

# A COMMUNIST IN CITY HALL

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## WINNIPEG'S CENTENNIAL: LOOKING BACK

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by BRIAN McKILLOP

The official crest of the City of Winnipeg contains two symbols: a cluster of three sheaves of wheat and a steam locomotive. Even three decades into the twentieth century these accurately reflected the basic economic makeup of the city. It was, first and foremost, a farmer's market. That the City Hall on Main Street was constructed adjacent to the Market Square was a direct reflection of this. Secondly, it was a centre in which manufactured goods were produced and distributed to the vast western Canadian hinterland. When the Great Depression struck Canada in the autumn of 1929, Winnipeg was hit with a particular vengeance in these two basic areas. By the fall of 1930 wheat was being sold on the Liverpool market at the lowest price since the seventeenth century. The 1928 wheat crop had been a bumper 566,000,000 bushels; by 1937 it would be only 156,000,000. Tractor purchases in the prairie provinces declined from 14,557 in 1929 to 762 in 1933. The gross value of manufactured products in Winnipeg fell between 1929 and 1932 from \$109.3 million to \$56 million. Eaton's mail order slumped from \$22,027,000 of business in 1930 to \$17,139,000 by 1932. Between 1931 and 1936 there was a decline of 26.34% in the earnings of Winnipeg workers, with the result that Federal income tax assessments declined by 35% in the six year period from 1929 to 1934. There was a bitter irony, indeed, in the

"HAPPY NEW YEAR" message of one of the cartoon strips carried by the *Manitoba Free Press* of January 1, 1929: "May the best you've had be/The worst you'll get—/May '29 be your best year yet!"

By the 1930s the character and the tone of Winnipeg's political life had long been set. The city, like the province itself, was the product of two waves of immigration: the first mainly Anglo-Saxon, British, and Ontarian from roughly 1870 to 1890, and the second, predominantly eastern European, from 1890 to 1914. The result was that the city developed a "we-they" dichotomy both spatially and in its prevailing political ethos. Winnipeg had been built around a railroad and a river, and the coming of this second, "different" set of immigrants dictated that henceforth there would be a "wrong" side of the tracks and a "right" side of the river. Never was this "we-they" division between the city's Anglo-Saxon founders and leaders and the "Strangers within our Gates" (to use J. S. Woodsworth's pregnant phrase) more forcefully revealed than during the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike and its aftermath. The effect of the Strike on civic politics in Winnipeg was to provide a legitimacy for the "we-they" ethnic assumptions that had always been a part of the political life of the province. On the eve of the Laurier boom in Manitoba, an ex-Mayor of Winnipeg had addressed a colonization convention in the city: "We can do well for the settler, and we want the men who can and will do well for them-

selves, and the state." But he felt obliged to issue a qualification: "Let the right class come, let us be careful to get only the right kind. . . ." The circumstances of May and June of 1919 simply confirmed for many citizens of Winnipeg the wisdom of such statements. The events of the Strike guaranteed, too, that for Winnipeg's bourgeoisie civic political life would be a politics of fear, with the spectre of the Strike never very far removed from the tedium of the average City Council meeting. Each year during the civic election campaign the dominant "Citizens" coalition on City Council emphasized the danger of ever again allowing "left-wing extremists" to obtain control of the city. For nearly the next half century the Rite of the Strike was as predictable an event in Winnipeg autumns as the inevitable warnings of frost. "[T]here is only one issue in this election," declared incumbent Mayor Charles F. Gray during the civic campaign of 1919: "whether the city is to be governed by the British traditions of law, order and equity, or by one class who [are] fanatics." The *Manitoba Free Press* editorial that quoted him was entitled, significantly, "The Second Round of the Strike."

The effect of the Great Depression upon civic political life in Winnipeg was to add economic crisis to ideological division. From 1929 to 1935, the objections of those on City Council who dared to challenge the economic orthodoxy of the "Citizens" majority—an orthodoxy which consistently during the '30s placed greater priority on paying the city's bonded debt than considering any increase in the level of relief for the destitute—were dismissed as the rhetorical flourishes of men who did not have the

responsibility of putting such visionary schemes into actual practice. But if this was literally quite true, it was equally the case that political responsibility seemed to some to breed social callousness. Whereas the Independent Labour Party candidate for mayor in 1933, John Queen, could cry that his platform was "summed up in these words: 'The life and well being of men, women and children is the only thing that counts,'" Mayor Webb could retort that there were only two clearcut issues in the campaign: "Whether we are going to carry on to the best of our ability in caring for the credit of our city, or whether we are going to take a false step and suffer the consequences."<sup>1</sup>

By 1934, civic politics in Winnipeg had reached a state of total polarization between "Socialist" and "Citizens" factions on City Council. In the 1933 election (to determine the make-up of the 1934 Council) Ralph Webb had defeated John Queen by 9,000 votes; but of the eighteen aldermen elected in the city's three wards, nine were members of the "Citizens" coalition and nine were "Socialists" of one stripe or another. Seven were members of the I.L.P., one was an independent Labour man (a former I.L.P. member who had the habit of voting the "wrong" way on occasion), and another was a communist. For the first time in the history of the city, aldermen representing labour had an equal voice with those elected as representatives of the "best interests" of the community. The explosive potential of the equal ideological balance on council during 1934 was only exacerbated by the fact that costs of relief in the city were reaching crisis proportions. Statistics for 1933 were later to show that the cost of relief



REAR VIEW OF MARKET SQUARE AND CITY HALL, WINNIPEG. UNDATED.

