

The Elizabeth Gurley Flynn Campaign

By Evelyn Wiener

ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN, veteran Communist leader, ran for City Council in the 1957 elections in New York's 24th Senatorial District on the People's Rights ticket. Over 4,000 signatures were collected to put her on the ballot, and 710 votes were secured.

The campaign lasted for three months, and since it was the first major activity of our Party in New York since the 16th National Convention it offered many valuable lessons for our future work. To all who participated in it, this campaign, coming as it did after a year and a half of inner Party discussion, brought new confidence in the need for our Party and our ability to weather the crisis. The campaign started late. While a majority of our County and State leaders favored it, it started in an atmosphere of doubt and hesitation. It ended in a spirit of growing unity, determination and high enthusiasm. Those of us who led the campaign had the great pleasure of daily seeing the arrival of skeptical if dutiful canvassers, return from their assignment with eyes shining, crusading spirit and

renewed pride in the Communist Party. A small active group constantly grew until it reached 450 stalwart participants who displayed the kind of spirit and the ability to work long hard hours, trudging up and down stairs, that can come only from conviction and from understanding the necessity of the job being done and from pride in the contribution they are making.

The campaign received support from some old-time wobblies, a number of American Labor Party members, followers of LaGuardia and Marcantonio, and others interested in independent political action. Our oldest participant was 85 years old and if you count leaflet folders, one could say that the youngest were five-year-olds. A group of teen-agers organized themselves in the course of the campaign, writing songs about our candidate, singing on the streets, distributing leaflets and contributing much to the healthy flavor of our valiant campaign.

The campaign to some whose confidence had been shaken looked like a small miracle. To others it reminded them of a lesson forgotten:

a correct line produces both the forces and the ability to carry it out. The campaign affirmed the need for our Party and the importance of the Party re-establishing itself in all spheres of political life.

The area of the campaign, the 24th senatorial district, covers all of New York's lower East Side and sections of the lower West Side. The district is 80 per cent working class. The scene of many historic political struggles, it is an area which long had a socialist tradition and elected the first Socialist Alderman and other Socialists to various legislative bodies. The area was formerly predominantly Jewish. However, the population has changed and the area now consists of a large Puerto Rican population and an important Negro, Italian, Jewish and Slavic community.

While the old-time socialist-thinking population has shifted considerably, the conditions which produce socialist thinking still exist full force in this working-class, depressed area. While the people's struggles have brought a number of low-cost housing projects, there are still vast slum areas and many of the streets and houses described in Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* remain as they were. Stuyvesant Town, a middle-class community and the scene of the first major struggle against Jim Crow housing in New York City, is also a part of the district. The district is predominantly Democratic. Truly this is a district which needs

Communist activity and program whose many problems cry out for solution, struggle and action, and one where great united movements are possible and necessary.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, just five months out of prison, brought to the campaign her rich experience of working-class struggle and her great confidence and optimism about the future of our Communist Party. For those of us who worked closely with her for the first time, it was indeed an inspiration to get to know this great American working-class leader. Her participation in the early struggles to bring unions to American workers, and in every major civil liberties struggle of the last half century reached their logical culmination in her activities and leadership in the Communist Party today. In the person of Comrade Flynn, we see the lie to the foreign-agent charge; we see, also, the answer to those within our ranks, who in the past period seem to have forgotten the deep roots in American life and struggle that the Communist Party has planted—roots which will once again bear fruit as the struggle to overcome the isolation of the Party goes further and deeper.

