Gus Hall (1910-2000): Stalinist operative and decades-long leader of Communist Party USA

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Gus Hall, who died at the age of 90 on October 13, spent more than four decades as the leader of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). After faithfully representing the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR, he mourned its demise a decade ago but continued to defend its counterrevolutionary perspective of "national socialism" until his dying day.

Hall was born Arvo Kusta Halberg on October 8, 1910 in the mining area of northern Minnesota. His parents were Finnish immigrants who became members of the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Growing up in this family under conditions of extreme poverty, it was not surprising that the young man, who later adopted the name Gus Hall, turned to revolutionary politics. His father, Matt Halberg, became a charter member of the American Communist Party in 1919, and recruited his 17-year-old son into the party eight years later.

In the upper Midwest and throughout the United States, this was a period of bitter class struggles. The Wall Street boom of the 1920s did nothing to alleviate the hardships facing tens of millions of workers, and small but significant sections turned to the ideas of socialism.

The CP of 1927 was already a far different organization than the party that emerged in 1919, inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution. Hall joined a party that was turning its back on the international working class and the perspective of international socialism. 1927 was the year in which Stalin, acting on behalf of a privileged bureaucracy that was gaining strength in the Soviet Union, consolidated his hold on the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International. The Left Opposition led by Leon Trotsky was expelled. Throughout the world Communists, while forbidden even to read the documents of the Opposition, were ordered to line up behind the campaign of slander directed against the co-leader, with Lenin, of the October Revolution.

The CPUSA in the 1920s was plagued by confused factional warfare. The Stalinist-controlled Comintern carried out bureaucratic interventions and unprincipled maneuvers to prevent a serious discussion of perspectives in the American party and installed leaders whose obedience to Moscow was unquestioned. By the end of the decade, Stalin had largely completed the task of turning the American party into a pliant tool of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Only that section of the leadership around James P. Cannon was able to overcome the debilitating factionalism that substituted organizational intrigue for political clarity. Cannon, after attending the 1928 congress of the Comintern and reading a copy of Trotsky's seminal *Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals*, which had been smuggled into the meeting, cast his lot with the Opposition and was expelled from the CPUSA in October of that year. Cannon was to become a founder and leader of the Trotskyist movement in the US, which in 1938 formed the Socialist Workers Party. Within a few months of Cannon's expulsion from the CPUSA, Jay Lovestone and his allies, who had enthusiastically carried out the purge of Cannon, were themselves purged from the American party because of their past political support for Nikolai Bukharin, the leader the Right Opposition within the USSR.

The Stalinist apparatus in the Kremlin was able to carry out its taming of the American party in large measure by appropriating the mantle of the Russian Revolution. At the same time it exploited ideological and political weaknesses within the American party and the US labor movement in general, weaknesses that took the form of national provincialism and indifference to theory.

The Stalinist credo of "socialism in one country" was used to strike a pose of optimism about the fate of the Revolution, but in reality it signified a deep skepticism about the prospects for an international revolutionary struggle of the working class to break the isolation of the Soviet Union. "Socialism in one country" rapidly became the rallying cry for those elements within the Comintern who abandoned the perspective of international socialism and substituted a nationalist program, reflecting the interests of the bureaucracy, rather than the Soviet and international working class.

This nationalist conception struck a responsive chord among forces who evinced little concern for international developments and problems of the world movement. By the time of the Great Depression, which brought new political opportunities and challenges in the US and elsewhere, the Stalinist grip on the American CP was complete. The degeneration of the Russian Revolution enormously exacerbated theoretical weaknesses of the American working class movement, preventing the American Communist Party from realizing its early potential.

Hall, who began his political life as a revolutionist, embodied many of the political weaknesses that led to the transformation of the CPUSA into a counterrevolutionary instrument of the Kremlin apparatus. Like many others, he came to identify defense of the Russian Revolution with defense of the Stalinist clique that Trotsky aptly characterized as the "gravediggers" of the Revolution.

In the 1930s and '40s Hall gradually advanced in the party leadership. Beginning in 1931 he spent two years at the Lenin Institute in Moscow. This was during the "Third Period," when the Communist International denounced Social Democracy and every other tendency in the socialist movement as "social fascism," an ultra-left orientation that blocked any struggle to unite the workers movement against the fascist danger, bolstered the position of the reformist Social Democracy, and enabled Hitler to triumph without a struggle in Germany, with catastrophic consequences for the working class and all humanity.