—Photo courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada

to the city had been over three and a half million dollars for the year, with almost forty-four thousand people on relief in April alone.

Quarrels on City Council during 1934 centred around one issue and two personalities. The issue was, as one might expect, relief for the unemployed. The personalities were those of Ralph Webb and Jacob Penner. It must have seemed to some that Webb had been Mayor forever. He had won the office whenever he had asked for it: in 1924, 1925, 1926, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, and 1933. A veteran of the Great War, after which he had emigrated to Winnipeg, Webb appealed to many of Winnipeg's voters because he epitomized the "Concerned Citizen": he was brave (his wooden leg testified to that), he had initiative and drive (within a few years of arriving in Winnipeg he had become manager of the Marlborough Hotel, was a prominent member of the Board of Trade, a major investor in real estate and securities, an executive of the Rotary Club, and organizer of the local tourist bureau, and—since he was the ideal "returned soldier"—was in great demand at Legion dinners and club luncheons). He was outspoken, prominent, respected, and successful. His choice of investments made him wealthy, and his choice of service club engagements made him Mayor.

Penner, on the other hand, was the perfect example of the Stranger within the city's gates. A revolutionary while in his native Russia, he had followed the dictates of his orthodox Marxism-Leninism through the various rifts and squabbles that had characterized radical labour organizations in Canada: from membership in the Socialist Party of Canada in 1906 to the Social Democratic Party of Canada in 1908 and ultimately—in the early 1920s—to enlistment in the ranks of the Community Party of Canada. He was to remain one of the national leaders of the party until his death in 1965. On City Council, Penner was not to be deterred from his attacks on what he regarded as a typical Capitalist unconcern for humanity on the part of the Citizens' faction. He charged that the city, by providing names to the Federal Government, was deporting "undesirables" without cause and on a wholesale scale to avoid increased relief costs. Webb denied the accusations categorically despite the fact that evidence was provided by others on Council in support of Penner's charge. Penner also objected to a Council decision (Mayor Webb had the deciding vote) to prohibit men on relief from picketing, and won a reversal at a meeting from which several "Citizens'" members were absent. But his greatest victory occurred when—due to the absence of the Mayor and another "Citizens'" alderman—he was able to cast the deciding vote in a motion that provided for a 20% increase in the entire food value of each relief schedule. Later, however, when the measure was brought before the Special Committee on Unemployment, Mayor Webb used his Chairman's vote to cause the "reconsideration" of the bill. Ultimately a compromise was struck that allowed for an increase varying from 6 to 9% in the relief schedules. Such, in general, was the course of civic politics within the sanctum of Winnipeg City Hall in 1934.

But Winnipeg civic political life did not end when City Council meetings were adjourned. Nor did the ideological quarrels of Webb and Penner. Nor did the politics of fear. In the Council Chambers and committee rooms of the City Hall the defenders of sound credit and liberal democracy were generally successful against sustained "attacks" from the socialists and the lone communist. The division lists generally attested to that. But during each of the Council's weekly Monday night meetings the din of shouting men half a block to the south-west frequently pierced the relative tranquility of the Chambers. The voices rose from the Market Square, the meeting place of Labour agitators from before the turn of the century.

It was in the Market Square during the early twenties that communist organizers had sold their wares. Located in the central manufacturing and textile core of the city, ten minutes' walk from Portage and Main, the same distance from the C.P.R. depot, a brisk twenty-minute tramp from the central relief depot on Tecumseh, and a stone's throw from the federal government soup-kitchens around the corner on Elgin, the Square was an ideal place for workers of the United Front to attempt to gain adherents and organize their followers against the "bosses" or the forces of fascism which they saw emerging at every turn. The fact that Jacob Penner had been a leader of activities on the Market Square did little to ease the tensions both inside and outside the Council Chambers.

