Chapter Nine

The 1950s

The Fabulous Fifties was the decade of the American dream: the detached house in suburbia, the double garage, the white-walled tires, electric washing machine, dryer, automatic dishwasher, supermarket, television, and the teenager. Jack Kerouac published his first novel and the "beat generation" was born — misfits who would not play the conventional role in this consumer society. Marilyn Monroe became the sex symbol of the new era. Raymond Chandler's last novel, *The Long Goodbye* was published in 1953. Elvis Presley swept the popular music scene in 1956. Rocky Graziano and Tony Zale fought it out for the middle weight crown until both were beaten by Sugar Ray Robinson, pound for pound the best fighter in the history of boxing, or so the pundits say. While a new decade brought new beginnings for some and great prospects for many, for Bill Walsh, the Communist Party, and the United Electrical Workers it was an ordeal, a continuous struggle for survival and all of the internal tensions and stress that brings.

In January 1950, scientist Klaus Fuchs was charged with passing information on the atomic bomb to the Russians. The hunt immediately proceeded for Fuch's alleged American accomplices. Fuch's evidence led to Harry Gold and to David Greenglass, a machinist in the atom bomb centre at Los Alamos. Gold fingered his sister, Esther Rosenberg, and her husband Julius. That weekend, Senator Joe McCarthy spoke to a ladies' club in Wheeling, West Virginia, holding up a piece of paper which he claimed was a list of 205 people who were known to the Secretary of State as members of the Communist Party, but were "still working and shaping the policy of the State Department." The witch hunt got serious, especially in wake of the Korean War which started in June 1950.

The "Hollywood Ten," a group of writers and directors who had refused to testify before the House of Un-American Activities Committee back in 1947, were sentenced to fines and imprisonment. Hundreds of actors, actresses, writers, and directors were blacklisted. In Canada, the National
Film Board was purged of anyone suspected of having "left-wing" sympathies.

Paul Robeson, the great Afro-American singer and actor had his passport cancelled because, the US State Department said, he made speeches in foreign countries which did not reflect "a prevalent American view." In early 1952 Robeson, not allowed to cross the Canadian border to attend a Mine-Mill convention in Vancouver, sang from the American side of the border to an audience of 40,000 people gathered on the Canadian side of the International Peace Arch.

Meanwhile, communist unions continued to face problems from the CCL. "Desire for unity does not require us to retain within our ranks ... traitors to our nation who have given themselves over, body and soul to the totalitarian philosophy of Communism," intoned CCL chief Aaron Mosher, opening debate on the UE’s final appeal against expulsion at the CCL’s annual convention in September 1950. Like other Communist-led unions, the UE would remain in exile for 25 years, and be subjected to relentless raiding. For a while the main attack came from Millard’s Steelworkers, with Millard assigning dozens of paid organizers to take over UE locals in Ontario and Québec. Hamilton was a lesser hunting ground for would-be raiders but they still occupied a lot of the attention of Bill Walsh and the UE staff.

In February 1956, Esther Walsh gave birth to a baby girl, named Sheri Joanne. Joe for Esther’s father and Anne for Anne Weir. Within a year the Walsh family moved up the mountain to a home on David Street, away from the fumes and soot of the eastend. With the birth of the new baby, the family worked better, and had a new bond. The presence of Sheri also brought more structure to their lives. Meals were scheduled; soon they began to take regular vacations. Not that Bill Walsh gave up his seven-day week. The family would always take second place to the class struggle.

Alderman Bill Walsh

The city of Hamilton had always been something of a radical centre, with Communists and progressive CCFers like Sam Lawrence sitting in City Hall. But the politics of the Cold War came into play here too. In 1950 Peter Dunlop was defeated in Ward Six, the traditional Communist seat. When the alderman that beat him unexpectedly died in 1951, City Council should have followed precedence and appointed Dunlop in the interim. Instead, it appointed third-in-line Don Ellis, using as an excuse that Dunlop was away taking holidays in Scotland. Ellis, the perennial CCF candidate and New Dealer in the Westinghouse shops, immediately used his seat in City Council to launch a campaign against the UE. As the November civic
elections approached, the Hamilton Party executive decided that Bill Walsh would stand the best chance of winning back Ward Six. Walsh was not happy with the decision and spoke against it, but in the end, he went along.

"I never had an interest in running for political office," he asserted. "My preferred field has always been organizing workers and I shunned most anything that took me away from that. For instance, except for the Party's Trade Union Commission, I never sat on any national Party committees and I turned down nominations to the Central Committee. Of course, I sat on the Hamilton Party executive, but that was different since a lot of what we did was related to the UE. At the time I was up to my ears in union work and I thought it might be hurtful to the union to be so openly identified." Running as an Independent Labour candidate rather than under the Party banner, he was still subject to smear tactics. He lost the 1951 election but agreed to take another crack at it a year later. This time around he decided to focus on one main issue: lowering property taxes on small homeowners. In his final pre-election radio broadcast, he promised that at his first meeting in City Hall he would make a motion to take a large part of the tax burden off home owners.

Enough voters overlooked the red-baiting this time to vote him in. And he fulfilled his promise, moving a motion at his first meeting to set up a committee to examine the possibility of exempting small owners from paying a portion of the general property tax. The motion went down to defeat seventeen to three with only Sam Lawrence and his cousin, Alderman David Lawrence supporting it. All of his motions suffered similar results, including a motion to build 500 low rental housing units and another to allow public meetings in the parks. "Not only did 10,000 striking workers hold open-air meetings in Woodland Park in 1946," he intoned, "but King John was presented with the Magna Carta in the open air in 1215, and William Lyon Mackenzie organized men in open fields to fight the Family Compact in 1837."

