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## NOTE AND DOCUMENT / NOTE ET DOCUMENT

# The Labor-Progressive Party in Crisis, 1956–1957

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**Mots-clés :** Parti ouvrier-progressiste, communisme canadien, 1956, Joseph Staline, Nikita Khrouchtchev. 20<sup>e</sup> congrès du Parti communiste de l'Union soviétique, Tim Buck, J.B. Salsberg, Norman Penner, Gui Caron, antisémitisme, Stanley B. Ryerson

ON 19 APRIL 1957, 110 DELEGATES FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY gathered in Toronto to participate in the 6th National Convention of the Labor-Progressive Party (LPP), Canada's major Communist organization. On the heels of the most intense and damaging crisis in the party's history, this convention was deemed highly significant. It was the culmination of twelve months of acute and acrimonious ideological and political struggle. The conflict divided both the leadership and the membership, involving a thorough re-examination and questioning of the strategy, philosophy, structure, and, ultimately, the very existence of the LPP.

Several major issues shaped the debate at the convention. Of major controversy were the questions of the relationship of the LPP to the international Communist movement in general, and to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in particular; the role of the party in relation to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the trade-union movement, and other "progressive" forces in the country; and the theory and practice of inner-party democracy. In the eyes of the majority of the delegates, however, one question was of overwhelming significance: that of the need for a Marxist-Leninist party in Canada. Around these very basic issues, two distinctly antagonistic positions crystallized.

A minority grouping, led by J. B. Salsberg, a long-standing leader of the party and one of its most able spokesmen, had decided that the LPP, "with its long history of dogmatism, subservience to the CPSU, sectarianism and isolation from the masses," was no longer an adequate tool with which to build socialism in Canada.<sup>1</sup> On this basis, Salsberg and his supporters advocated the dissolution of the LPP and a "socialist realignment" of progressive forces throughout the country. This stand could be characterized as essentially social democratic.

The large majority of delegates, however, stood behind the position held by the national leader, Tim Buck, and most prominently defended by Leslie Morris, who would become leader in 1961. To them, Salsberg's proposals represented "rank opportunism," "defeatism," and, worst of all, "revisionism" – an attempt to water down Marxism-Leninism in an effort to achieve "bourgeois respectability."<sup>2</sup> Buck and his followers were prepared to admit that Soviet precepts had been followed too closely in the past, that inner-party democracy suffered in the process, and that the LPP was insufficiently flexible in its policies. Certain changes and corrections would have to be made.

For the majority, however, such errors did not bring the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism into question. In its essence, the political line of the party had been correct. Proletarian internationalism, democratic centralism, and the dictatorship of the proletariat remained valid and necessary concepts. And most importantly, the need for a Communist party in Canada was indisputable; the LPP was that party and was still the vanguard of the Canadian working class. While attempting to rid the party of its dogmatic and sectarian tendencies, those aligned with Buck felt that the primary task at hand was to defeat the "revisionists" and "liquidationists."<sup>3</sup>

Yet not all delegates fit neatly into either group. Besides those affiliated with Salsberg, two other minority positions were discernible at the convention, one advocating the need for change, the other more hardened in its position.

A small cluster gathered around Norman Penner, Edna Ryerson, and Charles Sims, all leading members in the party.<sup>4</sup> This group was more critical

1. J. B. Salsberg, "For a Socialist Realignment in Canada," *National Affairs Monthly (NAM)*, February 1957. *NAM* was the inner-party newspaper that was thrown open for free discussion in 1956–57. Salsberg joined the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) in the mid-1920s and was active in the party's trade-union and Jewish activities until 1957. He served as an LPP member of the Ontario legislature in the 1940s and 1950s. He was a leading member of the National Executive Committee (NEC) throughout his membership in the party.

2. Tim Buck, "Canada Needs Its Leninist Party," *NAM*, March 1957.

3. Buck, "Canada Needs."

4. Norman Penner joined the CPC in 1929. Between 1929 and 1957 he acted variously as youth director, industrial director of Toronto, and chief Toronto organizer. He also served on the NEC from 1947 to 1957. My information on Penner is gathered from an interview I conducted with him on 18 January 1977. Edna Ryerson served on the Toronto Board of Education in the 1940s and 1950s and served intermittently on the NEC and the National Committee (NC) during her

of the LPP's past record than were the majority and advocated more far-reaching changes. Seeing "left-sectarianism" as the main danger in the party, they felt that to transform itself the LPP would have to alter its whole approach to politics and, in effect, adopt many of the techniques and short-term goals of the social democrats. However, believing that these changes were possible within the framework of the party and Marxism-Leninism, they too strongly opposed dissolution.<sup>5</sup>

Stanley Ryerson, the party's major theoretician, Tom McEwen, an elderly leader from British Columbia, and Camille Dionne, the new chief of the Québec wing of the party, represented yet another minority, which, like Buck, supported the continuation of the party but was uncompromisingly hostile to dissidents such as Salsberg and Penner. This group viewed the majority position as too conciliatory and too liberal. They condemned the vocal critics within the party for adding "grist to the mill of anti-communism" and succumbing to "capitalist propaganda." Proposals to broaden the base of the party, they said, would amount to a capitulation to right-wing social democracy and threaten the unity of the LPP as a communist party. They reaffirmed their faith in the Soviet Union as guide and mentor and in the LPP as the only true party of the working class in Canada.<sup>6</sup>

To characterize these four groups as the major divisions that had developed in the party over the previous year is to leave out one highly significant component. One group was not represented at the convention. It comprised the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of rank-and-file party members and sympathizers, and a few major leaders, who had already voted with their feet, leaving the party in despair, frustration, confusion, and political disharmony. This contingent included such people as Robert Laxer, educational director and organizer in Ontario; Gui Caron, former leader in Québec; the vast majority of Jewish party members; and a large proportion of the Montréal organization. Perhaps, in its absence, this group held more significance than any other.

Predictably, the majority position emerged triumphant at the convention. In a sense, it was a pyrrhic victory: unity had been achieved at the price of a drastically reduced membership and the loss of many of the party's most competent and dynamic spokespeople.

The roots of these developments and the causes of the crisis in the LPP in 1956–57 have yet to be fully explored or explained. By examining the issues

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membership in the party. Charles Sims was an active Toronto member of the NC and served as a Toronto alderman in the 1940s.

5. Norman Penner, "Amendment to the Draft Resolution," January 1957, mimeograph courtesy of Robert Kenny. See also E. Ryerson, "Chief Danger to Party Is Left-Sectarianism," *NAM*, April 1957.

6. Stanley Ryerson, "Getting Our Bearings: And Correcting a Dangerous List to Starboard," *NAM*, February 1957. See also Tom McEwen, "Existence of Party: Key Point at Issue," *NAM*, April 1957.

and events that precipitated this unprecedented split in the party, and the positions taken by different groups within the LPP in reaction to these, it is possible to shed some light on a significant and difficult period in the history of Canada's Communist movement.