## "Send Them Back to Russia, The Country of Their Dreams"

Mayor Webb's attitudes toward Labour and especially Left-wing "extremists" were well known. He had been conducting a one-man, nationwide campaign against "bolshies" since 1930. In 1931 he had written a confidential letter to the Prime Minister in his capacity as Mayor asking for federal legislation which would make it possible "to deal with these agitators in the way they should be dealt with, and that is,—to speak roughly,—'Send them back to Russia, the country of their dreams,' because their own countries do not need them; I am quite sure of that, and I am perfectly sure we do not need them." Two months later he telegraphed the Prime Minister: "LET US DEPORT ALL COMMUNISTIC AGITATORS STOP IF WE HAVE NOT THE LAWS NOW CANNOT WE OBTAIN THEM THIS SESSION." Similar letters were sent to various cabinet ministers. In a letter to the Minister of Immigration and Colonization, he provided a list of fifteen men who had gone to visit Russia from Winnipeg and asked if their return could not be prevented. Writing to the Minister of Labour, he defended the Western Packer's interests against Communist charges of unfair wages and work-

ing conditions. "I am sure you must realize," he concluded, that:

It is nothing short of ridiculous that such an organization should be permitted to carry on here in Winnipeg, pulling strikes almost every day of the week. Their whole policy is simply Bolshevistic, *dictated from Moscow* [underlined in the original] in an endeavor not to help the workers, but to create such conditions as will lead to further unemployment, misery, and (what they hope for) revolution amongst the workers.

Webb's attitude reflected not only his intense hostility to all things "bolshevik," but also his deep-seated fear of all things radical—whatever their sources. For the concerned Citizen of Winnipeg, the occurrence of particularly severe community stress meant the looming of the spectre of the Strike before his eyes. Phoenix-like in its reappearance from the ashes of 1919, the image of the Strike still conjured up all kinds of green-faced bogeymen and the troubles of the moment could once again be blamed upon "bolsheviks, anarchists and thugs." On June 21, 1919, the day of the Higgins Avenue Riot, the *Manitoba Free Press* reported claimed to have seen "[l]ittle groups of green-faced men struggling steadily southward along Main Street." All was not lost, however, for in the opposite direction he saw "[t]he British element [coming] swiftly. . . ." The Strike was ever-present during the winter years in Winnipeg.

To a large extent the position of Ralph Webb, as Mayor of the City of Winnipeg and *ex-officio* head of the Police Commission, was justified. Did the "PURPOSE" of the organization which had elected Jacob Penner not boldly state that all politicians elected under its banner were "to fight for the defense and improvement of the conditions of the working class, mobilizing and organizing the Canadian workers for the final overthrow of capitalism and for the establishment of a Revolutionary Workers' Government?" Did it not further avow that it was under the control of Moscow, being "the CANADIAN SECTION OF THE RED INTERNATIONAL OF LABOR UNIONS, pledged to a programme and policy of revolutionary struggle for the complete overthrow of capitalism . . . and the setting up of the State Power of the Workers? . . ." Had the recent trial of Tim Buck and his co-agitators in Ontario not proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Communists were advocating the wanton use of "force and violence" in Canada? Was all this not just plain subversion, calculated (as Mayor Webb's colleague at the provincial level, Attorney-General Bill Major, was to put it) to threaten "that British civilization which is the basis of our national life?" Was it not therefore an insult to City Council, to the electors of Winnipeg, and a disgrace to Canada's democratic British institutions to have a man like Penner—who even spoke with a Russian accent—sitting on Council?

Fears of revolutionaries, bolsheviks, and anarchists were not confined solely to the ranks of over-wrought politicians at the civic and provincial levels. The Vigilant [sic] Committee of

Winnipeg, writing to the Premier "For the Cause of Freedom," felt it their duty to warn of the dangers of the Communist menace. "Not content with having gained control over many units of the Trade Unions . . . they have turned their attention to the children of our Country, and at present are using their printing press to turn out literature to poison the minds of our boys and girls. . . . The ambition of the Communist Party, is that they may involve our Country in Civil War, and Bloodshed. . . ." The Empire Loyalists of Winnipeg wrote to the Attorney General of the province warning him of the insidious content of a poem that was part of a Communist-inspired pamphlet sent anonymously to an eleven year old school girl at Erikson Manitoba:

take them your paltry christ  
your gentleman god  
we want the carpenter's son  
with his saw and hod  
we want the man who loved the poor and  
oppressed  
but hated the rich man and kind  
and the scribe and priest  
we want the gallilean  
who knew cross and rod  
it is your good taste  
who prefers this bastard god

Mr. George Ashe, of Makinak, Manitoba, wrote to his Premier to discharge his duty as a citizen of Manitoba and a loyal member of the British Empire after he read that the Premier was about to receive a delegation of communists. "I trust that you will not give them any Encouragement . . ." he counselled. "I think that our governments both Federal and Provincial are too lenient with the foreign trash." Mr. Ashe had been in Manitoba since 1880 and felt strongly that since he and his generation had suffered many privations on the Manitoba frontier and had never sought "charity," dole should not be handed out to immigrants without their working for it. "These peasants are *pandered to Entirely* too much by the Governments and Railways they get [sic] jobs on Railway Work that Should in Justice be given to Canadians and English Speaking people. . . . And then at Every opportunity they trample our Flag Shoot our Police burn our Schools," he added. For Mr. Ashe, the pleas which had been made in the past to "take these People to your bosoms and assimilate them Make [sic] them good Canadians" was simply "Sunday School Clap trap:"

We were to assimilate them the Lousy Pock Marked Murdering Balkan peasants, which means lower our morals our Standard of living to deject [sic] them, and raise theirs. . . .