Civic politics took time he did not have. He conceded that some of the issues had political importance, but "whether fire alarm boxes and hydrants are painted with luminous paint or not is not exactly a burning question." He was convinced that the hours spent each week on Council business could be better spent on union work or other Party work. A large part of his political work, and even more so that of Esther, was to establish and build a Hamilton branch of the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case. Esther Walsh identified deeply with the Rosenbergs since her sons were just a little older than Robert and Michael Rosenberg, who were about to be orphaned. Few events in the Cold War so polarized public opinion as did the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. While they had stoutly maintained their innocence, the jury found them both guilty of
espionage and they were sentenced to death. Execution was set for January 1953. Thousands of citizens in Paris, Rome, London, New York, and Ottawa demonstrated in support of the Rosenbergs, and Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Jean-Paul Sartre and even Pope Pius xii joined the campaign to commute the death sentence. Since at worst the Rosenbergs had spied for the Soviets while they were still allies with the US, the death sentence seemed inappropriate. This was especially so for Ethel Rosenberg, as the evidence against her was much weaker than it was against her husband. It was suspected at the time, and since confirmed, that the government was using the sentence against Ethel to wring a last minute confession of guilt from Julius. Several times, desperate legal manoeuvres succeeded in delaying the execution. Until the end there was still hope that the new President, Dwight Eisenhower, might commute the death sentence. Such was not to be the case.

On 5 March 1953, Stalin died. The Party went into mourning. In response, Tim Buck spoke in Toronto's Massey Hall:

"From Cape Breton to Vancouver, to the oppressed Negro people of Africa, to liberated China and embattled Korea, Viet Nam and Malaya, to the peoples of the many nations of Europe and of North and South America — everywhere, working men and women paused in their labours, grief stricken by the tragic news that came from Moscow. Without any question, Stalin was the greatest man of our age ... the man of his epoch ... History will recognize this epoch as the Stalin Epoch."

J.B. Salsberg interrupted the proceedings of the Ontario Legislature to say “I am confident that the calumnies which were directed for so long against Stalin will, as time goes on, sink into oblivion and the figure of Stalin will emerge and remain in history as one of the greatest among the great of all times.” Only three years later Salsberg would lead the exodus from the Communist Party in the wake of the Nikita Kruhchev revelations.

Wallace-Barnes

In the midst of these events, as well as hosting a Labour Unity Conference of all the unions purged from the Congress of Labour, and fulfilling his aldermanic term, Bill Walsh headed into a new round of negotiations with Westinghouse. According to Walsh, UE leaders believed that they could risk a strike at the Hamilton Westinghouse plant only if the life of the union depended on it. “We could survive the loss of any of our smaller plants, but if we lost our largest General Electric plant or our largest Westinghouse
plant, we could hardly lay claim to be the union of the industry and in no time at all we would picked apart by the other unions looking to destroy us. We estimated that our whole union would be on the line. So we developed a knack of being able to use every ounce of strength of Westinghouse workers without actually taking them out on strike. The company was aware of our problem, but it could never be absolutely sure, and neither could we. You can carry it to the point where you can't hold the workers back."

In the midst of drawn out negotiations with Westinghouse's new director of personnel, Jake Henley, a strike broke out at nearby Wallace-Barnes, an auto spring company employing 300 workers organized by Walsh a few years earlier. Back then the company had been shocked to lose its workers to a union, let alone the United Electrical Workers. The shock hadn't worn off before the first collective agreement was signed. Having gathered the three toughest anti-union lawyers in the business — David Lloyd George Jones, Norman Mathews, and Donald Pile — it was fully armed for negotiations. "It's likely that if we didn't have this big problem of not wanting to take on Westinghouse," Walsh explained, "we might have found some kind of compromise. Of course, it wasn't as if the conditions at Wallace-Barnes didn't justify a strike. But a conscious part of our tactic of striking at Wallace-Barnes was to show Westinghouse that this union wasn't afraid to take on a strike."

The Wallace-Barnes strike broke out toward the end of June. Before long the company brought in scabs including some workers who had joined a rival union led by Oliver Hodges, who was also the president of the Hamilton Labour Council at the time. With the union fighting to keep out the scabs, the company sought an injunction which drastically restricted the number of picketers allowed on the picket line to four per gate. "The fight was very, very bitter. We ignored the injunction and our people were being arrested," Walsh observed. "We had lots of Westinghouse workers come down to mass picket lines before reporting to work. 'Remember their fight is our fight,' I wrote in our daily bulletin. 'And that's the understatement of the year,' I said to myself. We were building quite a sentiment in the Hamilton area for all out support to fight the injunction. Wives and children came out, including Esther and Johnny and Mike."

"Among the first people arrested was Ed Pritchard, a very popular Westinghouse steward with a big family and a sick wife. While others got a $25.00 fine, Pritchard got seven days and the pink slip from Westinghouse. The foundry crew was enraged and was all set to go on a wildcat strike to force the company to rehire him. Of course I reported this development to the national officers because it could lead to the result we were desperate to avoid. They told me that we couldn't afford the risk, 'Speak with Henley,' they said, 'anything but a wildcat.' " "I protested. 'How can I speak with the
company representatives? This union makes no private deals. We've always said that.' Jackson didn't like that. 'You always want to be the good guy,' he said. 'There's no moral question here. It's strictly one of survival. We can't afford the risk of a wild-cat. It could spread. You know that as well as anyone. Go see Henley. If he won't back down we'll find Pritchard a job someplace else.' I went to see Henley. There was no wildcat. It went to arbitration."

The Wallace-Barnes strike went on until December, lasting 24 weeks in all. It turned out to be one of the longest strikes in Hamilton history. Complicating the strike was the presence of Millard's protegé, Oliver Hodges. In 1949 he had been hired by the Congress and loaned to the rival IUE in the Hamilton area. Hodges saw the Wallace-Barnes strike as a golden opportunity to conduct a raid against the UE. Meanwhile, as president of the Hamilton District Labour Council he did what he could to limit broad support for the strike. Nevertheless, money and support poured in from unions in Hamilton and throughout Ontario. In the end it was not enough. "Bugs Bucking" Buckingham, president of the US company, was determined to keep the company open and to break the union at any cost. He succeeded.

But as far as UE was concerned, it was a worthwhile sacrifice. Walsh argued:

We showed Westinghouse and any other company that might take us to a strike, that they would pay a pretty penny, including the loss of a lot of their skilled work force. You could say we were fighting Westinghouse on the Wallace Barnes picket line. We were very conscious of that although for obvious reasons we couldn't allow the impression to be created that Wallace Barnes' workers were being used as pawns. I was uncomfortable with this situation, but I have to say that I went along with it completely. After all, I had been a military guy. I knew that to advance or hold on in certain fronts you sometimes had to sacrifice on other fronts. From that point of view it achieved its goal. For a number of years after there were still no strikes at Westinghouse and yet we were able to achieve reasonably good settlements.

