

U. S. COMMUNISTS SURVEY A WEAKENED PARTY

By HARRY SCHWARTZ

About 250 persons, many of them gray haired, have spent much of the last three days crowded into the small ballroom of a Harlem hotel. This is the physical reality of the seventeenth national convention of the Communist party of the United States.

The dreary surroundings of the meeting spoke eloquently of the low state of American Communism's political fortunes. They supported strongly recent estimates that party's dues-paying membership is now down to a few thousand hard-core fanatics, a far cry from the 1945 peak of 75,000 to 85,000.

Even before the convention there were many evidences of the party's decline.

Its national English language newspaper is now only a weekly; The Daily Worker has been only a memory for almost two years. And even the weekly Worker, a sworn statement it has just published stated, had a circulation this last year that averaged less than 15,000.

Many of the former leaders and leading lights of the party have left it, as have a far greater number of obscure members. John Gates, Howard Fast and Doxey Wilkerson are among the better known figures who have left. And every reporter who has been concerned with the party in recent years knows numerous lesser lights.

Front Groups Fade

Many of the key fellow-traveler organizations and transmission-belt groups through which the party used to operate are now no more or are moribund. Gone is the International Workers Order, the insurance organization with comparatively large funds that offered interesting possibilities for party aid in bygone years. Gone too are the Progressive party and the American Labor party. The Jefferson School and other party schools in different cities have vanished. The list of such organizations which have passed into the abyss of history is at least in the hundreds. And except for a few isolated cases, the party's role in the trade unions today is insignificant.

The Communist party's own explanation of its decline here in the decade and a half tends to emphasize two factors: the "fascist terror" against Communists during the period of McCarthyism and the "leftist sectarianism" of party leaders in the past. The latter phrase is party jargon for the many mistakes it has made these past years.

A fuller and more objective explanation of that decline



The New York Times
Eugene Dennis, U. S. Communist National Secretary.



The New York Times
Gus Hall, U. S. Communist Midwest Secretary.

would seem to include the following factors:

(1) The party's best days were in the depression-ridden Nineteen Thirties and during World War II. During the war, sympathy here for the Soviet Union as a fighting ally against Germany and Japan was translated into comparatively high membership for the party.

Since World War II, the United States has enjoyed prosperity and nearly full employment, thus eliminating the economic base that existed in the Nineteen Thirties for Communist party strength. Politically, the "cold war" tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union put the party time and again into positions of obviously supporting a foreign power against the United States, a posture that disillusioned many of the innocents who had joined during the years of the war-time alliance.

(2) The Communist party here consistently misjudged the post-war American scene and it paid heavily for its errors. It anticipated a depression that would approach that of the Nineteen Thirties—an expectation yet to materialize. It thought that the outbreak of the Korean War signaled the beginning of World War III and of American fascism, and made haste to go partly underground and to get rid of independent members. Its tactics in the trade union field drove many of its former supporters out of the fold, while reducing to impotence or wiping out unions in which faithful party members tried to carry out the line as directed.

(3) The high level of anti-

obviously had hope that the party would revive and once again become a power to be reckoned with in the United States.

In part their hopes are based upon the easing of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. There seems little question but that Premier Khrushchev's visit here gave Communist morale in this country a boost and a hope of better days to come.

In addition, American Communists believe that the feats of the Soviet Union—its rocket successes in space, its rapid economic progress, and the like—are proving their case for them. Like Premier Khrushchev they believe such feats show the "superiority" of socialism over capitalism, and like him they believe that even in the United States such feats will convince many that the Soviet system is a desirable alternative to our own.

Only time can tell whether or not these hopes are well founded. But as the elite of the American Communist party have met these last three days they have demonstrated nothing more than the vast distance they have to go before they must again be considered a significant political force.

Communist feeling, as the menace of Communist aggression became ever more apparent, scared away the weak-hearted and those who could not face the community ostracism, loss of jobs, and other penalties Communist party membership has often carried with it since 1945.

(4) The culminating blow was Premier Khrushchev's speech in February, 1956, exposing some of Stalin's crimes. That speech destroyed the final illusions about the Soviet Union and about communism in thousands who had remained faithful through the hardest days of the cold war and despite all the legal and informal community sanctions against Communists.

Those who assembled last Thursday for the convention