In the second half of the 1930s the Stalinists turned the Third Period policy on its head. Whereas reformists had earlier been labeled as fascists, now even conservative capitalist politicians were hailed as allies in the struggle against fascism, and CPs joined capitalist governments or called on workers to vote for candidates of big business. The Popular Front alliance with bourgeois liberalism, inaugurated in 1935 at what was to be the final congress of the Communist International before it was dissolved by Stalin, was implemented with particular zeal by the American CP. Earl

Browder, general secretary of the party during this period, dubbed communism “twentieth century Americanism.” The party devoted itself to fervent support of the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and gave even more enthusiastic support to Stalin's purges and the counterrevolutionary terror in which virtually all of the remaining leaders of the 1917 Revolution were framed up and executed.

The Stalinist purges coincided with diplomatic efforts by the Soviet regime to form alliances with the Western bourgeois democracies against fascist Germany. The extermination of Marxist intellectuals, workers and former party leaders was in part aimed at reassuring Moscow's would-be Western allies that they had nothing to fear from the USSR.

When the American working class embarked on the sit-down strike movement that led to 5 million workers streaming into the new CIO industrial unions in little more than a year, the American CP gave further evidence of its usefulness to capitalism by helping to keep this explosive movement tied to the Democratic Party and within the bounds of the profit system.

Hall got much of his training during this period. Working in the Steel Workers Organizing Committee in the steel centers around Warren and Niles in northeastern Ohio, he was part of the generation of young CP activists who assumed posts in the CIO unions under United Mine Workers leader John L. Lewis.

Though he led major industrial struggles at this time, Lewis was a fanatical anticommunist. His lieutenant Philip Murray, who headed the organizing campaign in steel, was a conservative Catholic unionist. Despite their hatred of socialism, Lewis and Murray entrusted the Stalinists with union posts. They were not disappointed. When the US entered World War II in alliance with the Soviet Union, CP leaders in the unions became the most vociferous advocates of “class peace,” ardently enforcing the no-strike pledge agreed to by the AFL and CIO tops. The CPUSA denounced Lewis as a “fascist agent” when he led the miners in a war-time walkout in defiance of Roosevelt.

Even as the war was ending the CP agitated for a continuation of the no-strike pledge. Its war-time role earned it the enmity of CIO militants, helping to create a political atmosphere in which the American ruling class and labor bureaucracy could, under changed conditions after the war, carry out an anticommunist witch-hunt.

The experiences between 1935 and 1945 were decisive in shaping Hall as a political figure. He was never a significant political personality, but the organizational and political skills he acquired came primarily from this period when the Stalinists played a significant role in the mass movement. For the rest of his career Hall did his best to combine a pose of home-grown American workers' leader with rigid adherence to Stalinist dogma and loyalty to his masters in Moscow.

After World War II, a major turn in US policy took place, a shift which was to determine Hall's future role. The alliance between Washington and Moscow was replaced by the Cold War, as American capitalism altered its foreign and domestic policies in line with its postwar needs.

The US continued to rely on the international Stalinist apparatus to betray the working class, and at war's end Communist parties throughout Europe either entered or supported bourgeois governments, thereby blocking the working class from carrying out a revolutionary settlement with a system that had wrought depression, fascism and military slaughter on an unprecedented scale.

At the same time American capitalism carried out its own ambitious counterrevolutionary intrigue, through the newly formed CIA as well as other agencies. It also renewed the ideological campaign against Marxism. The example of Stalin's Soviet Union, with its horrific purges, concentration camps and despotic regime, was extremely useful to world imperialism. Falsely identifying Stalinism with socialism—in accord with Stalin's own claims—enabled it to whip up anticommunism and chauvinism, while diverting attention from its own attacks on the working class.

This was the basis on which the Cold War witch-hunt was launched inside the US. The McCarthyite campaign against the Stalinists was directed against all left-wing opposition in the working class. While CP-dominated unions were expelled from the CIO, socialist trade unionists, including principled opponents of Stalinism, were hounded out of the labor movement as well.

In 1948 Hall and 11 other CP leaders were tried under the notorious Smith Act, which made “conspiracy” to advocate the overthrow of the government by “force and violence” a felony. Convicted and sentenced to five years in prison, Hall jumped bail in 1951, while the verdict was being appealed. Apprehended within a few months, his jail term was lengthened to eight years, which he served at the Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas.