FOLLOWING A PERIOD OF UNUSUAL STRENGTH in the 1930s and 1940s, the 1950s found the party in a weakened position. It was a decade of quietism and conformity. The Cold War exerted tremendous pressure on political radicals of all kinds. A distinctly inhospitable and politically conservative atmosphere prevailed and made Communist work difficult.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the LPP's strong ties with the Soviet Union (then considered by Canadians of most political persuasions to be the major threat to both world peace and domestic stability) played a significant role in ensuring Communist isolation. With anti-communist clauses passed in the platforms of almost all major trade unions, Communists were forced out of seats of power that had once been important positions from which to disseminate information, gain new adherents, and keep the party active in, and integral to, the mainstream of the labour movement.<sup>8</sup> This situation exacerbated other problems deeply rooted in the party's past, which will be discussed below.

Under such conditions, some members found the personal strain of party activity too much to bear and quietly allowed their affiliations to lapse. Others, who had joined the party largely out of admiration for the role of the Soviet Union during the war, were politically affected by the constant bombardment of propaganda and information programmed to inspire negative feelings about the Soviet Union and communism in general.<sup>9</sup> The high level of employment and a rising standard of living in Canada contributed to the inactivity of others and made the ground less fertile for Communist growth. It had been estimated that in the period between 1948 and 1956 one-third of the membership either left the party or drifted away from the movement.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note, however, that this exodus was unorganized and stemmed more from weariness and fear than basic political disagreement.

7. See Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975), 181–220.

8. See Irving Abella, *National, Communism and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935–1956* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

9. This information has been corroborated by interviews with members and ex-members of the CPC including Robert Kenny, Joshua Gershman, and others who must go unnamed. See also Avakumovic, *Communist Party*, 180–217.

10. Estimated by Robert Kenny, interview by the author, December 1976. Kenny has been an active member of the party since 1932. Other members have confirmed his estimate.

While such difficulties often foster political conflict and doubt, the majority remained active and committed members of the party, genuine and firm in their faith in the precepts and program of the LPP and unyielding in their defence of Soviet policy. There seems to have been little questioning of party philosophy, structure, or tactics. As Joshua Gershman recalled, "There was no feeling in our Party that anything would happen that would lead towards a split or sharpen the divisions in our Party."<sup>11</sup> Disagreements in the leadership were generally only of a minor nature. The Cold War, and the constant attacks on Communism by hostile forces, allowed the LPP to attribute its isolation and ineffectiveness to external conditions and enabled it to avoid a thorough examination of its policies and strategies from within, in the light of new objective circumstances.

People who have devoted their lives to a movement or a cause do not abandon it easily. However, isolation bred dogmatism, and by the 1950s Communism exhibited little of the dynamism that had characterized it two decades earlier. Increasingly, as a group of soldiers in a beleaguered fortress, party members turned inward, became more defensive, and relied more and more heavily on the guidance and example of the CPSU. With no other allies available, the LPP accepted virtually at face value the correctness of all pronouncements of Soviet foreign policy and allowed Stalin's theoretical premises to guide the formation of domestic policy, a practice that would later invite ridicule and disdain. The Soviet Union acted as the bulwark to the beliefs of the membership and provided confidence and confirmation of the party's direction. In the atmosphere of the Cold War, criticisms were easily dismissed as the unscrupulous propaganda of people who were fighting against the triumph of the two great goals: peace and socialism.<sup>12</sup>

While party activity was reduced to a series of rearguard actions, one member recalls that the "very difficult working conditions gave us a sense of worth and of purpose."<sup>13</sup> Another former adherent recalls the atmosphere more bitterly: "It's no doubt that what you are up against is a phenomenon of dogmatism, of having serious blind spots, where you either accept the whole theory or you don't accept it at all. You hang on because there is a sufficient amount of evidence ... almost like the paranoid who has enough evidence to keep his delusional system going."<sup>14</sup>

11. Joshua Gershman was a member of the party since 1923. He was active in trade union and Jewish Affairs and was editor of the *Canadian Jewish Weekly* (*Vochenblatt*) when I interviewed him in January 1977.

12. This information was gathered from interviews with members and former members. See also Avakumovic, *Communist Party*, 181–224.

13. Former Toronto member, interview by the author, January 1976. For personal reasons, this person preferred to remain anonymous. Hereafter he will be referred to as Interviewee 1.

14. Former Toronto member, interview by the author, December 1976. This person also chose to go unnamed and hereafter will be referred to as Interviewee 2.

This kind of uncritical perseverance was not to continue. In 1956, a political explosion of unprecedented magnitude overwhelmed Communist parties throughout the world and shook the LPP to its very core.<sup>15</sup> The floodgates of re-examination were forced open.

In February 1956, Buck attended the public session of the 20th Congress of the CPSU in Moscow as a fraternal delegate. Major speeches were made by the new leadership, headed by Nikita Khrushchev, who had taken command following the death of Stalin in March 1953. Contained in the addresses were veiled criticisms of Stalin and his policies and references to the “cult of the individual.” But, like delegates from other communist parties, Buck was not present at the closed session of the 20th Congress at which Khrushchev delivered a scathing denunciation of Stalin and catalogued crimes of torture, execution, and dictatorship that had taken place under his regime. Buck, it seems, remained completely unaware of the fact that the speech had been delivered until a few weeks later, when the leader of the British CP, Harry Pollitt, intimated to him the nature of its contents.<sup>16</sup>

Indications of the substance of the secret address were to be found in both the eastern European and Western press in the first few months following the Congress. Buck returned to Canada in April to find a somewhat disquieted party. Letters had appeared in the correspondence columns of the *Canadian Tribune*, the LPP’s official newspaper, voicing doubts and demanding explanations. None had been forthcoming. Confusion and turmoil resulted when Buck read his notes on the secret speech to the twelve members of the National Executive Committee (NEC), the highest body of the LPP. Suddenly, what had been orthodox was now its opposite. The Soviet Union’s Communist leadership, which the LPP had defended unflinchingly for so many years, and at a great political price, laid bare the distortions of socialism and justice that had flourished under Stalin’s regime. Stalin’s theoretical precepts, which had guided the formation of LPP policy, were exposed to ridicule.

The implications of such information were enormous and painful, and the shock tremendous. In light of the revelations, people were forced to question their most fundamental beliefs and principles. The mystique and magic of the Soviet Union – a force that in the past had provided unity, comfort, and confirmation in adversity – were now gone. There could, it seemed, be no more illusions. The revelations forced the LPP to take a long, hard look at its past record. What ensued was an agonizing and penetrating self-examination.<sup>17</sup>

15. See, for example, Joseph Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972); David A. Shannon, *The Decline of American Communism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1959).

16. Stewart Smith, interview by David Chud(novsky), 1973. Smith was a leading member of the party for over 30 years. He left the LPP in 1957.

17. Norman Penner described the effects this way: “You could see that the Party was getting nowhere. ... There had been many other periods in the Party’s history where the Party had

As Norman Penner recalls, the NEC met almost nightly for a month, although political divisions within the leadership did not immediately become apparent.<sup>18</sup> On 17 May 1956, Buck made his first report on the 20th Congress revelations to the National Committee (NC), a body of 51 members that theoretically held the greatest authority in the party. In his speech, Buck admitted that the “cult of the individual” and of leadership infallibility had permeated the LPP and that, under its influence, “we accepted the decisions of the CPSU as beyond question.” He urged the party to undertake a serious reconsideration of “what we did contrasted with what we could and should have done.” At the same time, he commended the CPSU for its courageous self-criticism, which he pointed out was evidence of its desire to eradicate the erroneous and criminal practices that had characterized Stalin’s rule.<sup>19</sup>

A 21 May 1956 resolution of the National Committee went further. While confirming Buck’s statements on the past errors of the LPP, it also directly criticized the CPSU for trying to withhold important information from fraternal parties. It called for the “most searching examination of every aspect of our work.”<sup>20</sup> The significance of these steps must be understood in the context of the intimate historical relationship between the LPP and its Soviet counterpart.