In the midst of the Wallace-Barnes strike, the Liberal government called a federal election. It was a sweep for the Liberals. The large slate of LPP candidates collected a paltry 62,000 votes between them. And in November, still weeks before the Wallace Barnes strike wound down, Walsh sensed another defeat as Hamilton municipal elections rolled around. Between negotiating the Westinghouse settlement, coordinating the Wallace-Barnes strike, and performing his other union duties he knew he did not have the time to carry on a winning effort, especially with David Lloyd George Jones, "the patron saint of union busting," joining the other side to defeat him.
Information from his RCMP file, a copy of which was acquired by Jones, was liberally used to smear his name. On 19 November an unsigned leaflet, one of many, appeared in the doorways of Ward 6 residents:

"ELECTORS OF WARD 6: FREEDOM AND LIBERTY ARE ONE AND THE SAME. VOTE TO PRESERVE WHAT OTHERS HAVE LOST."

Moscow dictates that her agents in world communication work in secret, hiding in an underground manner. Do not be deceived by the foxy stealth in trying to steal their way in. They have changed the name of their Party and even given new names to their stooges, in case the old name might taste bitter in Democratic mouths. Let us not tolerate the presence of a Communist alderman in City Hall.

Before Alderman Walsh's politics were generally known, he was elected to an aldermanic seat. Now that his identity is known, what are you going to do about this Communist at the next civic election?

When you vote, protect your freedom which has 'been so dearly bought.' Protect your Christian religion. Slavery was abolished by Abraham Lincoln. Who would wish its return but the emissaries of the devil!

The Communist candidate in your ward is William Walsh, formerly Moishe Wolofsky. VOTE FOR A DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE AND THANK GOD YOU STILL CAN.

Walsh fought back with leaflets of his own, but it was not enough. In any event, loss of the seat was something of a relief for him. 1953 had been a trying and exhausting year that also included more ulcer problems. Aside from the internal squabbles with Jackson, which were becoming something of a regularity, the smear campaign was unsettling. "I never hid my Party connection," he explained, "but nobody knew about the change in name. I feared the whole thing might sound to some people like an episode from 'I was a Communist for the FBI'."

Trade Union Communist

"How was a Communist trade unionist different from any other?" I asked Walsh on more than one occasion. "At various times in my life in the Party," he'd answer, "two sides of this question would come up. The first was how do we work so that Party people get key elected positions. Well, the answer to that was simple. Communists have to be the best trade unionists. The next question was how do we show the face of the Party, how do we build
the Party in the union? The problem was that this task could conflict with the other one. How do you get to be a leader in the union if you are a known Communist? In Jackson's case, there was no problem. He was the leader before there was a union. He started the union. And aside from his own abilities, we always had the key people on staff and on the local executive who were Party members, so there was never any problem re-electing him. In any case, of the three top officers in the UE, Jackson, Russell, and Harris, George Harris was the one chosen to show the face of the Party. Not that the rest of us denied our Party membership, aside from Jackson, that is. We just didn't make a big show of it."

"What did it mean in practice to show the face of the Party? Harris was a perennial candidate in federal and provincial elections running under the Communist banner, and during a speech at UE conventions once in a while he would say something like, 'I am a member of the Communist Party.' He didn't go about espousing socialism to the members. None of us did. And George didn't actively recruit guys into the CP. Nor did the rest of us. I suppose I did some, but most of those that came in did so at their own initiative. There were only about 25 or 35 UE members ever in the Party at any one time, although there were many more who were sympathetic."

"I always had the greatest respect for George Harris and I felt a lot of affection for him. He was a very lovable guy. He was also an excellent negotiator. He was the main negotiator at Westinghouse. I assisted him. But I used to think that in some ways he underestimated how far we could go in challenging management rights. I can remember him dismissing certain demands that members would raise at negotiating meetings. 'We can't raise that demand,' he'd say. 'Management will never give up that right. We'll never achieve that demand under capitalism. If you want to take that kind of control, then work with me to get rid of the capitalist system.' That was his way of promoting socialism. Now, he was right about some of the demands being raised, but in my view there were some that we could have achieved and some that we ultimately did achieve."

Was Walsh a trade unionist first and foremost, or first and foremost a Communist? Within Party ranks he was often criticized for protecting the union at the cost of the Party. Sam Walsh believed this to be the case. "Something happened to Bill after the internment camp and the war," he says of his brother. "He soft-pedalled the Party in the union." As for Walsh himself: "I always regarded myself as a Communist working in the trade union field." But, he added, "as a union official there were certain inhibitions about speaking as a Communist. You could promote specific policies that the Party supported and we did that all the time at conventions. And in our own discussions with individuals, which I did a lot. But you couldn't
do so as a Communist. That wasn't just me. It was the environment we were living in and it effected how all of us worked."

In an unfinished letter written to George Harris, Walsh tried to formalize the problem in a more theoretical fashion.

Put in its bare-boned terms there are two outlooks: (i) our job is to fulfil all the functions of a union for its members and families. While doing this we must do everything to perpetuate our survival and the influence of fighters for socialism who are in positions of functionaries in the union. (ii) our job is to advance the cause of fighting for socialism in every way. While doing so we will try to fulfil our function as a union seeking to perpetuate the union and expand our influence as well. From time to time I've been on both sides of this question.

Walsh's reflections were confirmed by John Eileen. During the mid-1950s, Eileen worked with him at the headquarters of the UE in Hamilton. "The UE's priority was to deal with issues of the day in the plant, not to build socialism," Eileen told me. "The leaders didn't want their politics to jeopardize their union's position. They wanted Party members on staff and on the executives and as shop stewards partly so they could help build and defend the union but also to support and sustain their own leadership. Union leaders had a lot more sway in the Party than other leaders and they would often use their influence to make sure that the Party didn't interfere in union business. For instance, Walsh was the key man inside the Hamilton Party branch. A lot of the Party activity had to do with the UE plant, and Bill's opinions on these matters were decisive. In the union he weathered the red-baiting without backing off. Whenever it became an issue he'd say that the Party was legal in Canada, that there were Communists in the UE as well as in some other unions and that he himself was a Communist Party member."

