



George Mink, the Marine Workers Industrial Union, and the Comintern in America

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In the 1949 RKO film, *The Woman on Pier 13*, Brad Collins, who, as an angry young man had briefly joined the Communist party, is drawn back into a web of sabotage and intrigue which threatens to destroy both his marriage and his picture-perfect American life. The agent of Collins' downfall is a blunt spoken, vaguely East European Communist named Vanning who specializes in waterfront work. Except for the absence of his trademark black leather jacket (this particular movie Communist blends into the post-war era by wearing a conservative suit) the character of Vanning bears a striking resemblance to the real Communist George Mink, the founder of the Marine Workers Industrial Union (MWIU).¹

Howard Hughes, who owned RKO, wanted *The Woman on Pier 13* to establish his anti-Communist credentials and warn his fellow citizens of the dangers posed by Soviet spies and saboteurs. But, Hughes' eccentricities, and the need to make a profit, created instead a dark and brooding "B" movie which only caricatured the Communist threat. Critics dismissed the film as nothing but a Hollywood fantasy borrowing equally from gangster films and war-time Nazi spy movies.

The fate of the real Mink mirrors that of his film counterpart. At one extreme he is condemned as Mink the butcher, the harbor pirate, the NKVD enforcer, and the self-proclaimed representative of the Comintern in America. Others dismiss him as an obscure second-level figure of little importance, some claim he never existed, and he is occasionally defended as a pro-labor, anti-Fascist, union builder.²

The controversy surrounding Mink's career is part of the much larger debate over the nature of American Communism and the extent of the party's ties to the Soviet Union. By the late 1980s those scholars discounting tales of Communist espionage and generally defending the party as a positive aspect of American life had come to dominate the historical exchange. However, the opening of the Central Archives of the

¹*The Woman on Pier 13*, originally titled "I Married a Communist," was released by RKO in 1950. An informative, and entertaining, account of the film's production and significance as a part of post-war anti-Communism can be found in Daniel J. Leab, "How Red was my Valley: Hollywood, the Cold War Film, and I Married a Communist," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19 (1984), 59–88.

²Richard Krebs first brought Mink to public attention in 1940 in *Out of the Night*, a classic of anti-Communist literature, which accuses Mink of being little more than a waterfront thug. Al Richmond, in *A Long View from The Left*, takes a more moderate stance and admits that he found Mink, whom he knew personally, an attractive but ambivalent figure. Mink's most complete rehabilitation is in Bruce Nelson's *Workers on the Waterfront* which portrays Mink as a minor figure who has become the subject of anti-Communist fantasies. Jan Valtin (aka Richard Krebs), *Out of the Night* (New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1941); Al Richmond, *A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973); Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

Communist Party of the Soviet Union, now the Russian Center for the Storage and Study of Documents of Contemporary History (RTZKhIDNI), the granting of limited access to selected KGB files, and the declassification of the CIA's VENONA intercepts transformed the discussion. The flood of books and articles based on these sources conclusively documented the extent and nature of Communist party ties to the Soviet Union and led former party defender Maurice Isserman to state that it has "long since become apparent that those of us who tended to discount Communist involvement in Soviet espionage were mistaken."³

As exciting as the recent revelations have been they are only the beginning of a complete reevaluation of this aspect of American history which must extend beyond the high-profile issues of Soviet influence and espionage. This study of Mink's American career begins by establishing his status as a Soviet agent, but continues beyond his relationship to the Comintern to shed light on a wide range of other issues as well. Two important areas considered in this study are the goals and methods of Comintern organizers in the United States and the relationship between the Comintern, the Profintern, and the CPUSA. Much information is also revealed about the mundane aspects of union organizing and the continual difficulties faced by Communist activists in the United States. A pleasant surprise is that although Mink's American career is fully illuminated the central figure is not diminished. Mink remains (as his critics and admirers have portrayed him, blunt, ambitious, ambiguous) and, although shorn of myth, still surrounded by controversy, conflict, and intrigue.