As these statements were not actually published in the party press until two months later, it is somewhat difficult to ascertain exactly at what point the rank-and-file as a whole became aware of the developments that had so shaken the leadership. Their questions were finally answered when, on 13 June 1956, the US State Department published what is widely accepted as a reliable text of Khrushchev’s speech and arranged for its worldwide circulation. The *Canadian Tribune* reprinted the text in full in mid-June.<sup>21</sup>

The shock, dismay, and disillusionment that characterized the initial reactions of some of the leadership were mirrored in the membership at large. As Buck later reflected, the revelations were, to the rank-and-file, “the political equivalent of a kick in the teeth.”<sup>22</sup> The cataclysmic effect of the news on many party adherents is evidenced by the vividness with which they recalled

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been underground or illegal or on the downgrade. But we accepted that – we always knew that eventually this would be over because we were on the right tracks. We’re the Party of the Soviet Union, the only successful revolution in the world. When we didn’t have that, we began to look at ourselves a little more closely and say, ‘What’s this all for?’” Penner interview.

18. Penner interview.

19. Tim Buck, “New Paths to Peace and Socialism: Report to the National Committee of the LPP, May 17, 1956,” *NAM*, May–June–July 1956.

20. “Resolution: On the 20th Congress of the CPSU. Adopted by the NC of the LPP, May 21, 1956,” *NAM*, May–June–July 1956.

21. Avakumovic, *Communist Party*, 224; *Canadian Tribune*, 18 June 1956.

22. Quoted in David Lewis Stein, “The Slow Comeback of Canada’s Communists,” *Maclean’s*, 29 July 1961, 7.



their feelings about it twenty years later. Penner remembers that in his party club “there was great consternation and confusion. It was a great shock to everyone.”<sup>23</sup> Another former activist recalls that, in his Toronto group, the news caused a “virtual explosion.”<sup>24</sup> Mel Shipman, a Québec member, described the reactions of some of the Montréal membership, capturing the atmosphere well: “Disappointment, anger, helplessness, loyalty – all were intermingled: all demanded top priority in people’s minds and hearts.” The following months would be, for many, “the most intense period of their lives.”<sup>25</sup>

Others, however, were not nearly as disturbed by the revelations. As one member from Edmonton wrote in the *Tribune*, “It is fantastic to think that Canadian Communists could be blameable for the cult of Stalin. ... The way the truth came to us was galling, but we refuse to lose faith suddenly in the great Soviet people or wallow in criticism that can only ... [aid] the enemies of progressivism.”<sup>26</sup> In a more unusual vein, a pensioner from British Columbia wrote that “Stalin defended socialism and would allow no one to destroy it. The wonder is ... that he didn’t make more blunders.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet while later political evaluations would differ radically, most Canadian Communists were, at least initially, upset. A small number of people quit the LPP in this early stage of the crisis. The vast majority, however, hesitated to make such a rash decision, refused to resign, and resolved to rectify the party’s past errors from within. Many who would later leave the party probably felt much like Gui Caron: “I felt that I had shared in the responsibility for those hideous crimes because I had contributed, even though unknowingly, to covering them up. ... My first impulse was to disassociate myself at once. But after so many years in the Party I could not bring myself to make a decision without more time for thought. I wanted to discover what it was in our philosophy which could account for such unforeseen developments.”<sup>28</sup>

News of the persecution of the Jews in the Soviet Union under Stalin exacerbated an already volatile and difficult situation and added significantly to the emotional character of the conflict. Naturally, the reverberations were greatest among Jewish members who formed a significant proportion of party organizations in Montréal and Toronto. For many, the belief that “the whole basis of Communism was hostile to any kind of anti-semitism” had been integral to their commitment to the Communist cause.<sup>29</sup> The role of the Soviet Union in defeating Hitler had also attracted many Jews to the LPP.

23. Penner interview.

24. Interviewee 2.

25. *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 25 October 1956.

26. *Canadian Tribune*, 25 November 1956.

27. *Canadian Tribune*, 12 November 1956.

28. *Canadian Tribune*, 19 October 1956.

29. Former member, interview by the author, December 1977. This person chose to remain

Two years earlier, when Salsberg had urged the LPP to confront the CPSU on the prickly question of the treatment of Jewish writers and Jewish cultural institutions, he lost his seat on the NEC.<sup>30</sup> However, in 1956, Jewish communist newspapers in Poland and New York published disturbing reports on anti-Semitic practices in the USSR.<sup>31</sup> Further official confirmation forced the party to apologize to Salsberg and admit that it had been wrong in its “uncritical acceptance of the dissolution of Jewish cultural organizations in the Soviet Union and the refusal to demand information on why they were dissolved.”<sup>32</sup> His stand vindicated, Salsberg was readmitted to the NEC in May 1956. He soon became the centre around which many of the party’s most vocal critics gravitated.

Over the next several months, initial reactions to the party crisis curdled into conflicting political positions. The pre-convention discussion, officially opened in June, revealed a wide range of views on three pivotal issues: proletarian internationalism and the party’s relationship to the CPSU; the adequacy of democratic centralism as a guiding process in party activities; and the means by which socialism could be best achieved in Canadian conditions.<sup>33</sup>

In an attempt to stem the tide of conflict, Buck and his supporters cautioned the membership against inferring, from the deformation of the Soviet system under Stalin, that scientific socialist principles themselves were questionable, and they urged the party to have faith in the “honesty” and commitment of the new leaders of the CPSU. There was room, Buck admitted, for self-criticism in the LPP. In its “immaturity,” the Canadian party adhered too closely to Soviet policy and had itself been permeated by the Stalin “cult.” This resulted in a breakdown of inner-party democracy, causing the LPP to be insufficiently flexible in some of its policies, in turn damaging the party’s relationships with other “progressive” forces in the country.<sup>34</sup> Buck urged the membership to strengthen the party by following the example of the CPSU, making

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anonymous and hereafter will be referred to as Interviewee 3. Her assertion was corroborated in other interviews.

30. J. B. Salsberg, interview by the author, February 1977.

31. Information on anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union was published in the *Folkstimme*, a Jewish Polish newspaper, in March 1956. The *Folkstimme* revelations were reported in the *Canadian Tribune*, 25 April 1956. See Doug Rowland, “Canadian Communism: The Post Stalinist Phase,” MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1964.

32. Avakumovic, *Communist Party*, 226.

33. Democratic centralism as defined by the party’s constitution is the principle of combining “the maximum of democratic discussion and participation of the membership in Party life, with the self-imposed obligation to carry out majority decision and execution of these decision by an elected centralized leadership capable of directing the entire Party.” Quoted in Rowland, “Canadian Communism,” 32.