What was Walsh like to work for? "Bill liked people and he had a lot of charm," says Eileen. "He was a very hard worker and a hard task-master, but whatever was going on, he always displayed a warm sense of humour. Bill was a workaholic and a perfectionist. He would often be at the UE office until 11:30 at night, meeting with different committees or staff members or putting out a leaflet for the next day. And it had to be perfect — the grammar, the spelling, the right-hand margins. He would do it over and over again. I think it was part of his ego. He was incredibly persistent in heading up organizing drives to get every possible membership card. Once he got me to go to the wedding of an employee in a plant we were organizing to get her to sign the card!"

"In negotiations, Bill was a power house. But as a negotiator he would use reason and persuasion rather than threats and bluster. That [threats
and bluster] was more Jackson's style. And Jackson tended to run rough-shod over the members of the negotiating team, whereas Bill would allow more participation. He was always well prepared and very intense. He smoked a lot in those days and worked late, as I said. It seemed very important to him to negotiate the best agreement in the industry. He argued down every point, fought hard for every nickel. He refused to meet with the company representative alone and would never fraternize with the company even when we would be invited by them to celebrate the signing of an agreement. He was very clear about those boundaries."

As a trade unionist, Walsh rejected the entire notion of union-management cooperation, a union philosophy much in vogue in the 1990s. "I never pulled any punches on this question," Walsh related, recalling a particular negotiating session. "I said to my counterpart, 'How can we cooperate? We have antagonistic interests. It's on the basis of the work that our members do that you make your profits. We know that under this economic system we'll never get everything that's coming to us, but we are going to get every damn penny we can from you. Contrary to what you say we're not in this together, we're fighting each other. You'll say what's a fair share, and I'll say a fair share is the most that we can get.'" Admitting that some trade unionists found this a bit extreme, Walsh continued to hold this belief all through his career.

The Laverty Affair

Among Walsh's two best friends in Hamilton were old comrades-in-arms Jim Beattie from the Victoria Leather days, still a trade union activist, and Arthur Laverty, the textile organizer who had helped him out at the time of the Kitchener Rubber workers strike. The three of them were on the leading committees of the Party in the Hamilton district.

Arthur Laverty was born in Ireland just before the turn of the century. By the time he had emigrated to Canada in 1930, he had already fought in World War I, participated in Britain's historic General Strike of 1927, worked in steel and textile plants and coal mines, and was a veteran trade unionist and a socialist. He was introduced to Marxism in a Labour College back in England. "What was taught and discussed opened up a new system of thought to me," he says in his unpublished memoir. "No longer could I accept the 'will of God' as the be and end all of everything. At the end of four winters of study there wasn't a single spook left within my mental vision." When he and his family arrived in Canada, Laverty settled in Cornwall where he soon went about organizing the textile workers in the big Courtaulds plant. In 1936 he led the union through a bitter strike which
managed to win a wage increase and a functioning shop steward system, but failed to gain union recognition. In 1939, after moving his family to Hamilton, Laverty joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and served as an instructor in England. After the war, he found employment at the Slater Steel Company and was soon elected president of his union local, and became a force on the Hamilton and District Labour Council.

"Arthur and Jim were very, very close. I was almost a third one of a triumvirate, but not quite," Walsh relates. "The main reason was that these guys were drinking guys and I wasn't, at least not like them. They spent a lot of time drinking. Jim was always in hot water in the Party. He never had any gods. He even got himself kicked out of the Lenin School for fighting. Jim Beattie was as close to a perfect Communist as I knew — militant, fearless, incorruptible. In the late 1940s he upset nearly everyone when he demanded to know from Helen Anderson whether she was donating all of her pay as city controller to the Party. Much to our amazement she answered that it was none of his business. I was startled. Since when isn't it the Party's business? If you're elected to office, you turn all your pay over to the Party. Jim paid a price for such disrespect. In the Communist Party you don't question your leaders."

Laverty also had problems with the Party. One perennial problem he faced was very familiar to Bill Walsh. "As Communists," Walsh explains, "we're accountable to the Party. As union leaders we're accountable to the union executive and ultimately to the members. It can create a real dilemma." Back in 1951, a leading member of the Party, Mel Doig, showed up at Slater Steel as a rank-and-file union member. He'd been sent into Hamilton from Toronto to "colonize" the plant, something that was quite commonly done back then. Doig, as a Party leader, insisted on being consulted with on the details of a set of negotiations. Helen supported him.

"Helen," Arthur objected, "no disrespect to Mel, but what in hell does he know about negotiations? He's never worked in a shop before. He's just come to work here. I should report to him? I'm trying to get him elected as shop steward in charge of publicity. But he'll get his information like everybody else, not through a Party committee. If it ever got out that I blabbed privileged information to someone outside the union structures, I'd lose all credibility in the union."

Walsh sided with Laverty. "Here I am a leader of the UE, an elected staff person, and there are other Party people on the executive, some are shop stewards, others are just rank-and-file union members. In the union things are cleared through the executive, or they're channelled through a committee, according to union procedure. They're the property of the appropriate body." He told Anderson, "You're asking Arthur to do something he can't do. As a member of the negotiating committee he can't report to a
Party committee about union strategy. Nothing goes out of that committee except what the committee as a whole agrees will go out."

Joe Levitt was in his late 20s, a war hero, when he was sent by the Party to work in a GE plant around the same time. He ran into the same problem as Mel Doig, aggravated further by the fact that it was organized by the UE. He told me:

> It was not easy being a Party rank-and-filer in a UE shop. We were expected to put in countless hours producing shop papers, distributing leaflets, and promoting UE policies, besides processing grievances and performing all of the other duties of a shop steward. At shop steward meetings it was our responsibility to present the union position on all the matters that would come up. We weren't free to take critical positions no matter what we might think. If we had a problem on a particular issue we were expected to raise it at our plant cell meeting or our Party branch meeting. But we always got shot down there, so we learned to keep our mouth shut. Democratic centralism worked for the leadership but it was sure confining for rank-and-file Party members. We put in very long days alongside union staff and we got reamed out if we didn't tow the line. When I moved to a UAW plant it was like a breath of fresh air. We still worked like hell and met in our Party cell, but we didn't always have to be defending the union leaders and we were free to develop our own positions on shop floor issues.