An almost universally held assumption about Mink is that he was a native-born American. However, in a 1932 autobiography written for the Comintern, Mink reported that he was born Godi Minkowsky, of Jewish parentage, in the Russian village of Zittomir Volyan in 1899. Abandoned by his mother and father Mink was sent by his grandparents to the United States to live with relatives in Philadelphia. At the age of 14 Mink decided to shift for himself and moved to Chicago where he worked at a variety of jobs and perfected his American accent. He wrote in 1932:

I always lived with native born Americans and I adapted myself to the life of the Country, and picked up the language in a slang form ... I realized very soon that an American Native Born could get along better than an emigrant so I decided to Americanize myself, and in the year of 1916 I joined the United States Navy giving my name as George Martin Mink, born in the USA.

So successful was Mink's deception that a 1942 FBI report listed him as born on April 23rd, 1899, in Scranton, Pennsylvania.⁴

³The most important recent studies drawing upon the newly available sources are: Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); the second edition of Ron Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America—The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1998). Maurice Isserman, "Guess What—They Really Were Spies," <http://www.forward.com/current/arts.html>.

⁴George Mink Autobiography, April 29, 1932, 2–3, file 495–261–1667, Russian Center for the Storage and Study of Documents of Contemporary History (RTzKhIDNI) Moscow, Russian Federation; Federal Bureau of Investigation, Custodial Detention Report, Dec. 26, 1942, 1 (Courtesy of David P. Hornstein).

Assigned to the Boston naval yards Mink was serving aboard a battleship when the badly damaged Russian cruiser *Variag* steamed into the port for repairs. Mink, who modestly acknowledged that, as his family had come from that country, he spoke “a little Russian,” was assigned as liaison with the *Variag*’s crew. The sailors introduced Mink to radicalism which struck such a responsive cord in the young seaman that he later wrote, “only then [did I realize] what was what in the world.” Inspired by the Russians Mink took every opportunity during the remainder of his career in the Navy to promote socialism and agitate against the war. Because of these activities Mink received an ordinary, rather than an honorable, discharge from the Navy in 1919 and took up the life of a merchant seaman and union organizer.⁵

In 1921 Mink became the International Seamen’s Union (ISU) representative to the AFL Central Labor Council in Philadelphia. In May of the same year a strike broke out and Mink found himself elevated to the strike committee, an experience which convinced him that the ISU did not properly serve the needs of marine workers. Searching for an alternative Mink joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and, when the strike failed, led 500 sailors out of the AFL and into the IWW. Expelled from the International Seamen’s Union as a Communist (although he was not) Mink left Philadelphia and sailed to the west coast where he made contact with the American Communist party. He later recalled:

While in Portland, Oregon I came closer to the Communist party there, the (Worker’s Party) and in [month illegible] 1921 I joined the Worker’s Party later the CP of the USA. I became very active in the seamen’s fraction and worked within the IWW keeping in touch with *Harrison George* who was in charge of the Red International Committee. I kept going to sea making trips to Japan, China, etc.

Harrison George headed the Pan Pacific Trade Union, an organization which fronted for a wide range of legal and illegal Comintern activity. The highlighting of George’s name in his autobiography indicates the importance Mink placed on the association and strongly suggests that he became involved with the Comintern’s international work almost immediately after joining the Communist party.⁶

Mink’s international travel and residence on the west coast insulated him from the factional struggles which swept over the party in the early 1920s. The constant upheavals required regular Comintern intervention and caused considerable membership turnover. As a consequence when Mink returned to New York in 1925 no one remembered his earlier activities (which had been outside the party in any case) and he seemed to be a fresh face. Transferred to District Three Mink was sent back to Philadelphia and given the task of building a Communist fraction within the seamen’s union of the IWW. Needing a shore-based job to support his organizing work he found employment with a taxi company. Although the brief job became the basis for the persistent belief that Mink had never been a real sailor he did not stay ashore long. After