34. Buck, “New Paths to Peace.” See also Tim Buck, “Every Member Should Take Part in Critical Pre-Convention Discussions,” *NAM*, September 1956.

necessary changes while upholding the Marxist-Leninist axioms of international working-class solidarity, democratic centralism, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The basic framework, he said, was beyond question and could not be altered. He prevailed upon the membership "to turn from retrospective preoccupation with the revelations ... back to Canada and the tasks involved in the struggle for peace ... a people's government, and socialism in Canada."<sup>35</sup>

Buck's steadily growing opposition was not easily diverted or becalmed. To many, Buck's new position was an old one reworked, his self-criticism insufficiently penetrating. The critics, though inchoate and unorganized, fired on Buck's positions from all angles and called for major structural and political changes in the LPP. Firstly, they insisted that the CPSU provide "a deeper and more satisfactory explanation for the events since 1934."<sup>36</sup> The critics demanded a much looser form of relationship with Moscow. As one member wrote, "The time has come to speak out fearlessly and independently. ... The time is past for taking cap in hand to the CPSU."<sup>37</sup> Few advocated a severance of ties with the CPSU, and none explicitly damned the theoretical concept of proletarian internationalism. However, many believed that in view of the party's history of "ideological and political subservience" to the CPSU, it was now necessary to take a firm stand in favour of the principle of "equality and non-interference" between fraternal parties and to formulate policy solely on the basis of an objective analysis of Canadian conditions and needs.<sup>38</sup>

On specifically Canadian issues, the critics did not present a united front. Several common themes are nonetheless detectable in their letters and articles. The Québec Provincial Executive called for a "sharp struggle against an entrenched dogmatism and intolerance; against the idea that divergence from accepted Party policy automatically flows from alien ideology; against the idea of the infallibility of party leaders; against the stifling of criticism; and against a certain conceit on our part in relations with non-Party people." A rethinking of the principle of democratic centralism was also called for. Most critics advocated limits on its use and strict guarantees of the right to dissent and debate freely.<sup>39</sup> Some declared that the party should dissociate itself from the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and associate more closely with Canadian social-democratic and parliamentary traditions. Many saw friendlier relations with the CCF and the trade-union movement as crucial if the

35. Buck, "Canada's Path to Socialism," *NAM*, August 1956.

36. "Statement of the NEC of the LPP – June 26, 1956," *NAM*, February 1957.

37. *Canadian Tribune*, 26 November 1956.

38. Salsberg, "For a Socialist Realignment."

39. "Resolution of the Quebec Provincial Committee of the LPP – June 17, 1956," *NAM*, May–June–July 1956; Harry Binder, "Open Up the Discussion on Ways to Build the LPP," *NAM*, May–June–July 1956.

party wished to broaden its perspective and be accepted as a viable progressive force in Canada.

In August 1956, in an attempt to restrain the growing polarization of forces, the LPP dispatched Buck, William Kardash, Leslie Morris, and Salsberg to Moscow with the directive to obtain facts on the extent to which the CPSU had been successful in eradicating Stalinism. Although the NEC report released following their return expressed satisfaction with Soviet efforts and explanations, it soon became apparent that the leaders had been far from unanimous in their evaluations. Salsberg signed the report, but did so with reservations. His subsequent article in the *Vochenblatt/Canadian Jewish Weekly* – a Yiddish-language Communist newspaper with close ties to the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO), a labour, cultural, and fraternal organization aligned with the LPP – revealed that in meetings with the Soviet leader, Khrushchev had made such anti-Marxist and anti-Semitic statements as “when a Jew sinks his anchor, there immediately springs up a synagogue.” Although Khrushchev had warned his Canadian comrade “not to allow himself to be saddled by the bourgeoisie and the Zionists,” Salsberg returned to Canada “strengthened in my conviction that the CPSU is still guilty of serious deviations from the liberating socialist solutions to the nationalities problem.”<sup>40</sup>

The Moscow trip evidently failed to calm the conflict in the LPP. If anything, the debate grew more fierce, the lines of attack more tightly drawn. Dissatisfaction with Buck's leadership and the general direction of the party first reached critical proportions in the Montréal membership in October 1956. Buck and Salsberg travelled to the city to attempt to harness the restlessness. At a special meeting, characterized by a complete breakdown in party discipline, the differences between Buck and Salsberg became apparent. Buck, it seems, was not conciliatory in his response to the questions and challenges of the Montréal membership. As Harry Binder, a leading organizer in Québec and member of the NEC, reported, “Comrade Buck stated that when a leading comrade raises questions about the dictatorship of the proletariat, he is raising the question of whether we need a Marxist party.”<sup>41</sup> To many, this represented an attempt to stifle free discussion on fundamental issues, evidence that Buck had been insincere in his protestations of a desire for real democracy within the party. Buck's attitude and position seriously antagonized and discouraged those who had been looking forward to a new political approach.

Shortly after the end of the three-day meeting, Caron, the provincial leader, and five other major Québec organizers resigned from the party on the grounds that “a sound moral and political basis for the continuation of the struggle for socialism in Canada cannot be reconstructed within the framework of the

40. Quoted in J. B. Salsberg, “What Nikita Khrushchev Told Us,” *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, 6 December 1956. Salsberg later recalled: “I knew then that it was almost over for me.” Stein, “Slow Comeback of Canada's Communists,” 9.

41. *Canadian Tribune*, 19 October 1956.

LPP.<sup>42</sup> Several hundred members followed their leaders out of the fold. All efforts to secure their return were unrewarded.

Other critics persevered. Their strength in the NEC was evidenced by the passage of two controversial resolutions at a meeting of 22–26 October 1956. The first authorized the dispatch of a telegram to the CPSU criticizing Soviet interference in the internal affairs of the Polish Workers' Party. The other proposal, which demanded Buck's resignation and his replacement by a three-man secretariat, was put forward by Norman Penner and passed by a vote of five to three, with one abstention.<sup>43</sup> Although the motion for Buck's removal was unanimously withdrawn several days later, the NEC refused to rescind the criticisms of the CPSU. As the meeting continued, it became apparent that the NEC was deadlocked. A plenary session of the NC was called.

It turned out to be a marathon, lasting thirteen consecutive days (28 October to 9 November), during which the full implications of the party crisis became clear and the antagonistic positions within the leadership hardened. The NC faced a difficult task: it proposed to attempt to work out the imbroglio in the NEC and then to deal with the Québec resignations and the differences of opinion regarding the results of the LPP's discussions with Soviet leaders. Basic questions for consideration were whether a Marxist-Leninist party is indispensable to the achievement of socialism; the correctness or incorrectness of democratic centralism in contemporary Canada; the policy of the CPSU on the Jewish question; and, finally, Buck's attitude to the pre-convention discussion and charges that he had obstructed the free exchange of ideas. In its own words, the NC "was unable to solve its problems in a definitive way."<sup>44</sup> Penner recalls that there was "a very vicious tone to that meeting."<sup>45</sup>

At first, the NC mirrored the disunity that had beset the NEC. For the first time in its history, it did not adopt Buck's preliminary report. Heated debate on other issues, however, was abruptly interrupted by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in the first days of November, which served only to create more confusion in the NC.<sup>46</sup> Contradictory reports from Budapest and Moscow made it impossible for the body to take a position on the Hungarian events, although to those who already had doubts about the Soviet conception of "solidarity"

42. "Letter from Gui Caron," *Canadian Tribune*, 19 October 1956. See also Norman Penner's "Amendment to the Draft Resolution," Mimeograph courtesy Robert Kenny.