Now you have them in the Shape of "Reds." They will be backed up by your labor members and they will want your Job and Salary and Everything else as well.

If you keep Such people in the Country, disfranchise [sic] them, and when Spring Comes Give Each Man ad Woman a Hoe, and a bag of potatoes, and tell them to do as the old timers did "Root Hog or Die"

... Enough for such Cattle to let them Stay in our country provided they wash themselves and keep our Laws and Stay Where we Can't Smell them.

Letters such as these, penned in varying degrees of extremist rhetoric, were received frequently by the major political figures in the province—especially William Major (the Attorney-General), Mayor Webb and Premier Bracken.<sup>4</sup> Such letters and warnings were given greater credibility when read in conjunction with official police reports which were, in some cases, no less extreme.

Much of this reporting was stereotypic. One undercover agent wrote: "Description of man named Friedman, alias Frieda, manager and organizer of the Junior Communistic Association: Tall, broad shoulders, very straight bearing, swinging walk, dark hair, round fresh face with big fat nose, wearing dark overcoat without hat—a typical Jew." ("Synopsis of Reports on Communistic Activities Commencing May 5, 1931" (8 pp.), Special File, "Communist Activity, 1931-36.")

In May of 1931, for example, one undercover agent reported to the Attorney-General's department that "the Headquarters of the Communistic Party have worked out a plan for conquering the city." The report had been based upon unverified rumours that the local Communists had somehow obtained thirty machine guns. By whatever means, the police operative had somehow learned of their three point plan to capture the city. First they would unexpectedly attack the Bank of Montreal at the corner of Portage and Main. (By attacking this particular branch it was thought they would be able to control the two main arteries of the city as well as much of its wealth.) Then they would attack the Minto Street Barracks. It was believed that the Communists thought there were three machine guns therein, and that they could capture these and the Barracks by "a small party with a truck". Finally, after the bank and barracks had been successfully taken, the utilities would quickly follow: Telephones, Telegraphs, Post Office, Railroad Stations. "The first thing to do", the operative added, "will be to free all prisoners and arm them. The banks must be cleaned up and cash hidden somewhere in case of failure. A suggestion has been made to export all cash from the banks to Russia."

The organization is divided into Groups A and B. Group A is the leading one. Members of Group B cannot attend the meetings of Group A. Everything there is done secretly. Group B is the fighting group, its command being entrusted to military professionals. It is sub-divided into artillerists, machine gunners and bombers, and its members attend courses in order to get acquainted theoretically with the technic [*sic*] of warfare. They study the system of attacking the enemy and war operations in general. This is to be future commanding staff of the "Red Guards of Canada". The Party has arms, but only Group A, the senior group, takes charge of them. Group B, though the military group, knows neither where nor how

many there are . . . . There is a special scouting division watching the city and protecting the secret meetings against spies. The commander of Group B once said at a meeting that "when the time for open fighting comes, the enemy will not even dream of the means for the fight over which he have disposal." The Party has quite a few members of Group B in the Canadian Army in order to demoralize the soldiers and to persuade them either to stay inactive or join the Bolsheviks when the open fight begins. This has not always been the main system of the Bolsheviks.

#### Winnipeg Nazis Are Feeling Blue

—By Avrom



**THE COMMUNIST VIEW OF THE 1934 CLASH ON THE WINNIPEG MARKET SQUARE.** From *The Worker*, June 23, 1934, p. 6. Photo courtesy of the National Library of Canada.

Extreme reactions on the part of politicians after reading such reports, coupled with the incessant problems of trying to cope with industrial unrest spurred on by Workers' Unity League-led strikes and walkouts and revolutionary rhetoric emanating from the Market Square virtually every evening, added to the impatience with which civic and provincial leaders regarded labour in general and the W.U.L. and its leaders in particular. And added to this was the increasing pressure from the local business community for authorities to quell the disturbances being wrought upon an already shaken industrial sector. In July of 1931, after a particular violent riot of the unemployed in Winnipeg, the Employers' Association of Manitoba had sent a wire to many prominent Ottawa officials. "ENCLOSING COPY OF NINE CLAUSE RESOLUTION PASSED BY EMPLOYERS ASSOCIATION OF MANITOBA REPRESENTING MAJORITY OF EMPLOYING INTERESTS IN PROVINCE". These resolutions, passed at the association's annual meeting, were, in abbreviated form, as follows:

- (1) Enlarging the authority of the Police within the Department of Justice in dealing with Communist Groups throughout Canada. . . .
- (2) Strengthen the Immigration Laws. . . .

- (3) Amend Naturalization Laws. . . .
- (4) Cancel Naturalization Certificates of Communists. . . .
- (5) Deny re-entry into Canada of an alien Communist who has visited Russia to secure training in Communistic Doctrines. . .
- (6) Amend Postal Laws to declare non-mailable all newspapers, and propaganda advocating Revolutionary Communism. . . .
- (7) Amend Laws prohibiting transportation of foregoing periodicals. . . .
- (8) Prosecute Communists or Publishers for spreading false rumours for the purpose of causing discontent among workers. . . .
- (9) Declare illegal any Communist Party who advocates the overthrow of our form of Government by force or violence.