The decision to run a Communist candidate in this election was arrived at after a period of extensive membership discussion in the various sections of Manhattan and among our County and State leaders. It was finally voted upon at a membership meeting of New York

County. There were those who felt that the campaign contradicted coalition policy and hindered developing unity movements. They did not see the role of our Party as an independent force in this election campaign. They displayed strong liquidationist tendencies and doubted the capacity of our seriously weakened organization to collect the necessary 3,000 signatures. Adoption of their policy would have led to continued inactivity and an absence of the Communists from this election campaign. A small grouping abstained from the campaign because they felt that the candidate should be a Communist Party candidate and not run on the People's Rights Ticket. The majority, however, reasoned as follows:

1. The Communist Party is a political Party and must again begin to participate in the political life of our country.

2. A Communist candidate can make a major contribution to the Party's fight for legality.

3. The growing desire and need for independent political action among the workers, Negro and Puerto Ricans can be strengthened through Communist participation in the electoral struggle.

4. The Communists have a special contribution to make in sharpening the issues and developing united movements, thus strengthening, not weakening coalition movements.

5. The Communist position and program on immediate issues and its socialist outlook and perspective must

be brought to the people, thus helping to develop class and socialist consciousness.

6. The Party name to appear on the ballot as required by law, was a secondary, tactical issue, in no way obscuring the fact that the candidate was a Communist.

As to the question of our capacity to get on the ballot and to wage a campaign, life proved our contention that only through activity and struggle will the Communist Party be revitalized and strengthened.

Despite the disagreements and doubts, as the campaign progressed a growing unity developed, with the majority of Communists understanding the need to abide by Party decisions and possessing the pride to carry out a necessary task. This attests to the fact that our differences must be discussed within the framework of mass work, mass activity for the Party, or else we will become a sterile debating society, without the ability of testing in life what is right and what is wrong. A small number of "diehards" did boycott the campaign, refusing even to sign the nominating petition because of disagreement with the campaign. However, this irresponsible conduct made very little headway.

This was true in spite of the fact that there still exists a strong current within our organization, which deprecates the role of the Party, and thus did not see the validity of independent activity within this election campaign. This made it more

difficult to conduct a proper ideological struggle.

About 30,000 people were directly canvassed in the course of the campaign. 100,000 pieces of literature were distributed; 30 outdoor meetings were held; and three radio programs were conducted; Comrade Flynn was interviewed by the local newspaper *Town and Village*, which has a circulation of 9,000. It was agreed by all, including politicians of the other Parties, that the Communists waged an active, meaningful campaign.

For the first time in years, Party members were given the opportunity to participate in public, political action. Again Communists were in contact with their fellow workers, beginning to exhibit in action the leadership qualities which they possess.

CONTENT OF THE CAMPAIGN

Our Campaign Committee attempted to develop a specific program for the district, to campaign on the major city-wide issues affecting the people and to point to their relationship with the struggle for peace, the civil rights issues and our socialist outlook. We attempted to make the fight against discrimination a central part of our campaign, pointing to the fact that discrimination bears a major responsibility for the bad housing conditions, the deterioration of our pub-

lic education, rent gouging, etc.

The major campaign issues were schools and housing, the need to clean Jim Crow out of New York and to get full equality for the Puerto Rican people.

We believe that we made a unique contribution to this campaign in that we pointed to why the needs of the people were not being met. We were the only Party that discussed the fact that at present the City Council is run in the interests of big business; that the money is there to meet all the needs of the people and could be gotten through taxing big business and the real estate interests and by turning from war expenditures to expenditures for public welfare. No other Party called for a change in the composition of the Council to include representation from the trade-union movement, the Puerto Rican people, as well as greater Negro representation; no other Party emphasized the fact, as we did, that only the unity of the people and great movements of struggle can win substantial improvement in conditions.

We attempted to move people into action and collected hundreds of telegrams to the President on Little Rock and to the Mayor on the Brown-Isaacs-Sharkey Bill to eliminate discrimination in all housing in the city of New York.

Finally we pointed to the source of the misery and poverty of the people of the East Side as being capitalism and pointed to the so-

cialist solution that had already been adopted by one-third of the people of the world.

All this was done within the framework of seeking unity on issues with all democratic movements and of a constant attempt to broaden our activity.