⁵Mink underlined the phrase *Ordinary discharge* in his 1932 autobiography, giving the impression that some controversy over his naval service may have existed. An Ordinary discharge was equivalent to today’s General Discharge which is usually given when normally faithful service is marred by negative behavior (such as anti-war agitation in time of war) in regard to performance of duty or personal conduct. George Mink Autobiography, April 29, 1932, 4, file 495–261–1667, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

⁶For a full treatment of Harrison George’s work for the Comintern, see Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 49–60; George Mink Autobiography, April 24, 1932, 5–6, file 495–261–1667, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

organizing a taxicab strike, which failed but bankrupted the company, Mink returned to the sea.⁷

In the spring of 1927 Mink sailed for the Soviet Union aboard the *USS Nordico* which was transporting a cargo of sheep to the Black Sea port of Novorossisk. Mink served as chairman of the Communist party fraction aboard ship and submitted two reports to the Novorossisk party officials. The professionally done reports identified the Communist party members aboard ship, discussed the behavior of the non-party crew members, and recommended that several of the latter be subjected to “close questioning” by local authorities. Mink did not return to the States on the *Nordico*, but instead traveled on to Moscow to attend the Fourth Profintern Congress as a delegate from the CPUSA. At the Congress the Profintern leadership appointed Mink as a representative of the Transport Workers International Committee for Propaganda and Agitation (TWICPA) and charged him with organizing the maritime workers in the United States.⁸

As American organizer Mink was responsible for carrying out general policies for marine work set down in a 1923 Profintern report on essential activities among seamen. The report begins with directives on such basic trade union activities as improving maritime publications, adapting Port Bureau activities to the “specific conditions” of seamen’s lives, and collecting data on wages and working conditions. Less traditional endeavors included instructions to extend Communist influence on the waterfront through the capture of “unorganized movements,” and active intervention to settle disputes between seamen. The report also recommended the aggressive use of unemployed councils to end strike breaking and establish control of the hiring process. The report’s authors urged port organizers to adhere to the Berlin conference decisions regarding the United Front, combat Fascism where conditions allowed, and form special committees in the large ports to observe and record the movement of war materials. Finally, wherever possible, work among seamen should be linked to organizing among other transport workers such as longshoremen and railway employees.⁹

The list of tasks reveals a mix of objectives behind the Profintern’s interest in maritime work. The Profintern sought to organize workers around a variety of reformist goals designed to improve their daily lives and to simultaneously create a disciplined revolutionary cadre. This group would have the multiple tasks of continuing to build the unions, preparing the ground for a proletarian revolution, and performing a variety of duties, such as monitoring war material or opposing Fascism, of direct benefit to the Soviet Union. What is not clear from the Comintern report is how organizing on the basis of reformism would create a revolutionary cadre.

⁷Mink also visited the Soviet Union in 1921 but fails to mention this in his Comintern autobiography. Possibly he visited the USSR before joining the Communist party (which occurred late in 1921, the exact date is illegible) and did not consider the trip significant. The Profintern thought otherwise and noted on Mink’s registration form for the Fifth Profintern Congress that he had visited the Soviet Union as a sailor in 1921. Nelson, 91–93; Autobiography of George Mink, April 29, 1932, file 495–261–1667, 1–6; Questionnaires from Delegates to the Fifth Profintern Congress, George Mink, file 534–1–179, 106, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

⁸Minutes of Meeting of Fraction of Workers (Communist) party of the *S.S. Nordico* and Letter from *S.S. Nordico* to Communist party, Novorossisk, USSR, Dec. 20 and 26, 1927, file 515–1–1175; Profintern letter addressed “Dear Friend,” undated 1929, and Profintern letter, 18 Jan. 1929, file 534–6–138, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

⁹Port Bureaus and Activities Among Seamen, Profintern report 1923, 100–101, file 534–2–11, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