43. Penner interview; Avakumovic, *The Communist Party*, 229.

44. "Report of Meeting of NC-LPP October 28–November 9," *NAM*, November 1956.

45. Penner interview.

46. John Stewart, editor of the *Canadian Tribune*, charged at the time that the paper was a narrow party organ. He said, "There were long and bitter debates over Hungary. ... The *Tribune* could not take any position at all until the NEC made up its mind." Quoted in Rowland, "Canadian Communism," 115.

and “internationalism” it was “just a further confirmation of what we were up against.”<sup>47</sup>

Toward the end of the meeting it became clear that the critics were in the minority. The NC revoked the NEC’s critical cable to the CPSU by a vote of eighteen to eleven, with one abstention. The unanimous decision of the NEC to resign brought the meeting to a turning point. Buck prefaced the election of a new executive with a plea for unity in the face of “liquidationism” and a call to choose those who would fight the “Right deviationists.”<sup>48</sup> Stewart Smith, a former Toronto controller and prominent Ontario member of the NEC for many years, was defeated. Salsberg tied with two others for the last seat. On announcing the withdrawal of his name from any further contest, Salsberg “expressed the view that the NC majority had, by its vote against opinions expressed by himself and by Comrade Stewart Smith, backed the policy of Comrade Buck which he held to be one that impedes free discussion.”<sup>49</sup> Binder and Penner promptly resigned in support. Two others withdrew from the runoff for the last seat. The plenum then decided that the nine elected candidates would constitute the new NEC, which left Buck in firm command. The NC resolved to meet again in December to work out a Draft Resolution for the upcoming party convention.

At this point, the conflict adopted a new tone and a new sense of urgency. Members continued to leave the party in droves with each new crisis in policy. Buck’s critics became increasingly strident in their actions and demands. His supporters retorted, with certain justification, that Salsberg and his supporters were threatening to destroy the very foundations of the Leninist model of a Communist Party. Charges and counter charges were volleyed back and forth and derogatory labels attached to everyone by their opponents. With the publication of the Draft Resolution in late December, the four positions that were to characterize the convention began to be clear.

Salsberg’s manifesto, “For a Socialist Realignment in Canada,” appeared in the February issue of *National Affairs Monthly* (NAM). In it, he submitted that “there is nothing essentially new in the Draft Resolution” and argued that it was an attempt to “heal symptoms but to leave the sources of the illness undisturbed.” Salsberg charged that the revocation of the Polish telegram and the continued reticence of the party on the question of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union amounted to a clear indication of the party’s continued “subservience” to the CPSU. He also asserted that the violent and hostile reaction of Buck and his supporters to the forthright criticisms of his leadership and its positions was evidence of the dogmatism and sectarianism that doomed the LPP to isolation. Salsberg agreed with Stewart Smith that “everyone pays lip service to

47. Penner interview. In January the NEC issued a statement in support of the Soviet intervention. See “Statement on the Events in Hungary,” NAM, February 1957.

48. Avakumovic, *Communist Party*, 231.

49. “Report of Meeting of NC-LPP.”

the need for an independent critical approach, but when it comes to deeds, the old prevails." In view of this, the Draft Resolution could represent no more than a meaningless document. Salsberg called for the rejection of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of democratic centralism. He supported a purely democratic approach to politics and, in effect, urged the LPP to transform itself into a social-democratic organization. In his own words, "We need a party that will creatively apply all that is valid in the body of scientific socialist knowledge to Canadian conditions and chart our own Canadian path to socialism" The LPP, he concluded, "cannot be transformed into such a party" and should therefore be dissolved.<sup>50</sup>

Norman Penner, Edna Ryerson, Charles Sims, and others were sympathetic to many of Salsberg's criticisms and demands for change. In Penner's amendment to the Draft Resolution, he boldly criticized the past record of the party and accused the leadership of looking "only superficially at the problem and strongly resisting the growing demand for change." Penner called for "new policies and radically different methods of work," suggesting numerous, very basic changes he felt were necessary "to get back into the stream of political action and discussion." He rejected the concept of one-party government (or the dictatorship of the proletariat) and repudiated the notion of the LPP as the "vanguard" of the Canadian working class. "We need to redefine our attitude to the labour movement and the CCF, ending all conceptions that place ourselves in opposition to other working class parties and groupings," Penner wrote. "We visualize the conquest of socialism through a broad farmer-labour coalition in which Marxism will be a vital part, but not necessarily ... the dominant party within such a movement." Spurning the Stalinist idea of democratic centralism, he called for a firm commitment to free debate, an open press, and protection of minority rights, as well as a reduction of the power of the leadership and an increased emphasis on rank-and-file participation in decision making.<sup>51</sup>

Edna Ryerson urged the party to "deal with the big problems of the day" and to overcome its sectarianism and dogmatism instead of "allowing ourselves to be paralysed by the proposition that what we need in Canada is a new party."<sup>52</sup> Importantly, she, Penner, and their supporters rejected Salsberg's demand for dissolution. Penner concluded his amendment by saying, "Given the changes and the sincere effort to carry them into life, we are confident that we Canadian Communists organized in the LPP will go forward in the working class movement and play our rightful role within it."<sup>53</sup>

50. Salsberg, "For a Socialist Realignment"; Stewart Smith, "On Fundamental Questions," *NAM*, March 1957.

51. Penner, "Amendment to the Draft Resolution," mimeograph courtesy Robert Kenny.

52. E. Ryerson, "Chief Danger."

53. Penner, "Amendment."



To the majority who stood behind Buck, however, the positions of both Salsberg and Edna Ryerson/Penner were unacceptable and represented serious "Right deviationism" and "opportunism." Some were prepared to admit, as did John Boyd, a leader in the Ukrainian community, "that there are many good proposals for changes submitted in the contributions of Penner and others." But, representing a widespread feeling, Boyd continued, "There are some things that I will not agree to change and among these are the principles upon which our Party is based; the principles of Marxism-Leninism."<sup>54</sup>

Leslie Morris identified three basic principles at the heart of the debate: working-class power, the theory and practice of a Communist Party, and working-class internationalism. On these issues, the Buck group took a very clear position. Buck rejected Penner's conception of the socialist state as one in which "the working class and its parties share the government with other anti-monopolist forces and groupings," calling it a complete repudiation of the fundamental Marxist principle of working-class political power as the indispensable condition for the transition to socialism. Morris accused Salsberg and Penner of confusing "forms with the essence" and said that "the proposal to discard basic principles for the purpose of uniting with people who are opposed to them is itself a rejection of Marxism." Similarly, while supporting the idea of a broader unity with the CCF and the trade-union movement, Morris contended that the LPP must remain staunchly independent and refuse to identify itself with the rightist tendencies of the social democrats.<sup>55</sup>