When he quit the Party a few years later, Joe Levitt attended university and he went on to become a professor of History and a prolific writer of scholarly works.

Throughout his years in the Communist Party, Bill Walsh tried to get the Party and the union to each work in their appropriate spheres. "The function of the leading party committee," he believed, "was not to direct the everyday activities of the union and its leaders, but only the political activities of the union." But he had admit it was a pretty thin line, and he could not help but recall his discussions with Alf Mustin almost twenty years earlier.

In the winter of 1953 Arthur Laverty dropped a bombshell. He appeared on local television to announce that he had quit the Communist Party. "I have been a Communist Party member since the 1930s," he stated. "For years I have stood up to red-baiting in the union movement. I believe in the ideals of socialism. I always will. I will never sell out my class. But I cannot accept the stories coming out of Europe where men whose writings I had read and learned from are denounced as traitors and disappear or are tried and found guilty. I cannot claim to understand what lies behind all these arrests and confessions but I do know that there is something terribly wrong. I need some time to think these things over."
The Hamilton executive sent Helen Anderson to talk with Laverty. "He repeated essentially what he said on TV," she reported back, "but then he went further. He said that based on his experiences with the Party, if we ever had a revolution here, he would be put to the wall and shot. I said to him, 'Arthur, are you saying that I, as Party leader, would give the order to fire?' and he looked right at me and he said, 'yes, Helen, you would. You would have a tear in your eye but you would do it.' Well, that's what he said. Can you imagine? How ridiculous can he be?"

"I wondered how ridiculous it really was," Walsh said, recalling the incident. "I said to myself, 'Arthur isn't wrong. The only question is who would be first, me or him. And with me, I don't think she'd have a tear in her eye.'" Helen Anderson and he never hit it off. She may have resented the influence he exerted within the Hamilton central committee. Walsh believed she had two-timed his good friend Johnny Miller back in the late 1930s when they were living together. "It broke Johnny's heart when he discovered that she was sleeping around," Walsh observed. "I would tell myself, 'Don't be prejudiced; they're adults. Johnny can look after himself.' But I know I held it against her when I moved to Hamilton.

The catalyst springing Laverty to action was the announcement that yet another hero of earlier times had been purged from the movement. On this occasion it was Andre Marty, the French sailor who had led a mutiny on board his ship on the Black Sea, raising the red flag for the new Soviet Republic. Marty, who had subsequently become a member of the French Communist Party's political bureau, was formally accused of questioning the political leadership of the General Secretary of the Party, Maurice Thorez. According to Marty's accusers, "What happened to Tito and other spies shows how treason inevitably begins at the moment a Communist questions his unconditional loyalty to the USSR." When Marty refused to confess, the political bureau decided he also was a spy.

When Walsh sought him out a safe time later, Laverty said to him, "You'll see, Bill, pretty soon they'll be calling me a spy and a renegade, an enemy of the working class, and all the rest. That's what happens to anyone in this Party who strays from unconditional loyalty. That's why so few speak out. Why do you think I said nothing to you about this earlier? I knew you would have reported me. Even you, Bill. Look. You're the only one in the Party talking to me these days. How long will it be until you cave in? You haven't said if you agree with these purges. We held these people up to be model revolutionaries. And they were model revolutionaries. Now they turn up as spies, fascist monsters, and all the rest, and our leaders accept it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. It just don't wash, Bill. It don't wash." Walsh couldn't answer. He didn't every try.
In the local Party executive, he kept his silence, merely denying the accusation that he had been forewarned about Laverty's TV interview. In such a paranoid atmosphere of "Spy Fever," simply refusing to join in on the smearing of his friend Arthur was enough to raise questions about his own loyalty. Even to ask a question, let alone reveal doubts, would be reason enough to find himself suspected. After Laverty was elected president of the Hamilton and District Labour Council, the Party was forced to change its attitude towards him. They did, however, manage to re-establish friendly relations.

The Revelations

By mid-decade, some academic theorists were certain that the class struggle was over. The old grasping capitalism had disappeared, they said, replaced by a mixed economy and welfare state with corporations responsible not only to their shareholders, but also to their customers, their employees, the community, and the nation. It was the end of ideology. The grand consensus had been achieved. No fundamental restructuring of society was required, only fine-tuning.

No self-respecting Marxist, certainly not Bill Walsh, believed this concoction, so reminiscent of the Browder line. But whatever its weakness as a theory, for now it worked. No one could ignore the fact that for the Left the decade had been a disaster. Even the timid CCF plunged into steep decline. For the Labour Progressive Party matters were far worse. The barrage of anti-communism made the recruitment of new members almost impossible. Of the old members, some who fought overseas never rejoined. A few were disgruntled by the war-time policy of supporting the Liberals against the CCF. Still others who had joined the Party during the war out of admiration for the USSR became persuaded by anti-Soviet propaganda to quit. Virulent anti-communists among the Ukrainian and other ethnic groups received strong reinforcements from among the half-million refugees, sworn enemies of Communist Russia, who emigrated to Canada after 1945.

Fewer Party members were prepared to engage in public work arguing, with justification, that a Party member might lose his job or position if he became known as a Party member. And with the Party going nowhere, some upwardly mobile activists no longer felt that further personal or family sacrifice was justified. Between the end of 1946 and the beginning of 1956, a third of the membership either quit or drifted away from the movement. Yet Party leaders insisted on maintaining the extremely large Party machinery that included 350 full-time Party workers throughout the country. This
expensive Party apparatus placed enormous financial burdens on those remaining.