Mayor Webb's actions and words were in fact representative of an important section of the community which was becoming increasingly impatient with "foreign rabble" disturbing the peace and hindering the efficient administration of government and industry. What irked this segment of the community even more was the grating irony that those who seemed to be causing the greatest social and industrial unrest, those in the North End, were the very people who constituted the vast majority of those on relief and who then had the nerve to object because they were not receiving enough! It bothered and frightened them, too, that many of these same people, the apparent cause of much of the relief burden, had so little respect for the flag and institutions which helped to sustain them.

Communist celebrations each May Day, parading *en masse* down Main Street and Portage Avenue, simply added to their distrust. Each year during the depression several thousand people—men, women, and children—could be seen waving red flags defiantly and singing Eugene Pottier's "The Internationale":

Arise, ye prisoners of starvation!  
 Arise, ye wretched of the earth,  
 For justice thunders condemnation,  
 A better world's in birth.  
 No more tradition's chains shall bind us,  
 Arise, ye slaves; no more in thrall!  
 The earth shall rise on new foundations,  
 We have been naught, we shall be all.

#### REFRAIN:

'Tis the final conflict,  
 Let each stand in his place,  
 The International Soviet  
 Shall be the human race.

Southward down Main Street past the statue of Queen Victoria in front of the City Hall they would march, their red flags waving in the north breeze. "*No more tradition's chains shall bind us*". Down towards Portage and Main, past the towering Grain Exchange. "*We want no condescending saviors, / To rule us from a judgement hall*". Rounding the corner, heading west down Portage Avenue, they would pass one of the oldest securities firms in the city on their left, and on their right they would see the massive Bank

of Montreal building. "*The rich are free from obligations. . . .*" And finally they would turn off Portage Avenue down Memorial Boulevard and come to a halt on the steps of the Legislative buildings, just behind another statue of Queen Victoria. Their words, loud and defiant, would echo from the limestone walls and columns:

Toilers from shop and fields united,  
 The union we of all who work,  
 The earth belongs to us, the workers  
 No room here for the shirk  
 How many on our flesh have fattened!  
 But if the noisome birds of prey  
 Shall vanish from the sky some morning,  
 The blessed sunlight still will stay.

They would then return to the Market Square, from where they had come, for an evening of demonstrations and speeches delivered from the platforms of flatbed trucks. Afterwards there was left only the walk to the soup kitchen on Elgin or to the Tecumseh Avenue relief station for their two weeks' supply of vouchers.

## Brownshirts and bolsheviks

While Mayor Webb did what he could to discredit Penner and the Communists in the Council chambers, another group in the city was actively organizing to stamp out Bolsheviks in its own way. The Canadian Nationalist Party, organized by William Whittaker, had been meeting regularly to discuss the "Communist menace" and what to do about it. Although they claimed to be concerned only with ridding Winnipeg of a subversive and dangerous element, there is reason to believe that the group's motivations were deeper than those of over-zealous "one hundred percenters". At a meeting in the Transcona Legion Hall, for example, Whittaker wore his regular uniform, consisting of "knee boots, riding breeches, a brown shirt, black tie and a swastika sign and a beaver on the arm". (The beaver, presumably, represented the Canadian content of the Whittaker group.) Nor is there any reason to believe that the group's apparent affinity for European fascism was unduly exaggerated by the Communist newspaper reports. Early in 1934 John Queen warned of the militant nature of the organization. Speaking in the provincial legislature, where he was the I.L.P. representative of a west-end Winnipeg constituency, he produced its membership card on which, he said, "the new recruit was asked to state whether he could instruct in the use of rifles, machine guns, Lewis guns and other lethal weapons." In his speech he declared that the party should be "suppressed as dangerous to liberty"; that material turned over to the Attorney-General of Manitoba by Winnipeg Police contained "Books and papers that . . . revealed seditious conspiracy"; that a translation of an official Nazi paper "said that the brown shirt organization in Canada was anti-semitic, aimed at overthrow of the government, abolish-

ing the provincial government, and the setting up of a strong central government."

City authorities were therefore confronted with two extremist factions. Webb was put into the awkward position of having to prevent clashes between the two groups, while having made pronouncements identical to the declared objective, if not the means, of the Nationalists: to get rid of Communism. His first attempt to avoid clashes between the "brownshirts" and the "bolshheviks" was the cancellation in March of a W.U.L. meeting slated for the Dominion Theatre. He had done so at the request of Whittaker who had told him that "he could not control his followers and feared there would be trouble if the meeting were held." Webb's announcement of the Police Commission's decision brought a headed and vigorous condemnation by Penner in a Council meeting that was to last for and a half hours. Placing himself in the position of a defender of free speech, Penner maintained that if the Nationalists were threatening to disrupt the meeting, then Whittaker should be arrested. The very meeting which had been cancelled, Penner went on, was to have discussed the menace of fascism: "The greatest danger facing us today is Fascism. It brings the approach of war very close to our doors . . . and all know what Fascism has meant in Europe to the voting classes."