The Smith Act was passed in 1940. When the Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party became the first Smith Act defendants in 1941, Hall and the rest of the Stalinists applauded their prosecution and conviction. When the same law was turned against the Stalinists, the American Trotskyists took a principled position. Without minimizing its fundamental and unbridgeable political differences with the Stalinists, the Socialist Workers Party denounced the persecution of the CP as an attack on the democratic rights of the working class, and defended the CP leaders.

While Hall was in prison in the early and mid-1950s, the crisis of Stalinism came to a head. Stalin's death in March 1953 was followed within a few months by a rebellion of angry workers in East Berlin, which was brutally suppressed by the Stalinist authorities. In 1956 Nikita Khrushchev gave his secret speech admitting many of Stalin's crimes. In October of that year the Hungarian Revolution, although soon drowned in blood by Soviet tanks, shook the Stalinist bureaucracy to its foundations.

Emerging from prison in 1957, Hall was unmoved by these great events. An unreconstructed Stalinist closely associated with veteran party leader William Z. Foster, Hall took up the battle against a group within the CP led by *Daily Worker* editor John Gates. The Gates faction, like many others before and since, distanced itself from the brutally repressive methods that constituted the modus operandi of the bureaucracy, while continuing to adhere to the nationalist perspective that was the essence of Stalinism. Equating Stalinism with Marxism, this group saw the crisis of the bureaucracy as proof that the building of a Marxist party in the working class was impossible.

Between 1956 and 1958 the majority of CP members, increasingly demoralized and lacking any clear analysis of the upheavals taking place within the Soviet bloc, simply left the party. The faction of Moscow loyalists essentially waited and picked up the pieces of the shattered organization. It was during this period of the virtual collapse of the American Communist Party that Hall took over the reins of party leadership, replacing Eugene Dennis as general secretary after accusing Dennis of insufficient loyalty to the USSR.

Over the next 40 years the American Stalinists became increasingly ossified under Hall's leadership. They remained unswerving in their support for the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy. Millions of American workers, students and youth found themselves well to the left of the misnamed Communist Party during the 1960s and 1970s. The CPUSA, or what remained of it, could always be relied upon—in the struggle for civil rights, the movement against the war in Vietnam, and upsurges of working class militancy—to prop up the AFL-CIO and the Democrats in the White House, Congress and state and local office.

The CP, in fact, has supported every Democratic candidate for US President from Roosevelt to Gore, with the single exception of the 1948 race, when it endorsed the third party campaign of Henry Wallace, the former vice president and secretary of agriculture, who ran on a platform advocating continued collaboration with the Soviet regime.

Toadying support for the trade union bureaucracy was a hallmark of Hall's tenure as CP leader. Hall's speeches and articles on the US labor movement provided a breathtaking display of opportunism. He regularly pleaded with the AFL-CIO to soften the hard-line anti-Soviet policy advocated by its late president George Meany and Meany's successor, Lane Kirkland. The Stalinists barely complained of the AFL-CIO's record of corruption, strike-breaking and anti-immigrant chauvinism, and avidly backed its support for the Democratic Party representatives of big business. All they wanted was the opportunity to serve the American trade union bureaucracy as they had before the Cold War. Hall would often hark back to the days when the "center-left" alliance of Stalinists and labor bureaucrats worked in tandem for Roosevelt.

Following the demise of the Soviet bureaucracy, Hall found a silver lining in the new opportunities to serve the AFL-CIO leadership. John Sweeney, installed as president of the labor federation five years ago, was hailed uncritically by the CP.

The CPUSA under Hall was also notorious for its servility to the Soviet bureaucracy. While other Stalinist parties found themselves obliged to criticize the Soviet regime, Hall never flinched. In the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks 44 years ago, as well as the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces 12 years later, Hall defended Moscow's repression. When the Solidarity movement erupted in Poland in 1980 Hall again attacked the working class, helping to drive what began as a largely spontaneous rebellion against Stalinism into the embrace of anticommunist forces, including the Catholic Church.

A definite class orientation and social outlook led the American CP to play a particularly despicable role, even compared to other Communist parties. From the mid-1930s on, it based itself less and less on the working class and more and more on a layer of the middle class that was impressed by the Stalinist regime in the USSR. Even when the CP had great influence inside the CIO, its authority was based largely on alliances at the top of the unions, and not on the rank and file. This made it much easier for the CIO bureaucracy to purge the Stalinists in the late 1940s.

The CPUSA, after decades of apparent internal stability based upon an aging and dwindling membership, finally erupted after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. A number of prominent figures who had worked alongside Gus Hall, in some cases for decades—among them historian Herbert Aptheker, activist Angela Davis and journalist Carl Bloice—left the party to form a small and largely stillborn organization called The Committees of Correspondence.