RESPONSE OF THE COMMUNITY

The response of the community on the meaning of the campaign cannot be discussed only in terms of the small vote.

We found in canvassing, a minimum of red-baiting and a real interest in what we had to say. The 4,000 signatures to the petition were at the very least an expression of the feeling that Communists should be given the right to be on the ballot, and a rejection of McCarthyism. Many people expressed their sympathy with our efforts to get on the ballot, but did not sign for fear of job reprisals. The 4,000 signatures also constitute proof that people want the Communists to challenge the other Parties, even if they are not ready to vote for us.

In line with the general electoral picture, the Democrats did not wage a particularly active campaign, while the Republican candidate for City Council limited himself to such "issues" as pornography and the need for a revolving sidewalk on Times Square to ease the traffic jam!

It is unfortunate that the Liberal Party, which took the positive ac-

tion of running independent candidates for City Council in a number of districts, allowed itself to become involved in the kind of red-baiting indulged in by their candidate. This was also followed by Jose Lumen Roman, Liberal Party candidate for City Council of the 15th District through *El Diario*, Puerto Rican newspaper. However, this had very little effect on the petition-signers. It certainly shows the maturity of the signers, especially the Puerto Ricans, who in spite of a full week's campaign of intimidation in *El Diario*, did not call for any withdrawal of signatures and continued to sign to put Gurley Flynn on the ballot. But the red-baiting diminished once the petitions were filed and it was announced that we had obtained 25 per cent more signatures than required by law.

The petition signers represented a cross section of the working-class community, with signatures coming from Jewish, Italian, Negro and Puerto Rican people. The response was especially good among the Negroes and Puerto Ricans.

In the course of the campaign Elizabeth Gurley Flynn spoke at a Forum of the League of Women Voters at a public school. Debates took place in a number of other organizations on the advisability of including a Communist speaker in political forums. In at least two organizations that we know of, the membership expressed their desire

for a Communist speaker, but were stopped from having Elizabeth Gurley Flynn by their national leadership. These activities, a direct result of the campaign, challenged the poison of red-baiting which has hurt the functioning of many people's organizations.

The refusal of the City College authorities to allow Comrade Flynn to speak because she was a Smith Act victim, evoked protests from many students and was denounced in editorials in both the City College and Hunter College newspapers.

The outdoor meetings held in the community were very warmly received. Especially noteworthy were the outdoor and radio appearances of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn together with former Councilman Benjamin J. Davis, now chairman of the New York State Communist Party. The splendid records in the City Council of the two Communist Councilmen—Davis (two terms) and Cacchione (three terms)—were constantly brought forward in the campaign, and the warm reception of the East Siders to Ben Davis' speeches is testimony to the fact that his fighting leadership is remembered and appreciated.

In view of all these positive achievements, how can we explain the small vote for Elizabeth Gurley Flynn?

It is necessary first to state that the size of the vote is not decisive in evaluating the decision to conduct this campaign. If the Communist

Party was to participate in electoral struggles only if it were guaranteed a big vote, it would never run candidates and never get a big vote.

We must judge this campaign as a new beginning. It came after many years of inactivity as a Party.

A single campaign, vigorous, healthy and enthusiastic as was the Flynn campaign is not yet sufficient to convince masses of workers that we are here to stay, and that we are serious in our determination to achieve the legalization of the Communist Party, and not only to see that it functions.

The vote should be understood as follows:

1. The campaign did not take place in a period of mass upsurge and break-away from the two-Party system. This is bound to affect the kind of vote Communists will get. However, one of our major tasks in an election is to call upon the people to agitate in their unions and organizations for a political movement which will once and for all break away from the domination of the capitalists, of the Republican and Democratic Parties. As that develops, and it surely will, the Communist Party will grow in influence and reflect that growth electorally, by the increasing adherence of workers whose class consciousness has been awakened and who are ready to cast their vote for the Party of Socialism.