Notwithstanding all of the above, the Cold War had not totally decimated the Party. Communist influence in the trade unions was decreased dramatically, but it was never broken. Despite the harassment and the purges, Communists maintained at least a toe hold in virtually all the industrial unions and even at the lowest point in the 1950s, five Communist-led unions still represented 70,000 workers. J.B. Salsberg and A.A. McLeod held on to their seats in the Ontario legislature, and Communists were still able to get elected on some councils and school boards in the large cities. The Party was able to launch a new literary periodical in 1952, *New Frontiers*, and attracted to its pages poems and essays by the likes of Milton Acorn and George Ryga, among others. Under the slogan “PUT CANADA FIRST,” the Party showed some leadership in emphasizing the need for Canadian cultural and economic independence, and launched a campaign against American domination. In short, the post-war tailspin had probably bottomed out, and there were even signs of recovery. Then in February 1956, came the Khrushchev revelations.

Snatches of information about Khrushchev’s secret address at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR appeared in the daily press immediately following its delivery. But nothing prepared Bill Walsh and other Canadian Communists for this 17 March headline in the Toronto Globe and Mail. “RED BOSS BLASTS REIGN OF TERROR IN STALIN’S TIME.” The paper reported “Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet Communist Party Chief, accused Stalin of massacre, torture of children, and a personal reign of terror, in a sensational speech behind closed doors at last month’s Party Congress in the Kremlin, according to reports here today.”

In their own paper, the *Canadian Tribune*, Party members were treated to articles on “the Soviet Renaissance” and “Blueprint for Miracles,” written from Russia by Tim Buck, who had attended the Congress. Members were confused. Many believed that the stories being reported in the mainstream media were nothing more than the usual western propaganda. But some wrote into the *Tribune* demanding to know the facts, chastising the Party leadership for its fear of “printing the news before some authority has stamped it ‘approved’.” One sarcastically, observed: “We seem to be waiting for Tim to come home. Then we will know the answers.”

When Buck finally returned home in April, he reported to the National Executive Committee of the party (NEC) that as a fraternal delegate he had been barred from the closed session and only heard about the contents of Khrushchev’s secret speech while attending a funeral in Warsaw. The twelve members of the NEC felt stupid and humiliated. They had been waiting for this first-hand report before making a statement, and here he was telling
them that he knew no more than they. The NEC met almost daily for a month, pouring over Buck’s notes of the secret speech, earnestly trying to understand the full meaning of the revelations and its implications for the Canadian Party. While the impact within that leadership core was generally one of shock, discomfort, and consternation, at that stage there was neither a consensus on what must be done, nor a clear division.

Other than what he had read in the papers, the first Bill Walsh heard from the Party was a May Day speech given to Hamilton members by Tim Buck. Buck reviewed Stalin’s “gigantic services to socialism.” He confessed that, “the LPP accepted the cult of the great man” and that this “interfered with our political thinking” and “marred our judgment.” In Canada, the LPP would work hard to learn the lessons of these revelations — “to ensure that never again shall we succumb to the false theory of ‘the great man’.” This kind of presentation did little or nothing to clarify the issues and only raised more questions for distressed rank-and-file members.

At the May meeting of the National Executive Council, Joe Salsberg was reinstated to the Party executive. Bill, for one, had not even known that Salsberg had been removed from office two years earlier. So great had been Salsberg’s following that news of his removal had been kept from the Party rank-and-file. Stories appearing in Jewish Communist papers in Poland and New York now confirmed Salsberg’s complaints about anti-Semitic practices in the USSR. In 1952, large numbers of Jewish cultural leaders had been arrested and shot. In refusing to publicly defend the Soviet government’s position on Soviet Jewery, “J.B. Salsberg was right and the majority of the national executive was wrong,” the leadership now admitted.

On 18 June, the full text of Khrushchev’s speech, reprinted from the New York Times, finally appeared in the Canadian Tribune. Walsh could not force himself to plough through the horrifying details, and only skimmed the document. The membership at large experienced the same shock, dismay, anger, and confusion initially felt by the leadership months earlier. A small number quit the Party there and then, but at this stage the vast majority resolved to see the crisis through.

Party Traumas

A convention to deal with the future of the Party was called for March 1957. In anticipation, the Tribune kept its letter pages open, and the pages of the National Affairs Monthly were given over entirely to an unprecedented inner-Party debate. Within weeks it was out of control. Critics demanded a much looser form of relationship with Moscow — “the centre of our gravity must be Canada, not the USSR,” one wrote. No one yet advocated a severance
of ties with the CPSU but, as one contributor put it, “the time has come to speak out fearlessly and independently.” For his part, Tim Buck admitted that there was room for self-criticism in as much as the LPP in its “immaturity” had adhered too closely to Soviet policy and had itself been permeated by the Stalin “cult.” This had resulted in a breakdown of inner-party democracy, and inflexibility in some of its policies, which in turn had damaged its relationship with other “progressive” forces. He nevertheless insisted that, “the Party follow the example of the CPSU in making necessary changes while upholding the Marxist-Leninist principles of international working-class solidarity, democratic centralism, and the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Not surprisingly, Buck’s interventions did nothing to dissuade what appeared to be a growing opposition. Some demanded an end to stifling of criticism, to “dogmatism and intolerance”, and to “conceit in relations with non-Party people.” They called for a re-examination of the principle of democratic centralism, and strict guarantees of the right to dissent and debate freely. Still others argued that the Party should abandon its allegiance to the concept of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and move towards Canadian social democratic and parliamentary traditions.

In an effort to restrain the growing polarization and find a broad common ground, in August the Party dispatched four of its leaders to Moscow to evaluate how successful the CPSU had been in eradicating Stalinism. The Moscow trip failed totally. While the NEC released a predictable report following their return, expressing satisfaction with Soviet explanations and efforts, Joe Salsberg came back from the trip confirmed in his suspicion that the Soviet leadership had not moved away from its anti-Semitic past. The NEC noted only that Salsberg had “certain reservations,” which were not specified.

The debate got fiercer. The Toronto and Montréal membership, many of them Jewish, was ready to explode. A Calgary member wrote:

> There was nothing Stalin would not do in order to maintain himself in a position of prestige and glory. We also have many members in our Canadian Party whose hunger and jealousy for position and glory knows no bounds.... Under the guise of criticism we have seen sincere, modest comrades withstand a withering attack from some glory-seeking pip-squeak exercising his or her authority.”