Continued acceptance of the LPP's role as a "vanguard" in directing the Canadian people to the path of socialism was thus central to the Buck-Morris stand. Also distinct was the strong belief in democratic centralism as the necessary organizational foundation of the party. Buck reaffirmed his commitment to proletarian internationalism as the "heart and soul of our movement." To weaken international solidarity, he said, would be to weaken the labour movement, the fight for peace, and the party. While giving his support to the development of LPP policy based on Canadian conditions, and admitting that in the past the leadership had been guilty of mechanically applying the positions and theoretical propositions of the CPSU, Buck warned that "to elevate national characteristics beyond what is universally true and valid, is a profound error."<sup>56</sup> Basically, then, Buck and his supporters, while admitting that certain changes were necessary, were not prepared to tamper with what they saw as the fundamental tenets of Marxism-Leninism. Salsberg's call for a "socialist realignment" was rejected outright and denounced as "revisionist" and "opportunist." The vital role of the LPP and the importance of

54. John Boyd, "On the Two Dangers in Our Party," *NAM*, May 1957.

55. Leslie Morris, "Three Principles at Heart of Debate," *NAM*, March 1957; Buck, "Canada Needs."

56. Buck, "Canada Needs."



a communist party in Canada was incontestable. Those who threatened it deserved only sound defeat.

Buck's and Morris' criticisms of Salsberg's and Penner's propositions were surpassed in ferocity by those of the final grouping, represented by Stanley Ryerson, Tom McEwen, Camille Dionne, and the Saskatchewan LPP executive. It is important to note that the main thrust of their position closely resembled the essence of Buck's. They too called for an unequivocal reaffirmation of the validity of tested Marxist principles and the LPP as the only true party of the Canadian working class. However, the tone of their proposals and of their attacks on the critics was angry and provocative. Generally, this section of the membership was unprepared to make any significant criticisms of the party's past performance and rejected the charge that it had been characterized by dogmatism and sectarianism. As a minority resolution of the Québec Provincial Convention said, "In the by and large we have suffered setbacks not because we were wrong, but because we were right. In the main our policies were correct and have been proven correct."<sup>57</sup> Salsberg, Penner, and the like were accused of "promoting subservience to the outlook of the capitalist class in the name of combatting subservience to the CPSU."<sup>58</sup>

Charles Lipton, a Montréal member, charged Salsberg and Smith with "blackmail," "colossal conceit," and "unprincipled methods"; he urged the party to "Defeat the Opportunists! Vote Them Down!"<sup>59</sup> The members of the faction led by Stanley Ryerson, Tom McEwen, and Camille Dionne criticized the Draft Resolution as too "conciliatory" and too "liberal."<sup>60</sup> They felt that their fellow comrades had had ample time to make up their minds on the important issues and that to indulge in further discussions would "make a virtue out of evasion and wavering." It was now time, they said, for people to declare themselves "for or against the Party," which they saw as the key question.<sup>61</sup>

The Ryerson-McEwen-Dionne characterization of the debate as being one centred around the question of "for or against the Party" was not altogether inaccurate. As the controversy deepened, it became clear that although there were four positions, there were basically two sides: the Penner-Salsberg group, which demanded fundamental change; and the majority section, which did not. A Buck supporter recalls, "It did quite definitely come down to the question – are you for or against the party in the defeat of the revisionists' position which was for the liquidation of the Party. ... When people are saying that the thing to do is to disband the Party, the question isn't then to debate what

57. "Minority Document – Quebec Provincial Convention," Mimeograph courtesy Robert Kenny.

58. S. Ryerson, "Getting Our Bearings."

59. Charles Lipton, "Workers First! Party First! Canada First!," *NAM*, April 1957.

60. McEwen, "Existence of Party."

61. S. Ryerson, "Getting Our Bearings."

are the better forms of organization, but to decide whether to disband or not disband because that's obviously primary." In such circumstances, she recalls, it was difficult to seriously consider the proposals of the Penner/Edna Ryerson group. "It was rather hard to find the line that divided them off. You could see it, but they tended to be seen more as supporters of the revisionists than as opponents of them."<sup>62</sup> From the other perspective, Penner recalls that "Stanley Ryerson's position became the position of the majority. Sure – he was the hard-liner and theoretician at that period. But he wasn't a separate faction. He stood with the majority."<sup>63</sup> The political polarization, then, was well defined.

Political positions, however, are not shaped solely by intellectual and theoretical considerations. A wide variety of motives and tensions brought people to divergent political postures. It is clear that in the LPP crisis of 1956–57, ethnic, regional, economic, and other factors critically influenced the divisions within the party.

The geographical region least affected by the party crisis was western Canada. While there were numerous and important exceptions to this rule, support in the West for Buck's position was quite firm. Not one member left the Saskatchewan party in this period, and similar loyalty was evident in British Columbia. Several factors seem to have accounted for this. The membership composition of the western organizations was solidly working class. The LPP found its strength among lumber workers and miners in British Columbia and with farmers and labourers in Saskatchewan. Most had joined in the Depression years for *material* rather than *ideological* reasons.<sup>64</sup> And while the ideological component of party work had developed in the West, the concentration was clearly on economic issues. As a result, the revelations of the 20th Congress did not have a drastic effect on the membership.<sup>65</sup> One member recalls that "the revelations didn't change the class relations in this country."<sup>66</sup> As Gershman aptly put it, "Harvey Murphy and Pritchett – they had been doing a damn good job fighting for conditions. A woodworker or a miner in B.C. didn't give a damn what happened at the 20th Congress."<sup>67</sup> Letters to the *Tribune* testified to a resentment of the fact that "many of our middle-class intellectuals have gone into a tizzy." One letter concluded with

62. Current member, interview by the author, February 1975. Having chosen not to be identified, this person is hereafter referred to as Interviewee 4.

63. Penner interview.

64. Interviewee 4. See also Avakumovic, *Communist Party*, 231–232.

65. Norman Penner recalls, "When we decided in the NEC to reprint Khrushchev's secret report in the *Tribune* ... when it got to Vancouver, they burned it. ... They wouldn't distribute it." Penner interview.

66. Interviewee 4.

67. Gershman interview.

the advice that those who were so upset ought to “dirty their own hands and taste their own sweat. ... It is so basic.”<sup>68</sup>

The fact that there were very few Jews in the western organizations (with the exception of Winnipeg) also weakened the impact of the party crisis there. So did the fact that members were not concentrated in urban centres but widely distributed in far-flung towns and farming communities. Club meetings were less regular, by necessity, and the membership less in touch with the deliberations of the leadership in Toronto, than were their counterparts in the East. In Saskatchewan, in particular, another factor contributed widely to the unity and solidity in the face of conflict. The presence of a CCF government that had declared itself opposed to McCarthyism and red-baiting countered the deadening effect of the Cold War on the membership.<sup>69</sup> The weariness, doubt, and fear that had led to significant losses in the East were never present to the same degree in Saskatchewan. Thus the organization was not in an already weakened position when the crisis hit.