2. Our Party has not yet been successful in achieving unity with all other independent forces and appearing in this election in combination with other

independents, as in the past years with the ALP.

3. Our campaign did not come after a period of mass struggle and activity. Moreover, our Party has not been seen independently for many years. This campaign was just a beginning of our resumption of activities and therefore could not yet secure an important vote.

4. The difficulties and discrimination at the polls that the Puerto Rican people are confronted with made it harder for the people most friendly to us, to cast their vote for us.

5. Our weakness in the past several years in the struggle for Negro and Puerto Rican rights.

The low vote is disappointing, but not discouraging, because we understand the cause and know that it will change. We know also that the change will not come about without action. If we had no campaign, we would not have spoken to 30,000 people who can now be spoken to again about the Party and its program. And as the Party begins to develop activities and begins to show in life how to fight for the program projected in the Flynn campaign, so will our prestige among the people, and our votes, grow.

To those who say the campaign was a mistake because the low vote shows our weakness, we answer that there are no short-cuts to re-establishing our leadership among the workers and people. We will grow in strength not by hiding but through boldly participating in all areas of activity, through contributing our scientific understanding and our de-

votion to the fight for all the needs of the people on a daily, all-year-round basis.

SOME LESSONS OF THE CAMPAIGN

1. The campaign was a valuable experience for our Party and for all progressives. It brought the Party and its program once again to the people of the East Side. It was necessarily limited in the absence of candidates of the Communist Party on a city-wide level. It is necessary for us to engage in election campaigns to the maximum of our ability. Candidates exemplify our role as a political party, seeking to challenge the dominant Parties for the support of the people.

2. The campaign points up the need for review of our whole electoral policy and the role of Communists and independents within the framework of fighting for unity and coalition. In general, elections provide the best opportunity to advocate the need for independent political action and political realignment which will represent the interests of the masses.

3. The campaign helped us to get a better estimate of just where our Party stands organizationally. It showed our ability to unite our membership around activity. It generated Party morale, confidence and fighting spirit. It certainly was a wonderful tonic after the apathy of the past period. Five people joined the Party in the course of the campaign. The

campaign strengthened our Sections organizationally. Members who had lost the organization, found it again in the election campaign.

For the several hundred who canvassed, it gave them the great opportunity, privilege and joy of speaking to the people as Communists. It helped them to grow as Communists. It gave us the opportunity to speak to the people and learn from the people. This has not occurred for years; it alone is sufficient justification for the campaign.

4. While participating in all the mass movements of the people, our Party must boldly come to the people with its own Communist program. Anti-, pseudo-, neo-, and ex-Communists hold themselves out as experts on Communism. It is time for Communists to speak to the peo-

ple about Communism.

We must organize meetings and forums; open Party headquarters and take many new bold steps to win our legality and to fight against all tendencies to liquidate the Party. In doing this, we will help to cement the unity of the people in struggle on all issues and further the development of an anti-monopoly coalition.

Speculation about the "obsolescence" of our Party, illusions about capitalism, these get some mighty blows when one sees the miserable slums, the poverty and the reality of discrimination that exist in this district. The campaign gave us strength, confidence and determination to rebuild the Communist Party, to fight for its full legality and to give leadership on the many burning issues that affect the people.

It's a dog's life . . .

.... "For cocktail time—dog fashion—there are bright velvet coats edged with gold embroidery. . . . For the lucky dog who flies south for the winter, Sak's Fifth Avenue has a bamboo edged couch upholstered in linen or shantung for relaxing in the sun."

"Canine Fashion to Pamper Pets," in *N. Y. Herald Tribune*, Dec. 16, 1957

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"I can't feed my children and buy clothes to go out in. I cannot manage. I guess I am a failure. We have not been out in years; we entertain not, yet I can't keep my children in shoes, gloves, overshoes and all the fresh whole milk they would like to drink."

Letter from a subway worker's wife, in *N. Y. Post*, Dec. 16, 1957