Mink, however, had no doubts about how to proceed—he simply sidestepped the problem. He intended to create a revolutionary union by staffing it with men already radicalized by contact with the IWW. As soon as he returned to the United States Mink began contacting old friends and acquaintances within the IWW alerting them to the plan to launch a “red” seamen’s union. He used the most active among these individuals to create a maritime affiliate of the Communist Party’s labor umbrella, William Z. Foster’s Trade Union Educational League (TUEL). Called the Marine Workers Progressive League (MWPL) the organization had at least a paper existence by the autumn of 1928. Never intended as an end in itself Mink planned to use the Progressive League as a foundation for the building of a genuine trade union, but his activities were almost cut short by party factionalism.¹⁰

In late 1928 or early 1929 Jay Lovestone and Jack Stachel accused Mink of belonging to James P. Cannon’s faction of Trotskyites and suspended him from all of his duties. The action prompted an immediate response from the Profintern, which sent a sharply worded letter to the CPUSA:

Dear Friends, We received a communication stating that you have removed Mink, our representative, a member of the TWICP&A, without having made any investigation of the matter. We are surprised that there should be such an attitude towards our workers, for down to the present time we have had in all our organizations workers who were appointed and withdrawn with our agreement. We herewith bring to your notice that at the Fifth Conference of Revolutionary Transport Workers, Mink was elected a member of the TWICP&A representing the workers in the Marine Transport Trades of the U.S.A. and he was charged in accordance with the decision of the Fourth RILU Congress and the Fifth Revolutionary Transport Workers’ Conference with the organization of the American seamen ... In view of the stupendous importance of organizing the American seamen ... the TWICP&A requests you to speed up the investigation of the question of Comrade Mink and until its completion to reinstate him on his former work.

The letter leaves the distinct impression that the party had not been previously informed of Mink’s international connections.¹¹

Mink immediately returned to work and sent a letter of explanation to the CPUSA Political Committee. In the letter Mink protests that he had always been a supporter of the Foster group and regarded the principles of the Cannon group as counter-revolutionary and a crime against the working class. He claimed that someone had forged his name to both a subscription receipt for *The Militant*, the Cannon group paper, and a second receipt indicating that he had donated \$50 to the faction. The defense is weak and mildly overstated. Mink was certainly involved in the faction fight and might have, uncertain of the outcome, briefly supported the Cannon group. Mink was greatly relieved when the Comintern ordered Jay Lovestone and a small group of followers expelled from the party in 1929. While in Moscow the following year he took pains to comment on the improved atmosphere in the party and frequently reminded listeners of his loyalty to the faction surrounding Foster. The incident shows off Mink’s

¹⁰Dear Friend letter, undated, likely early 1929, 18, file 534-6-138; Mink Report to the American Commission, 9 Sept. 1930, 176, file 495-37-67, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

¹¹Profintern to CPUSA, Jan. 18, 1929, 6, file 534-6-138, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

somewhat ham-handed political skills and, more importantly, reveals the degree of international protection he enjoyed.¹²

Freed from factional entanglements, Mink organized three seamen's conferences one each on the East, West, and Gulf coasts. The conferences put organizers in the field and laid the ground work for a national convention to establish a revolutionary union. Of 191 delegates attending the MWIU's founding convention in New York city in April of 1930, only 24 were party members. Mink took great pride in this accomplishment and on several occasions pointed out that many of the delegates had hitch-hiked or ridden the rails to reach the convention. Such enthusiasm indicated a level of dedication and working-class consciousness that Mink felt was rarely seen in party circles.