Webb became infuriated at Penner's pronouncements and left the Chair in order to speak his mind. "[Y]our organization has been going around cursing everybody," he declared, "telling everybody what they were going to do. . . . You have had four years of it and longer. Your organization does a lot of threatening. It has threatened in the market place time and again and it has threatened in the city hall . . . . We cannot make fish of one and fowl of another. Law and order are going to be enforced and I hope you will exert an influence on your own

people to keep them within the law." The Communist national newspaper, *The Worker*, as usual, made excellent use of this opportunity. "This is the most direct blow that has been struck at the working class so far in Winnipeg. If we allow this to stick, the last vestige of 'Free Speech and Assembly' is gone, all because Whittaker goes to Webb and demands it." The lesson to be learned from Webb's action was therefore plain: "This must serve to arouse every worker in Canada to the efforts of the Webbs to rally their cowardly, gang-murdering brother brown shirts to a sadistic bloody orgy. The Winnipeg workers may be depended upon to stamp this degenerate 'brown shirt' menace out of existence." Its Winnipeg readers learned their lesson well. On the evening when the Dominion Theatre W.U.L. meeting was to have taken place, they met in a North End hall and, led by Penner, organized the Anti-Fascist League of Winnipeg—which would prepare for the battle they knew was inevitable drawing nearer.

While both groups organized, debate continued in the provincial Legislature as to which faction was the more dangerous. The Attorney-General saw no distinction, having declared earlier that both were "cut from the same cloth." At that time he had warned that the authorities would be willing to deal at a moment's notice with those who "by artificial propaganda, by demagoguery or malicious fabrication seek to create hatred or rancor against any group of the population." A few days later, Mayor Webb, who also represented Assiniboia in the provincial Legislative Assembly, ended the debate on the Speech from the Throne by making clear who the "real enemies" were:

People would be astonished if they learned how much was going out of Winnipeg every



MAY DAY PARADE THROUGH A DOWNTOWN WINNIPEG STREET, 1933.

From *The Worker*, May 27, 1933, P. 4. Photo courtesy of the National Library of Canada.

week for the needy of Russia. . . . Let us say to Mr. Bennett from this Legislature, that in view of extraordinary ramifications of the Communist organization in this province, that an ultimatum should be delivered to all those who don't like this country, giving them thirty days to go back to the country where they came from, and that if after thirty days they were still here then they would be deported. Some people are liable to think this a joke, but you don't know what I know what I know or see.

Marcus Hyman, Winnipeg-born and educated on a Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford, felt, however, that there was a basic difference between the two groups. The Nationalists, the I.L.P. member maintained, were nothing less than "racketeers", in that they distributed handbills at their meetings "asserting in 'an inverted way' that 'a certain group' in the population desired to kill everyone else. They 'preached inverted violence'."

Shortly thereafter, Hyman introduced a motion before the Law Amendments Committee which called for the name of the printer and publisher to be attached to every printed advertisement, circular, poster and handbill. Hyman's motion was made mainly to prevent the spread of anti-semitic propaganda. But it was attacked by the ever-vigilant *Worker*, which saw only one more sign of creeping social fascism on the part of the I.L.P. deputy leader:

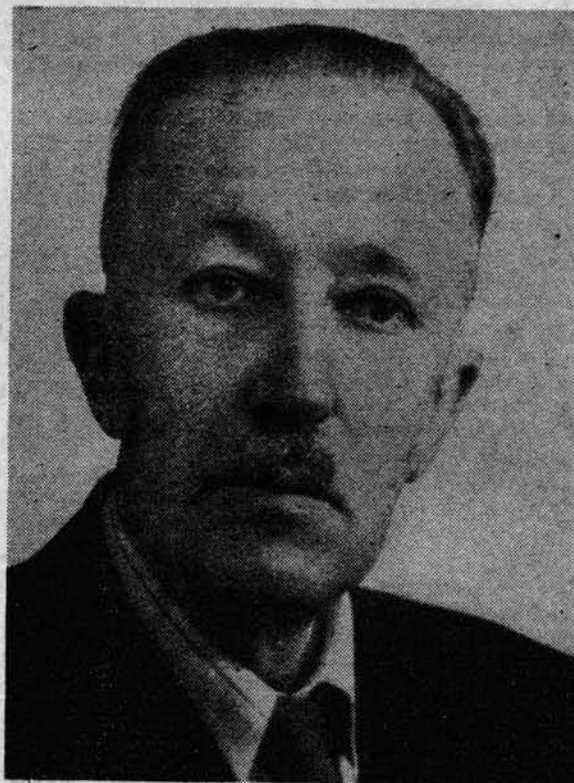
The social fascists, like Hyman, are assisting the open fascists, like Mayor Webb, in their attacks on the working class. Coming at a time when the workers are issuing a large amount of printed material in connection with the repeal of Section 98, the investigation into the shooting at Tim Buck, the numerous strike struggles, etc., it is a direct attempt to deprive the workers of this weapon of struggle.

