Chapter 2

The Fight for Legality

By 1921, the Bolsheviks had held onto power, but at a tremendous cost: a destructive civil war and an economy in shambles amid isolation and backwardness. This highlighted the importance of world revolution for the Bolsheviks who believed no ultimate solution within Russia itself was possible. Yet the wave of European revolution after the Bolshevik Revolution had receded, the capitalist system had stabilised, and the traditional trade-union and social-democratic leaders of the working class had begun to recover from the fiasco of the war. Of all the revolutions in 1919–20, only the Bolsheviks survived victorious. For the Bolsheviks, the situation underscored the need for the Communist International to codify the lessons of the October Revolution and impart them to its sections.

The ‘Theses’ adopted at the Third Congress of the Communist International of 22 June to 12 July 1921 declared that since the Second Congress a year earlier, ‘a series of working-class uprisings and battles have resulted in partial defeats’. They envisioned ‘a long period of revolutionary struggle’ because ‘the world revolution is developing even more slowly than expected’. This was particularly due to the treachery of the ‘strong workers organisations and workers parties, namely the social-democratic parties and trade unions, which were created by the proletariat to fight the bourgeoisie’, but which had turned into ‘organs of counter-revolutionary influence that ensnared the proletariat and are continuing to hold it in their grip’. The theme of the Third Congress was that member parties needed to gain influence in the working class, and win workers to Communist leadership away from social democracy.¹

Most Communist Parties were not up to the task. In a letter to Zinoviev, Lenin observed that ‘none of the Communist Parties anywhere have yet won the majority of the working class, not only regards organisational leadership, but to the principle of communism’. Thus, ‘the tactics of the Communist International should be based on a systematic drive to win the majority of the working class, first and foremost within the old trade unions’. As part of this, the newly formed Communist Parties needed to assimilate the lessons of the Bolsheviks’ struggles to forge a revolutionary party before the Revolution, as well as the lessons from the Revolution itself. Throughout this period, Lenin polemicated against what he labelled revolutionary impatience, or the belief

that a small party could take power without working-class support. One solution Lenin developed was the 'united front', a tactic of winning rank-and-file workers in mass social-democratic organisations, through proposing and carrying out joint actions.²

Many European workers were pro-socialist, and tactics such as the united front aimed to win them to Communism by demonstrating leadership of day-to-day economic and political struggles, often of a defensive character, for partial demands. That most American workers were not socialists did not stop American Communists from impatiently advocating revolution. In the summer of 1920, for example, workers went on strike at the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company, demanding a closed shop, an eight-hour day, higher wages and better schedules. The CPA issued a leaflet that demanded: ‘Broaden and deepen your strike. Make it a political strike. Get ready for armed revolution to overthrow the Capitalist Government and create a Workers Government—as your brothers did in Russia. Stop asking merely for a little more wages’.³

Communists and the ‘Red Scare’

This leaflet highlighted the Communists’ problems in intervening in the labour movement. The fundamental concern in implementing the lessons of the Third Congress was the question of illegality. The American Communist movement was born amid increased political repression. This had begun during the war, and intensified in the face of the revolutionary wave abroad begun by the Bolshevik Revolution. A series of real or attempted bombings in the spring of 1919, including of the house of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, gave the government an excuse to wage war on radicals and immigrants. By that fall, the nascent Bureau of Investigation (predecessor of the Federal Bureau of Investigation) had files on some 60,000 suspected radicals. On 7 November 1919 (the second anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution), the first ‘Palmer raid’ was carried out against the leftist Union of Russian Workers in Lower Manhattan and other cities. More than 250 were arrested. In December, 249 suspect radical aliens, including the anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, were deported to Soviet Russia aboard the Buford. While the Department of Justice took the lead, the Supreme Court, state and local police, and US Military