There were no fundamental differences between the two groupings on the issues of support to the Democrats and the trade union bureaucracy. They both rested on and defended the nationalist line of Stalinism. As soon as the Moscow connection disappeared, however, a belated echo of the "Euro-Communist" tendency surfaced inside the tiny American CP.

Euro-Communism, pioneered by the Italian CP and other European Stalinist parties a quarter century ago, sought to turn these parties in the direction of Social Democracy, openly renouncing support for Marxism and the original goals of the Russian Revolution. Hall would have no part of this Social Democratic drift, however.

His answer to critics was to extol the isolated and backward regime in North Korea, calling it a model for the international working class. The breakup of the American CP into these warring but equally bankrupt and opportunist factions demonstrated quite clearly the historical dead end of Stalinism. One group espoused Social Democratic reformism just as the failure of this trend was being exhibited more clearly than ever. The other group, led by Hall, nostalgically defended the Stalinist brand of national reformism, even after the collapse of the once-powerful Soviet apparatus on which it had been based.

The past decade brought other awkward moments for Hall, in the form of revelations of financial support from Moscow to the American party amounting to millions of dollars. This development was seized on by right-wing commentators to argue that the American CP was nothing but a nest of spies.

As far as the anticommunists are concerned, any collaboration between workers internationally is a crime. But while Kremlin subsidies to the American CP did not prove that the American party was simply the "agent of a foreign power," it did highlight the corruption of Stalinism.

In the early days of the Communist International, the CPs around the world fought to defend the first workers state by conducting the struggle for socialism in their own countries, thus concretely aiding the embattled Revolution in Russia. Gus Hall's financial arrangements, however, had nothing to do with aiding the working class in the USSR. The money from Moscow showed that after decades of defending the indefensible, the American CP became dependent for its continued existence to no small degree on cash doled out by the regime it served politically.

The response to the death of Gus Hall in the media is of some significance. The *New York Times* printed a nearly full-page obituary of the sort reserved for the most important political figures. This was followed by an editorial marking Hall's death. In contrast, the 1974 death of James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism, one of the founders of the American CP and a major figure in the American workers movement for more than six decades, was given the most cursory treatment.

Hall's political career was nothing much to speak of, but the *Times* felt it necessary to note the services rendered by him and his party. Its obituary was a way of recognizing the role of the Communist Party in sabotaging the construction of a genuine socialist leadership in the American working class.

Above all, the spokesmen and ideologues of capitalism value Hall's role in perpetuating the lie that Stalinism equals socialism, which in turn forms the basis for their claim that the collapse of Stalinism signifies the collapse of socialism. These considerations were reflected in the title of the *Times* editorial, which dubbed Hall "America's Bolshevik."

In reality, Hall lost any connection to Bolshevism and Marxism many decades before he died. An article written by James P. Cannon almost 50 years ago summed up Hall's role quite accurately. Cannon called Stalinism "the supreme example in all history of a labor bureaucracy swollen to monstrous proportions," and declared it "the most misunderstood phenomenon of our time." He wrote: "Most ludicrous of all is the widespread impression that these representatives of reaction and stranglers of revolutions are secretly plotting revolution on a world-wide scale."

"The proletarian revolutionist is one thing and the Stalinist functionary is another," explained Cannon, describing Hall and his colleagues. "They are not only different in their aims and purposes. There is a profound difference in their mentalities and in their methods of expressing them. The revolutionist is a democrat, organizing opposition to the power of the present day, and striving to create a new power of the people. The functionary is merely a bureaucrat, always and everywhere serving an existing power. The revolutionist trusts the masses because they are the makers of revolutions. The bureaucrat fears them for the same reason. The bureaucrat gives orders like a policeman. The revolutionist tries to explain things like a teacher. The bureaucrat lies to the people. The revolutionist believes the truth will make them free, and tells it" (James P. Cannon, "The Revolutionist and the Bureaucrat," first published in *The Militant*, August 20, 1954; reprinted in *Notebook of An Agitator*, Pathfinder, pp. 238-41).

Gus Hall began his political life when the October 1917 Revolution was still young, and many millions of workers looked to it as a beacon for the future. When his career ended more than 70 years later he had become a symbol of all that Stalinism had done to debase the cause of socialism. New generations of workers and young people will learn from Hall's life by rejecting the prostration before bureaucracy and "existing power" that

he came to represent.