## A Communist On Council

While carrying on his regular duties on Council as member of the Improvements and Safety (standing) committees, Jacob Penner—who from the moment he first entered public office in 1934 ceased to work at any other occupation—spoke regularly at Anti-Fascist League meetings, gave lessons that he had gleaned from Lenin's *What Is to be Done?* to members of the Young Pioneers (the Communist children's movement), and exhorted the unemployed from the platforms of farm trucks parked on the Market Square. When speaking on the need for employment at one such meeting of 300 unemployed he found several men who had been cut off relief, and the men marched together to the government soup kitchen. The grievance committee spoke directly with the head of the Single Men's Relief Department and seven men were eventually granted temporary relief.

This was the essence of Penner's consistent support in the north ward of the city. He was close to his constituents and he provided them with service. Michael Harris (Hrushka before anglicization), a *Winnipeg Free Press* labour and ethnic reporter for many years, later recalled that during the depression:

[t]he working people had a lot of problems with the City Council and they couldn't get anywhere. Some aldermen wouldn't say anything, wouldn't do anything, or had no time—they always had some excuse, but when they see Penner, well he never refused a single one: a request to him to do something whether it was their homes or their jobs or



JACOB PENNER

anything like that that they needed City Hall assistance.

To give an indication of how Penner was regarded by his constituents, Harris recalled a meeting of the Ukrainian Conservative Party which he had covered as a reporter:

And at this meeting one fellow complained that he appeared at the City Council with a problem . . . and what he wanted was something important for his family and his home and all that and the president of this Conservative group says: "Why don't you go and see Jake Penner? Jake Penner will do anything you want if it is at all possible". And I was surprised at—here he was a Conservative man was advising him to see Jake Penner to help him and his problems:

Harris also remembered a conversation he had with a "Ukrainian Leftist" in the Pritchard Avenue Ukrainian Labour Temple. ". . . I said,

'John, how is it that the Communist candidates get such a heavy vote in North Winnipeg? There is not that many Communists in this constituency, in this area—you know that.' . . . 'Of course not', he says, 'the people from St. Vladimir Cathedral, from St. Nicholas Church from all these places, they go and vote Penner because he is their friend; he helps them. Not anybody else' . . . [H]e was elected by these people . . . and he put all his time and efforts to help them as much as it was possible for one alderman to do it. And the people, as this man told me, they're Catholics, and they're Orthodox and they're Protestants and of every different religion and of different political views—they supported him as an alderman because he gave them service. He was their man. . . . He just helped a man because he needed help."

As the spring of 1934 melted into early summer the W.U.L. increased their industrial and labour activities. By the end of the year it would be officially "credited" with controlling eight industrial unions in Winnipeg, (mainly in the needle trades) and its influence permeated others. (*The Party Organizer*, a handbook published by the Central Organization Department of the Communist Party of Canada (1931), had stressed the importance of the "THE ROOTING IN OF THE PARTY AMONG THE WORKERS IN THE SHOPS".) W.U.L. labour agitators agitated in the Market Square each day of the week and crowds were growing. The question of "free speech" raised earlier by Penner on Council was kept alive when the Police Commission, chaired by Mayor Webb, refused a permit for the annual May Day parade. Penner objected strenuously on Council to this sign of what he regarded as incipient fascism, and Webb responded with what a reporter for one of the Winnipeg dailies called "a characteristic attack against individuals and organizations which attempt to disrupt the good government of Canada." A coalition of Left and Right-wing aldermen forced Webb to ask the Police Commission to reconsider their decision, but not before Webb advised Penner that he should "lead his people back into the spirit that brought them to Canada. . . . If they didn't like Canada let them go back to Russia, the paradise they talked so much about. . . . The [Workers'] Unity League was not an organization which should expect rights and privileges."

Ultimately, however, the parade was permitted. Somewhere between 4,500 and 6,000 people, led by Alderman Penner and School Trustee Andrew Bileski, marched. The parade took 23 minutes to pass any single point. Later in the evening a crowd estimated by *The Worker* correspondent at "well over 8,000" met on the Market Square. Penner and Bileski were the featured speakers.

Other issues raised by Penner both in and out of Council kept civic politics in a state of ideological ferment: the acquittal of nine members of the Nationalist Party by Magistrate Graham; support of strikers of the needle trades against the firm of Jacob and Crowley; support of the actions of the W.U.L.-spurred Flin Flon miners; similar support for Parkhill Bedding strikers and the employees of Western Packers. In the

latter, a particularly violent and bitter struggle, Penner carried the battle into the Council Chambers when he demanded a motion of censure against the firm for "paying wages below the subsistence level." The motion was declared out of order by the Mayor on the grounds that he was "investigating" conditions in the plant. An even more vigorous debate occurred a few weeks later, when Penner attempted to gather support on Council for reversing a Police Commission decision banning the play, "Eight Men Speak". The play, a dramatization of the philosophies of the eight communists imprisoned in Kingston since 1931, had already been banned in Ontario, although no charges had been laid there. Penner failed to receive the I.L.P. support for his motion. Five days later, a meeting protesting the ban was held on the Market Square. Attended by 2,000 people, it was addressed by Oscar Ryan (co-author), E. J. McMurray, a prominent criminal lawyer, and Joseph Zuken (the play's Winnipeg director), who, decades later, would sit in Jacob Penner's seat on City Council. Penner was chairman. But the ban against "Eight Men Speak" remained.