By mid-October, restlessness in the Québec wing of the Party reached critical proportions. Tim Buck and Joe Salsberg rushed to Montréal to quell the revolt. They only succeeded in revealing the sharp differences between themselves. Montréal members were shocked by Buck’s display of dogmatism. His open hostility to any serious questioning gave the lie to his posturing about the need for real democracy in the Party. The meeting
lasted three nights. By the time it was over, the Québec provincial leader and five key organizers had resigned from the Party. Several hundred members followed. The mass exodus had begun. Within six months, membership in Québec dropped from 1,200 to 300.

At the National Executive meeting in October, the critics appeared to be in control. The NEC dispatched a telegram to Moscow criticizing Soviet interference in the internal affairs of the Polish Worker's Party, and passed a motion to remove Tim Buck from the leadership of the Canadian Party. Three days later this motion was withdrawn, but not the cable to the CPSU. A plenary session of the National Council was quickly convened to deal with the crisis in the Party.

The fate of the Party was probably determined during this thirteen-day marathon session between 28 October and 9 November. For the first time in the history of the National Council, the Party leader's report failed to get adopted, and Buck and the NEC were rebuked for failing to clarify issues for the members. The election of a new NEC gave a large majority to the Party's old guard, causing the others, including Norman Penner and Harry Binder, to resign from the committee. Binder reported that Buck followed a strategy of attacking the critics as "rotten elements" and "do-gooders" who were out to liquidate the Party. Penner blamed the election results on "fantastic rumors and charges," comparing the process to a "witch hunt." According to Penner, members of the Soviet embassy huddled in an upstairs room to guide Buck as to how far he could go to meet the demands of the opposition. At one point in the proceedings, Penner related, Norman Fried rose from his seat and, leaving the meeting, said. "The house is on fire and I'm not going to stick around to see it burn." At another point Misha Cohen, business manager of the Tribune, asked to address the Council. Long denied a seat on the Council himself, Cohen bitterly complained that several sitting members were themselves undeserving. "They talk a good game, but they're poor workers," he was reported to have said. "Norman Fried is always at the races; Mcleod, since he lost his seat at Queen's Park, walks about aimlessly; Comrade Ryerson is always sick with his headaches." In the course of his presentation, Council members sat aghast as Cohen ticked off the uncomplimentary habits of several veterans. In the midst of this chaos, Charlie Sims rushed in with the news that the Soviet Union had invaded Hungary.

News of the Soviet invasion also shattered the national convention of the UE meeting in Toronto. "We were just in the course of condemning US aggression, we're just giving them hell when we heard the news," Walsh recalled. "We called a quick meeting of our top group, the Staff Committee, to determine what we are going to do. We were in many respects the voice of the Left in Canada. CP positions used to be projected to the public
through the UE. No way are we going to condemn the Soviet Union, but we had to say something. ‘Crazy bastards,’ I wisecracked, ‘couldn’t they have waited until our convention is over. The least they could do is consult with us about their timing.’ This episode made me very uncomfortable.”

With the Party convention scheduled to take place in six months time, it was clear that the conflict in the Party was coming to a head. Two main opposition positions soon emerged. The first, headed by Norman Penner, called for a total shake up in the Party: an end to democratic centralism and domination by full-time functionaries; a Party press allowed to reflect diverse currents of thought; unrestricted internal discussions; and support of all movements towards independent labour action and other progressive parties. In Penner’s view, Communists ought not to see themselves as the party of the working class, but only as one party of the working class, a Marxist party with a leading but not exclusive role in the movement towards socialism.

A second element, led by J.B. Salsberg, argued that the LPP, because of its long subservience to the CPSU, its dogmatism, its sectarianism, and the distrust with which it was regarded, could not be transformed. Salsberg thought it was impossible to build a viable Marxist party within the framework of the LPP. Instead, it should be dissolved and its members join with others in building a new party. “We need a new party,” he wrote, “that will creatively apply all that is valid in the body of scientific socialist knowledge to Canadian conditions and chart our own Canadian path to socialism.” Salsberg called for “a socialist realignment in Canada” that would include Canadian Marxists and all socialist-minded people. It would commit itself without reservation to a peaceful, parliamentary transition into a socialist society. 7

Most Party members opposed both these positions. They saw the issue as it was characterized by Stanley Ryerson: it was time for people to declare themselves “for or against the Party.” They wouldn’t consider proposals for reform while the very existence of the Party was at stake. Still others took an even harder line. Veteran Party member Tom McEwan poured scorn on those who felt “guilty for the crimes committed in the USSR” and who wish to “re-write Marxism to suit the tastes of bourgeois respectability.” 8

Sam Papernick’s Restaurant

Bill Walsh followed these events from the coverage provided in the Canadian Tribune. “We got very little information from Helen Anderson who sat on the National Executive, nor from other members who were part of the National Council,” he said. But the fact of the matter was that he no longer
took as much interest in the affairs of the Party, except where it impacted on his trade union work. For a person who always kept himself well informed of international and national news, this is baffling, as Walsh himself admits. Certainly, his attention would have been partly diverted by the birth of Sheri in February, just a month prior to the first news about Krushchev’s secret speech. Then again, by avoiding becoming engaged in the inner Party turmoil, he appeared to be following the practice of all of the chief officers of the UE. Many trade unionists took the position that the revelations changed nothing about the class relations in Canada. Deep down perhaps, Walsh was still smarting from the humiliation at the Party school ten years earlier. In any case, he readily admitted that he didn’t follow the debates in National Affairs Monthly, where all of the critiques and alternative positions were fully aired, and, further, that he was barely aware of the various positions being put forward.