In Montréal and Toronto, the two major centres of party activity and membership in the country, Buck found his strongest opposition. While he retained the allegiance of the Ukrainian community and some of the Toronto leaders and bureaucrats, much of Buck's base was shattered in those two cities.<sup>70</sup> It was there that the splits were deepest, the crisis most damaging, and the greatest number of members and leaders lost. There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. The most obvious factor, perhaps, is the significant proportion of Jewish members in both the Montréal and Toronto organizations.<sup>71</sup> It is not unimportant that four of the six major leaders who left the party in 1956–57 were Jewish: Salsberg, Binder, Sam Lipshitz, and Robert Laxer. The revelations of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, given constant attention in the *Vochenblatt* and other newspapers, cut deeply into the emotions and commitments of many Jews who had come to the Communist Party and to communism in the belief that “with the wiping out of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist state, there would be an end to anti-semitism.”<sup>72</sup> The effect was similar on the many Jews who had joined the LPP through their activities in the antifascist movement of the late 1930s and from profound admiration and gratitude for the role played by the Soviet Union in the defeat of Hitler. The revelations shattered these basic ideals. As one Jewish member

68. *Canadian Tribune*, 12 November 1956.

69. Interviewee 4.

70. John Wier, a leading Ukrainian member, wrote the following in *NAM* in March 1957: “We are proud that in this period there have been no resignations from membership of positions among our comrades, that our members and supporters have not succumbed to the pressure of hysteria and liquidationism.”

71. Joshua Gershman estimated that 50 per cent of the Toronto members and supporters were Jewish, and in Montreal, 20 per cent.

72. Interviewee 3.

recalls, “it was a terrible blow.”<sup>73</sup> The UJPO, the major Jewish Communist mass organization, was severely split by the crisis and many of its members severed their relations with the party immediately. Others who had resolved to stay on later left owing to their dissatisfaction with the LPP’s subsequent stand on the issue and with the CPSU’s effort to correct its approach to Soviet Jewry. In sum, by 1957 the Jewish membership of the party had been decimated.

It was not only Jews who had their ideals fractured. The Toronto and Montréal parties enjoyed a significant upsurge in membership in the late 1930s and early 1940s among workers, but especially among students, professionals, and even some small shopkeepers and entrepreneurs. For many, particularly the younger members who had joined the Communist Party in the pre-war and war years, faith in the Soviet Union as a guide and example had been integral to their commitment to the Communist movement. Like Caron, who joined the LPP in 1938 in the struggle against fascism, many had seen in the Soviet Union “the fullest flowering of the dream of democracy and morality.”<sup>74</sup> To such people, the revelations of the 20th Congress could not help but be devastating. The dearth of younger members that plagued the party for several years following the crisis attests to the fact that this group was seriously affected.<sup>75</sup>

Economic conditions, particularly the rising prosperity and high level of employment that characterized urban centres in the 1950s, may also have more subtly influenced the outcome of the crisis in eastern Canada. The Montréal and Toronto party branches and organizations enjoyed a larger following of lower-middle-class and middle-class members than did their counterparts in the West. It is also clear that the largest number of people who left the party in 1956–57 were members of the middle class.<sup>76</sup> Historically, moral outrage has been the territory of the economically comfortable and the intellectuals. On reflection, a former Toronto activist casts the phenomenon in a slightly different light: “As earnings of working people rose from the end of the war to the 1950s, and as the Cold War sapped the energy of members, some began to move ideologically away from the Party and to feel uncomfortable economically within it. Some seized the opportunity of the 20th Congress as a good excuse to get out.”<sup>77</sup> While direct evidence supporting this contention is

73. Interviewee 1.

74. *Canadian Tribune*, 19 October, 1956.

75. Interviewee 4.

76. This assessment was corroborated in seven interviews.

77. Former member, interview by the author, December 1976–January 1977. This person did not wish to be identified and hereafter is referred to as Interviewee 5. John Boyd also suggested this, in “On the Two Dangers”: “There is no doubt that some sections of our Party, particularly in the larger centres, have been strongly tainted with middle class ideology. The way of life of many comrades has changed in the post-war years and with it their ideology has changed. ... More and more ... comrades want to TAKE LIFE EASY; fewer are prepared to make some of the

obviously not available, both members and former members generally concur, in hindsight, that economic conditions and the erosion of commitment and stamina wrought by the Cold War indirectly affected the political conclusions of certain sections of the eastern membership.

In conclusion, Buck and his supporters faced strong opposition from a large number of Jewish party members in Montréal and Toronto, from an articulate minority of young French Canadians, and from several of the most dynamic party leaders in Ontario and Québec. The Young Communist League was also severely split by the crisis. And finally, middle-class members tended to be found on the side of the “revisionists.” While the isolation of such trends is necessary and valuable, conclusions must nevertheless remain tentative. The attribution of psychological motivations to political positions is a hazardous enterprise for the historian. As one former LPP member cautioned, “Nobody can really tell what was going on in the people’s minds.”<sup>78</sup> And, importantly, many members did not move with their peer groups.

By the time of the convention, however, it was plainly evident what group was in command. Hundreds of members who might have supported Salsberg’s or Penner’s positions had already left the party in anger and frustration by April 1957. As one major activist who left in December 1956 recalls,

I went through the stage of wanting to change from within too. But then I realized that you were fighting over a corpse. The CP had lost all credibility. ... Ultimately, the question wasn’t what position you were going to adopt within the CP. The question was whether the CP was worth being associated with. ... So what I thought of Salsberg’s position was that he had some good ideas but that he was wasting his time and what he was doing wasn’t any more relevant than what the other side was doing, because the whole thing was useless. So when I came to that conclusion – I walked out.<sup>79</sup>

As a result, Buck and his followers increased their relative importance and strength in the political balance and were clearly in the majority. In the face of a disorganized opposition, torn by varying demands and a lack of active support, Buck’s adherents maintained a stubborn and forceful united front.

The convention itself, then, was anticlimactic. There was never any doubt as to its outcome. Salsberg was given a surprisingly large amount of time in which to present his proposals, an effort he later described as being solely “for the record.”<sup>80</sup> His support among the delegates was negligible. Predictably, he was soundly defeated in his bid for a seat on the NEC. The “compromise” position was caught in between and never received serious consideration. But while the convention rejected Penner’s amendment to the Draft Resolution, the delegates, in an attempt to conciliate and avoid further desertions, elected

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sacrifices of the past.”

78. Penner interview.

79. Interviewee 2.

80. Salsberg interview.

both Penner and Edna Ryerson to the NC. With minor revisions, the Draft Resolution was accepted, Buck re-elected as leader with an overwhelming majority, and his staunch supporters chosen for virtually all positions on the new NC and NEC. The LPP emerged united, with a clear direction.

Unity, however, was achieved at a great cost. Inside observers estimate that the party lost over half of its membership as a result of the crisis of 1956–57.<sup>81</sup> Sympathy for the LPP among middle-class progressives and in the Jewish community was gouged. The UJPO temporarily severed all ties to the Communist movement. The scores of young people who quit left in their wake a party severely handicapped by a generation gap. The Communist youth organization was not revived until several years later. Party press activities were severely curtailed for a time, and there was a general falling off in public work.