## Violence in the Market Square

Temperatures had been rising for a considerable time, both inside and outside City Hall, when the regular weekly meeting began at 7:45 p.m. on Tuesday June 5. I.L.P. aldermen had been frustrated by Webb and the Civic Election Committee ("Citizens") aldermen for months in their attempts to raise the level of relief and loosen the Finance Committee's purse strings. They had been hindered, too, by the militancy of United Front workers in their efforts to reach reasonable agreements at strike conciliation meetings. Webb and C.E.C. aldermen felt harassed by the "economically unrealistic" demands of I.L.P. aldermen and were simply annoyed by the indignant crusades of Penner. And the United Front alderman was impatient with the lot of them for their constant obstruction at every turn.

The level of noise emanating from the Market Square that evening was unusually high, increasing the air of impatience and general irritation in the Chamber. Soon after the meeting had begun, a clerk entered the chambers with the news that a riot had erupted in the Market Square. One man had been stabbed and several others were injured and the ruckus was not yet over. Alderman Barry, remembering only too vividly the abuses he had suffered at the hands of communist "troublemakers" during the 1933 civic election, then launched into a vigorous attack, charging that the Communists did nothing but "foment race hatred". Penner was ready with an equally vitriolic defence, but as he began Barry jumped up, his fists thrashing the air: "I won't sit still and hear you say that. I've heard you at the Norquay School tell your followers to go out and fight the Nationalists. And you come here like a hypocrite and talk like this. If an innocent man got stabbed in the Market Square

tonight you're responsible, you snake in the grass." After tempers had cooled somewhat, Council put a final stop to the "Eight Men Speak" question by defeating 9 to 7 the Penner motion which would have censured police authorities.

The battle which at that moment was occurring outside during the Council meeting was later acknowledged to have been the largest and most violent outbreak since the days of the 1919 strike. The Nationalist Party had scheduled a mass meeting for the Square that evening at 8:00 p.m., but when they arrived they had found 2,000 W.U.L. supporters already massed and singing the "Red Flag" and "The Internationale" while Young Communists League members sold Communist literature. This was the meeting for which the Communists had been preparing at their Anti-Fascist meetings. As Nationalist Party members, greatly outnumbered by the Communists, gradually were pushed back towards the walls of the surrounding buildings a scuffle broke out. Soon members of each side were pushing and shoving the other. Since the communist forces were universally acknowledged as the victors, perhaps their own observer should be allowed to describe the scene that then followed:

... the fascist leaders gave their usual signal, by the blowing of a whistle and the fascists hooligans drew from their pockets and from beneath their shirts, blackjacks, knuckle dusters with knifelike points, pieces of hose-pipe loaded with lead (one taken from them weighed over nine pounds, a lethal weapon), lead piping and lashes of stranded wire threaded with knife-edged steel ribbon.

Not to be intimidated by such a base display of brute force, the soldiers of the Internationale took the offensive:

The workers... led by the disciplined ranks of the Anti-Fascist League members, who are by now showing tactical ability as a result of their mass physical culture classes, retaliated en masse, and laid the fascists low, with

cracked heads, and with faces covered in blood. . . . During the fight, fascist leader Whittaker, late organizer of the Ku Klux Klan, arrived near the scene in an automobile with a body-guard of four 'storm troops'. The five of them unloaded, but when Whittaker saw his 'fascist Christian heroes' being routed, he leaped back into the auto deserting not only his followers who were on the Square, but being in such a hurry to save his rat's hide, also deserted completely his own special body-guard.

## Plus Ca Change

The clash between Communist and Nationalist forces on that June evening marked the high point of extremist activity on the Market Square in the summer of 1934. There would be more skirmishes there in the future. The Nationalists would soon demand the resignation of Attorney-General Major because of his refusal to arrest the leader of the Anti-Fascist League, Jacob Penner, but the Canadian Nationalist Party never again attempted any show of strength in Winnipeg. Penner himself was only beginning his career as an alderman in 1934; and that career would end only in the 1960s. By the end of 1934 Ralph Webb had completed his career as a civic politician. He did not run for the mayorly in 1934. One of the results of this was that in the autumn of 1934 the citizens of Winnipeg elected a Socialist Mayor: John Queen. Queen's career would end only after the Second World War was beginning to shift the attention of the world from depression to apocalypse. Meanwhile, with rumours in the Council Chambers and in the Board Rooms that John Queen might once again run for Mayor, and others that Mayor Webb might not, summer in Winnipeg passed into early fall, September into October. Civic election time was once again drawing near, and it would soon be time for the Rite of the Strike to take its usual place in the autumnal political life of the city.

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