Early in 1957 Party clubs invited presenters of opposing viewpoints to speak to their members. Walsh recalled a Hamilton meeting addressed by Joe Salsberg. Salsberg’s growling voice and broad moustache were probably the best known symbols of Communism in Ontario. Salsberg had been only recently defeated as a member of the Ontario legislature, where he had occupied a seat for thirteen years. Salsberg spoke for 50 minutes, describing his trip to the Soviet Union and the anti-Semitism displayed by the leadership, and repeating his call for an end to subservience to the CPSU and for a new socialist realignment. Walsh said this of his own participation:

There were about fifteen members present at Bert Mclure’s home, where the meeting was held. I said that I regarded proletarian internationalism as the ABC of socialism, but that in practice this has always come down to defending the Soviet Union. This made perfect sense in the 1930s and during the war, when the Soviet Union was isolated and needed whatever support they could get. They don’t need us anymore, I said. They have the Red Army and massive weapons and the bomb. They’re a world power. When we place ourselves in the position of making every diplomatic manoeuvre of the USSR a matter of principle that has to be defended, we place ourselves in an impossible situation. Wasn’t it Lenin who said that it is the duty of the Communist Party everywhere to fight its own bourgeoisie?

Walsh’s intervention didn’t go over very well, but Salsberg’s reception was far worse, drawing muttering of disapproval throughout and hostile questions and comments after. After the crowd dispersed, Salsberg approached Walsh, “Can we talk?”

Walsh took him to Sam Papernick’s restaurant. Sam Papernick had been in the dress maker’s union with Esther back in the 1930s, and he recognized
her instantly when she wandered into his restaurant shortly after moving to Hamilton. He became a close family friend. "We stayed there long after closing time," Walsh remarked about that evening. "Joe told me things he didn't say in the meeting. Sam sat with us through part of it."

"You know I spoke with Krushchev," said Salsberg. "Of course, he denied that anti-Semitism was an official policy. What would you expect? But when I reminded him of the closing of the Jewish theaters and the dismantling of the Jewish publications, do you know what he answered? That the Jews of the Soviet Union have chosen to assimilate and want no theater groups, schools, or publications. When I argued, he told me what he really thought: 'When a Jew sinks his anchor, there immediately springs up a synagogue.' He told me not to be taken in by the Zionists."

"I don't know about you, Bill, but reflecting back on my history in the movement, I find this business very disturbing. Good people, sincere, idealistic people, dedicated, joined the Party and became hangmen to their friends. Maybe this was the only way to build communism under the circumstances. Maybe any other way would take a hundred years. But you know, I think it's better to wait a hundred years than to build communism on the mountains of dead people."

Salsberg described the atmosphere at the National Executive meeting. "Neither Tim nor his supporters would debate substance with us. They engaged in a campaign of vilification, labeling us supporters of peoples' capitalism, rotten elements. They made a mockery of the word 'comrade.' They circulated fantastic rumours about plots and conspiracies. It was quite unbelievable. 'Just see who eats with who,' they said, 'and tell us there is no group functioning here!' How can you have free debate in such an atmosphere?"

"In the midst of all this came the reports from Budapest. We couldn't agree on a position, but a tough stance of the USSR was a boost to the old man. He knew that in this kind of emergency the CPSU expects unconditional support and as always Tim was prepared to give it and get their backing in return."

"Bill, either we break with the Stalin period, break with the USSR and develop a truly independent Party that recognizes the right to internal dissent and practices it, or we stagnate as we have been doing and remain a marginal force."

Only now did the full meaning of Salsberg's position begin to sink in. "Shocked" was the word Walsh used to describe his reaction. Salsberg had talked about the realignment of the Left when he spoke to the meeting, but in terms that Walsh found vague and difficult to follow. And he found himself in general agreement with many of Salsberg's criticisms.
“You’re talking about dissolving the Communist Party! What would you replace it with?” Walsh asked. “First of all,” Salsberg answered, “it’s already all but finished. I’m talking about dissolving the LPP but not the Marxist movement. I want to see a new militant working-class party, a Marxist party that is not a Russian party but a Canadian party. It won’t happen over night. It’s a gradual process. The first task is an educational one. The new organization will come later.”

“I’m sorry, J.B. When you talk about the need for reform, I’m with you. Maybe not in every detail, but I’m ready to listen” replied Walsh. “But when you start talking about dissolving the Party and replacing it, with what? You’ve lost me. I just can’t follow you on this.”

And he got up to leave. “I’m surprised, Bill. I’m surprised that after all that’s happened and that’s still happening that you think the Party can be reformed. Until quite recently I thought so too. But my experience these past few months convinced me otherwise. I thought you were more of a realist.”

“I don’t see what’s so realistic about what you’re saying, Joe. Sounds like pie in the sky to me. We could wait forever for your new party.”

A week later Walsh related the conversation to Ross Russell, saying, “I can’t understand Joe.”

“Never any good” responded Russell. “Imagine, after supporting the Soviet Union all this time, what a time to quit with Sputnik just happening.” “How long will it be until the Americans put one up?” “Can’t,” came the reply. “Sputnik’s a product of socialist science. Don’t be a defeatist, Bill. Damn that Krushchev anyway. Should never have made that speech, washing our dirty linen in public like that.”

The April convention was anti-climatic, the outcome a forgone conclusion. The opposition forces were fragmented and in any case most of their supporters had already left the Party. Over half the Party membership had left. Only a handful remained in Québec, the youth organization was decimated, most supporters in the Jewish community abandoned the Party, and several dozen of its most experienced and talented leaders quit. The Party’s national office moved into two shabby rooms rented from the All for One Mutual Benefit Society. “A period of ideological consolidation,” Tim Buck called it.

By decade’s end things looked slightly better. Sputnik softened the post-Hungary antagonism towards the USSR; unemployment at home became a national dilemma; the second convention of the Canadian Labour Congress called for the establishment of a new party out of the old CCF; and the mere appearance of what would be the New Democratic Party seemed to have invigorated the entire Left. In October 1959, the Seventh Convention of the LPP voted to change its name back to the Communist Party of
Canada. By the early 1960s the Party was beginning to re-engage with life outside itself, including a new Christian-Marxist dialogue, and to join the growing debates around the meaning of Marxism which were attracting a new community of socialist intellectuals. This opening to the broad Left would be cut short by the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which again divided Party ranks since many members had become enthusiastic about the Prague Spring. Still another wave of dissidents left as the Party leadership once again stood behind the USSR and turned inward.

Notes

1 Canadian Tribune, 16 July 1956.
3 National Affairs Monthly (September 1956).
4 Canadian Tribune, letter to the editor, November 1956.
5 Canadian Tribune, letter to the editor, November 1956.
6 Personal interview with Penner, June 1980.