

THE LIFE AND LIES OF PAUL CROUCH



**COMMUNIST,
OPPORTUNIST,
COLD WAR SNITCH**

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3**“PAUL CROUCH, BOLSHEVIK,”
1927–1932**

Free from prison and a true believer in Communism, Crouch accepted his party card and became a full-fledged member of the Workers (Communist) Party of America upon his release in June 1927. He would spend the next fourteen years as an active Communist organizer, deftly following the ever changing party line and surviving amidst a nation that continued to view Communism as un-American and dangerous. During the first five years of his active Communist life, he traveled nationwide, spoke about his experiences in Hawaii, visited Russia to witness the glories of the first socialist state, and spent brief periods in New York City, Massachusetts, Delaware, Virginia, and North Carolina trying to expand the party’s membership. Although Crouch would face his moments of doubt, his faith in Communism got him through the darkest hours and confirmed his ideological fervor.

Upon leaving prison and formally affirming his membership in the WPA, Crouch joined an organization in turmoil. The two parties that formed in the aftermath of the 1919 foundational meeting in Chicago eventually unified, at the behest of the Comintern, and in 1921 organized as the Workers Party of America, which in 1925 became the Workers (Communist) Party of America. Although unified, sectarianism remained a problem. Within the party two groups predominated, corresponding to the struggles in Russia to succeed Lenin, who died in January 1924. Charles Ruthenberg and Jay Lovestone led one faction, which allied itself with Nikolai Bukharin, while William Z. Foster and James Cannon supported Stalin. This division and the factional struggle played out during the rest of the decade, with the Foster group emerging victorious thanks to Stalin’s victory in the Soviet Union, but in the meanwhile it distracted party leaders.

There were other problems as well. In 1923 the Communist Party boasted some 15,000 members. Of that number, however, only 5,000 spoke English and only 46 percent were members of trade unions. Believing that both issues were hindering the party's efforts, in 1925 leaders announced a program of "Bolshevization," which aimed at creating the vanguard of which Lenin had written. By demanding ever more from members, focusing more on trade union efforts, and expanding the American base of the movement, party leaders hoped to create a highly trained and skilled phalanx that could better seize power. The excessive organizational demands this campaign made on party members, however, decimated the membership rolls, with numbers falling from 16,325 at the start of the year to 7,213 in October. When Crouch formally joined the WPA in June 1927, membership remained below 9,000. Worse still, there were few African American members, females comprised less than 20 percent of the membership, and the party remained geographically centralized in the urban, industrial Northeast and Midwest.¹

There was one final problem as well. As the Soviet leaders came to realize that the worldwide revolution they had expected was not imminent, they announced the aforementioned Second Period—the era of capitalist stabilization—and the subsequent need to expand party membership, to find willing allies, and to defend the Soviet Union. In the United States, that led the party to end calls for revolution and instead to focus on reforms for the betterment of the working class. As Jay Lovestone explained: "We might talk ourselves blue in the face about our holy cause, about the wonders of Communism, about the necessity for shouldering guns against capitalism and yet not enhance the revolution by an iota. But let us talk to the workers about their long hours, their disemployment, their hardships and the why and wherefore of these, and they will be ready listeners and doers."² Although such talk previously was disparaged as "economism" by none other than Lenin, who believed a focus on reforms within the existing system was anathema to the revolutionary nature of Marxism, by the time Crouch took his party card it was established policy.

Historians Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, however, assert that "this tactic inherently had a large element of subterfuge to it." As they explain it: "immediate demands would win support for Communists from the masses of workers. This support would give Communists

power; power in trade unions and power in politics. Communists would then use this power to advance the revolutionary cause by whatever means were expedient.” The element of subterfuge came from the fact that “only the initiated Communist party members knew the ultimate intentions.”³ This too caused the party problems. Although the new, and seemingly more benign, Communist Party won new followers to the cause with their calls for reform, when members learned of the truly revolutionary agenda they fled.

Thus, the Communist Party in the 1920s was young, small, faction ridden, unsure of its founding principles, and willing to lie to win converts and power. Despite those problems, Crouch jumped in enthusiastically. He did so for many of the same reasons that the four individuals mentioned in the introduction joined. First, he had few friends and sought out the camaraderie of the party. Rarely in his massive archival collection does he mention any close acquaintances, with the exception of James Larkin Pearson who was his cousin and his elder by twenty-five years. His parents were older when he was born, the family moved frequently, and Crouch seems to have been unable to establish close relationships. As such, the Communist Party was a perfect place for him to enjoy personal associations that he had never before appreciated. Crouch also clearly saw the world as endangered. His early literary efforts attest to that, and his association with socialists in Delaware seems to have urged him to the Communist cause. That he had already suffered for the movement, for his efforts in Hawaii, further confirmed to him that the cause was just. Crouch also enjoyed the notoriety that came with being a Communist; he had published a number of works while in prison and seemed to relish seeing his name in print. Indeed, his personal archival collection includes a mass of clippings and newspaper stories about him. Regardless of the nature of the reporting—positive or negative—Crouch loved the exposure, and being a Communist in the 1920s was a good way to ensure such coverage. Finally, although Crouch liked to think himself an intellectual, he had only a minimal education and was not nearly as smart as he claimed. As such, joining an organization that told members what to think and believe makes sense. Although Communist ideology is complex, the average member simply needed to learn and be able to parrot the party line. Crouch was willing to do so and in the process could feel intelligent without having to think for himself.

