence, the ALP, on October 7, 1956, decided on a course of action which was not only realistic in a practical sense but which also resolved its dilemma of ideology versus electoral action. It chose to disband.

entitled "ALP electoral objectives for 1955-56," which is located in *ibid.* The statement also includes the nomination of a woman for the Supreme Court and the defeat of Queens District Attorney Quinn.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, November 9, 1955, p. 26.