Finally, the central leadership incurred great losses. The bitter rift caused the departure of many of Canadian Communism's most experienced, intelligent, and dedicated public figures and leaders. Several of them had been instrumental in attracting non-Communist support to certain party campaigns and had been prominent activists in their respective communities. All had been involved in party life for many years. Caron, provincial leader in Québec, and Laxer, education director and organizer in Ontario, relinquished their posts long before the convention. Three weeks following the Buck victory, four other prominent members made public their resignations from the LPP. Their statement, published in full in the *Globe and Mail*, read in part as follows:

The LPP is unwilling to make a break with the deeply rooted sectarianism and Stalinist methods of working and thinking. ... The LPP's ... lack of independent thinking ... dooms it to ideological sterility, political ineffectiveness and decline. We, for our part, will not approve of, nor associate ourselves with, policies which are in conflict with the present and future interests of the Canadian working people, and with the cause of Socialism in this country. It is our opinion that the historically necessary task of regrouping socialist forces in this country has to be undertaken. This is not an organizational task in the main, but a political one, an educational one. What is now crystal clear, however, is that the LPP cannot and will not perform this task.<sup>82</sup>

The signatories were Salsberg; Smith, Ontario leader of the LPP and a member of the NEC for three decades; Binder, former national treasurer, for many years a member of the NEC, and organizer in the province of Québec; and Lipshitz, until 1956 a member of the NC, for eighteen years secretary of the party's National Jewish Committee, former editor of the *Canadian Jewish Weekly*, and a staff member of the *Canadian Tribune*.

These were not the only losses. With much less fanfare, Penner and Edna Ryerson left the LPP in the following year. So did A. A. McLeod, former LPP member of the Ontario legislature, and Steve Endicott, a leader in the youth movement. Such talent was not easily or quickly replaced. As one member

81. This was estimated by Robert Kenny and was corroborated in other interviews.

82. "Four Top Reds Quit the LPP, Blast Buck" *Globe and Mail*, 16 May 1957.

says, "It took a considerable time to begin to rebuild ... to reestablish a collective leadership."<sup>83</sup>

Salsberg's talk of a "socialist realignment" was never realized and the rebels made no serious effort to establish a new socialist party to rival the LPP. Instead, the paths of those who left the party in 1956–57 diverged widely and may provide further confirmation of the fact that the political conclusions with which people departed varied considerably. Salsberg, Lipshitz, and Binder, for instance, became quite active in the Zionist movement. Smith went into private business and became a millionaire. Laxer and others found positions in the academic world. Many pursued careers with professional organizations, the trade-union movement, and government. Still other former members entered industry and commerce.

Immediately following the crisis, most went into a political hibernation. Some chose to remain in the political wilderness; many did not. Some became virulent anticommunists. A few returned after a time to the LPP or one of its mass organizations. However, while many felt a certain nostalgia and closeness to the party, most remained disaffiliated from it. Instead, they found political outlets in work with the labour movement, the CCF-NDP, and the Waffle. Many former members became proponents of the peace movement and other New Left causes of the 1960s.

Despite the defections, the party survived, changing its name to the Communist Party of Canada in 1959. It continued to play an active role in Canadian politics, albeit with a reduced membership. But there is no doubt the crisis that ravaged the LPP in 1956–57 left wounds that have never fully healed. Ostracized from the mainstream of Canadian political life, and caught in a web of international events beyond its control, the party's ability to cope with its internal crisis was severely handicapped. Furthermore, the conflicts were magnified by the intense personal commitments of its members, a characteristic common to minority political parties. Confronted by such formidable pressures, the task at hand was a difficult one. The questions that beset Canadian Communists in 1956–57 plague them and their counterparts throughout the world to this day.

## Appendix I: Interviews

J. B. Salsberg (conducted by Karen Levine, February 1977)

Norman Penner (conducted by Karen Levine, January 1977)

Robert Kenny (conducted by Karen Levine, December 1976)

Joshua Gershman (conducted by Karen Levine, January 1977)

Stewart Smith (conducted by David Chud, 1973)

John Boyd (conducted by David Chud, 1973)

83. Interviewee 4.



Sam Lipshitz (conducted by David Chud, 1973)

Karen Levine also conducted interviews, in December 1976 and January 1977, with five individuals who stipulated that their identities were not to be revealed.

## Appendix II: Chronology of Events

### 1953

March: NEC drops J. B. Salsberg because of persistent demands for investigation of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union (USSR).

### 1954

25–28 March: 5th National Convention of the LPP. New program adopted: “Canadian Independence and a People’s Parliament: Canada’s Path to Socialism.”

### 1955

Salsberg visits the USSR to conduct personal investigation into anti-Semitic practices. Reports to NEC upon return; for tactical reasons, publicly understates findings.

### 1956

February: 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

March: First reports of the 20th Congress in *NAM*.

mid-April: Buck returns to Canada.

25 April: *Canadian Tribune* reports *Folkstimme* accounts of anti-Semitic practices.

April: Indications of contents of Khrushchev’s secret speech appear in eastern European and Western press.

May: Salsberg vindicated and reinstated to the NEC.

21 May: NC issues first statement on the 20th Congress. Characterizes Khrushchev’s explanations of Stalin’s excesses as inadequate and criticizes CPSU for attempting to keep speech secret from other Communist parties.

13 June: US State Department and *New York Times* publish unofficial text of Khrushchev’s speech.

18 June: *Canadian Tribune* reprints US State Department version of the speech.

26 June: NEC passes resolution calling for scientific, Marxist explanation for death of collective leadership in USSR, etc. Reiterates NC criticism of



secrecy. Deplores failure to discuss Jewish question.

late August: NEC dispatches delegation composed of Buck, Morris, Salsberg, and Kardash to discuss issues with leaders of the CPSU. Statement upon return expresses satisfaction with Soviet effort to eradicate "cult" of Stalin. Salsberg signs document with a rider. Acrimonious discussions.

10–12 October: Buck and Salsberg address Québec membership. Their differences come out in the open.

15 October: NEC receives notification of resignation of six Québec leaders on grounds that "a sound moral and political bases for the continuation of the struggle for socialism in Canada cannot be reconstructed within the framework of the LPP."

19 October: Binder and Buck go to Montréal to secure withdrawal of resignations. Unsuccessful.

22 October: Resolution to have Buck surrender post to three-man secretariat is moved by Penner and passed by NEC.

23 October: NEC sends message of support to Polish Workers' Party and cable to CPSU criticizing its interference in Polish internal affairs.

26 October: NEC unanimously withdraws motion demanding Buck's resignation but refuses to do the same with criticisms of the CPSU.

end October and early November: Hungarian uprising and Soviet intervention.

28 October–9 November: Meeting of NC. New NEC elected. Telegram to Moscow withdrawn. No position on Hungary adopted. No political report or resolution adopted.

November: Laxer resigns from LPP.

November–December: Salsberg's articles on meetings with Soviet leaders and anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union appear in the *Canadian Jewish Weekly*.

late December: NC meets to prepare for National Convention.

## 1957

21 January: NEC adopts resolution supporting Soviet intervention in Hungary.

February: "For a Socialist Realignment in Canada" appears in *NAM*.

March: Salsberg resigns as leader of the Toronto party organization.

19–22 April: 6th National Convention of the LPP. Buck emerges victorious. Smith and Salsberg soundly defeated. Penner and E. Ryerson re-elected. New constitution adopted.

16 May: Salsberg, Smith, Binder, and Lipshitz publicly resign from LPP.

November: Penner resigns from LPP.