He received some unexpected support for his new endeavor from James Larkin Pearson, who fulfilled Crouch's request and published a short article about him not long after his release. Entitled "Paul Crouch, Bolshevik," the poet first described Crouch's father as an old-time school teacher with a "long patriarchal white beard and a benevolent, not to say saintly, countenance. Paul's mother is a woman of more than average intelligence, with a quick and natural temperament." Of Crouch he wrote that although he received little formal education, he had rounded up enough knowledge to challenge college professors and had developed enough writing skills to mark him out as a "rising literary star." Unlike many young men, Crouch did not drink, smoke, chew tobacco, or use profanity and was uninterested in sports or gossip. Instead, he focused on "the bed-rock problems of existence." Pearson further asserted "that he was a dreamer and idealist [who] could not be doubted for a minute," although he acknowledged that "'practical minded' folks would have said that he was 'nutty.'" Pearson concluded his assessment by asserting that Crouch was "a creature of destiny, with a mission which must claim his whole attention. He must solve the problems of the world. He must save society from the effects of its own folly. He must live and die for his cause."⁴In a later remembrance, Pearson added that "instead of knowing how far to go and when to stop, Paul Crouch made a beeline for the reddest thing he see [*sic*], and never stopped until he landed with both feet in the camp of the Russian Bolsheviks."⁵

Pearson was more correct than he knew. Crouch indeed was a dreamer and an idealist, although those ideals shifted over time. He also certainly headed for the "reddest thing" he could find, believed himself a literary figure, and clearly viewed his mission in life as one to save mankind from itself. Similarly, many throughout the years would describe him as "nutty." By contrast, the idea that he "could not be doubted for a minute" was about as far from the truth as possible. Crouch had only an imperfect relationship with reality, and at times one wonders whether he knew what the truth was. All of this will become apparent, and at the time he left prison not even Crouch knew where his future lay. For the moment, all he knew was that his present was with the Communists.

After a short rest in California to recuperate from his years in prison, Crouch agreed to go on a nationwide tour for the Communist affiliated All-America Anti-Imperialist League. On July 18, 1927, his comrades in California gathered to celebrate Crouch's freedom and his forthcoming

trip. An invitation for the event informed people that the tour upon which he was about to embark had been delayed by illness, which was the result of “the cruel military prison regime where he spent his three year sentence.”⁶ Now recovered, the party celebrated his return to health and the beginning of his new career.

After the fête, Crouch embarked from Los Angeles and spoke formally in Detroit, Cleveland, Toledo, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Scranton, Baltimore, New Haven, New York, and Boston, as well as in countless small towns in between, under the slogan: “Bring back all American military and naval forces from foreign territory!” Although technically opposing imperialism, Crouch focused his talks on the horrors of military service and the abuses he and other “agents of imperialism” suffered. He urged soldiers and workers to fight against American militarism and the capitalist desire for another war, and he argued that the only way to prevent such a war was through a class-conscious alliance of soldiers and workers. According to the press, countless soldiers and former soldiers complained that Crouch actually understated the horrors of military life and after the speeches regaled him with their own stories. According to Crouch, it was not merely soldiers who supported him; while in Plentywood, Montana, in the extreme northeastern part of the state, he discovered that “the sheriff and most of the county officials” were Communist sympathizers and came out in support of his speech.⁷

While in Chicago in the midst of the tour, he sent a letter to James Larkin Pearson in which he updated his itinerary and offered his assessment of the Communist Party’s future in the American South. He told Pearson that he was anxious to reach Southern workers but feared that “for religious reasons, it would be very difficult to organize the Workers Communist Party in the South.” He continued on this ir-religion bent by criticizing Pearson for the religious nature of many of his poems: “Personally, I think the religious ideas expressed in many of your poems does [*sic*] more harm to the success of your work than everything else. Ninety-nine per cent of the THINKING WORLD today is militantly anti-religious; and even one religious poem would make them throw aside the book in disgust. To fight for religion in intellectual circles today is about as practical as to defend Evolution in Tennessee.”⁸ In a subsequent letter Crouch asserted that he rejected religion because there was no scientific basis to it. He argued that scientific advances had necessitated changes in religion that religion had failed to make. As a

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Figure 1. Paul Crouch pictured in his military uniform during his 1927 nationwide tour. Courtesy of the James Larkin Pearson Library, Learning Resources Center, Wilkes Community College, Wilkesboro, N.C.