The vast majority of the delegates were former members of the IWW, which had certain advantages as well as drawbacks. Their past experience had given them, in Mink's words, "a very good training in the class struggle," and made them able organizers. But at the same time the former Wobblies were notoriously independent and mistrustful of bureaucracy. At the convention the delegates refused to accept a previously written draft constitution insisting on working through it line by line until a document agreeable to all was produced. The extra effort resulted in a cost over-run forcing Mink to go downtown to CPUSA headquarters for an extra \$1000.¹³

The money was well spent as the constitution produced was unflinchingly radical committing the union to striving for better wages and working conditions and to advancing the revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system. The document also denounced class collaboration and sought to unite seamen, harbor workers, and longshoremen into a single militant force. As a tangible demonstration of their revolutionary commitment the delegates requested that the MWIU be directly affiliated with the Red International of Transport Workers. Mink explained that the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), Foster's old TUEL, of which the MWIU was a part, was already a Red International affiliate. But the delegates replied that the TUUL was too unstable and they preferred to put their trust in the Profintern. Mink agreed and the MWIU became directly affiliated with the International Seamen and Harbors Workers Union (ISH) headquartered in Hamburg. The delegates left the convention armed with stacks of membership cards and a resolve to rapidly build the union. In August, only four months after the founding convention, Mink traveled to Moscow and reported to the Comintern that there were now 11 International Seamen's clubs (commonly known as Interclubs) in the United States and 6000 members in the MWIU.¹⁴

¹²A possible source of this support may have been A.S. Lozovsky, head of the Profintern, with whom Mink is often linked. An FBI report cites [blacked out] sources who believed that Mink was Lozovsky's brother-in-law. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Custodial Detention Report, Dec. 26, 1942, 15; George Mink to the Political Committee, undated, 104, file 515-1-1640, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

¹³Mink Report to the American Commission, Sept. 9, 1930, 176, file 495-37-67; Interview between Comrade Manuilsky and American Comrades, Aug. 31, 1930, 1-4, file 495-37-73, RTzKhIDNI; Richmond, 175-176.

¹⁴The International Seamen's clubs first appeared in the Soviet Union as a tool for organizing the domestic shipping industry and then served as a model for a worldwide network of clubs. By the late 1920s, in the words of a distressed British union official, the Interclubs were "springing up everywhere." Everywhere but the United States which, until Mink's organizing drive, had only a single 90-member club in New York. J. Havelock Wilson, CH CBE President of the National Union of Seamen, to the Principles of all the Shipping Companies of the United Kingdom, 111, file 534-5-207; Interview between Comrade Manuilsky and American Comrades, 1, file 495-37-73; Preamble and Constitution of the Marine Workers Industrial Union, 15-19, Minutes of the National Convention of the Marine Workers League, 6, file 515-1-2179, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

Despite these impressive statistics Mink admitted that the MWIU had two serious problems: its relationship with the CPUSA was strained; and it suffered from an extremely unstable membership. The constant fluctuation of membership arose in part from the conditions of maritime work. Unlike European sailors, American sailors were not usually married so they frequently moved from port to port rarely staying with a single ship for more than a few months. In addition their lives were punctuated with regular periods of unemployment as they waited on the beach between ships. Because of such circumstances Mink told the Comintern that, of the 6000 paper members, only 1600 paid dues, and of the dues-paying members only 400 belonged to the Communist party. All of the party members, including Mink and his close associates, were sailors themselves which meant that the group which could have formed a stable core of activists also constantly shifted from place to place. Mink believed that the problems created by seafaring could be partly alleviated by recruiting among the longshoremen to provide a reliable, shore-based membership.¹⁵

The problems with the CPUSA, Mink reported, stemmed from a lack of understanding of marine work by the bulk of the party leadership. This led to such farcical incidents as Baltimore Party officials, under the mistaken impression that marine meant Marine Corps, asking sailors at the Fells Point Anchorage to put on their uniforms before coming to a party meeting. More seriously, it led to either neglect of marine work by local leaders put off by the rough men from the ships and docks or the overwhelming of new party members with bewildering responsibilities. Mink proposed solving these problems by strengthening the TUUL and educating party members about the peculiar needs of seamen. Mink's analysis of the problem reflected favorably on him but avoided the real problem between the two organizations which was an old-fashioned turf war fueled by party resentment of Mink's arrogance and independence of action and a struggle for control of chronically short resources.¹⁶

Comintern officials attached to the American Commission closely questioned Mink about the class consciousness of the MWIU membership and the specific goals of the union for improving the day-to-day life of the sailors. Mink proudly replied that, as the bulk of the membership had come out of the old IWW, they were a very class-conscious lot and had gone "to a good school" of the class struggle. This response pleased the Comintern reps but they were unhappy with the list of demands Mink outlined. Chief among them were same food for officers and crew, eight-hour watches on deck, six hours below deck, abolition of fines and logging (blacklisting), and the right to pay off in every port. Dmitry Manuilsky, the head of the American Commission, felt that these demands were too ambitious and joked that they would only be achieved under a proletarian dictatorship. After a pause for laughter (recorded in the transcript) he asked Mink what he was doing to meet small immediate needs to show the workers what the union could do for them. Mink had no ready answer, pleading that work would have to be centered among the longshoremen in the near term. He added that some things were being done, but, as they happened at sea, the union only heard about the events after it was too late to have any direct influence.¹⁷

¹⁵Interview between Comrade Manuilsky and American Comrades, Aug. 31, 1930, 1-2, 11-12, file 495-37-73, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

¹⁶Mink Report to the American Commission, Sept. 9, 1930, 173, 177-178, file 495-37-67, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

¹⁷Interview with Comrade Manuilsky and the American Comrades, Aug. 31, 1930, 22, file 495-37-73, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

An issue unaddressed by either Mink or his Comintern questioners was how his organizing work was being funded. The question most likely was never posed because everyone present knew the answer. Unfortunately their silence creates problems for historians, especially given the controversies over the extent of Soviet funding for the American Communist party. The record offers two clues to Mink's finances. Richard Krebs, in *Out of the Night*, recalls escorting Mink to Hamburg in 1931 after he had been given "several thousand dollars" for waterfront activities by Fritz Hecker, the treasurer for the Western Secretariat of the Comintern. An FBI informant recalled the same occasion and stated that Mink had received \$40,000. More evidence can be found in two audits that Mink had conducted of MWIU finances. The audits cover the period from April 24th, 1930, to August 31st, 1931, and reveal that the MWIU operated on a budget that never exceeded \$5,000 for a single year. They also reveal that between 80 and 90 percent of that amount came from "donations," recorded as a single lump sum, with the remainder eked out of dues payments and subscriptions. In all likelihood the donations represent Mink's "Moscow gold" but if so it also indicates that the Comintern operated on a tight budget.¹⁸

Once back in the United States Mink instructed MWIU organizers to begin intensive work among longshoremen in the familiar territory of Philadelphia. Eager to demonstrate results Mink called for a general waterfront strike after only a month's preparation. The effort failed miserably and although about 50 individuals retained their MWIU books the pressures of unemployment quickly forced all of them back inside the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). At the February 1931 national committee meeting Mink reported that over \$500 was owed to the printers and that the union itself was at a virtual standstill. A much harsher evaluation of the situation came from the Profintern which wrote to the International Seamen and Harbor Workers Union blaming it for the "collapse" of the MWIU.¹⁹

George Hardy, a British Communist and newly appointed head of the ISH, responded vigorously to the Profintern criticism by blaming the collapse on George Mink. Mink, Hardy wrote, provided weak leadership and employed mechanical, bureaucratic, methods which could only lead to the kind of disasters suffered in Philadelphia. Worse Mink had been warned about employing such tactics when he passed through Hamburg and met with Hardy in the fall of 1930. Since then repeated letters sent to the United States requesting information about the situation of the MWIU had met only silence. Considering that very good communication links, "both open and confidential," existed between the two organizations Hardy was at a loss to explain the American attitude. The best solution, Hardy concluded, would be to send an ISH representative to America to directly oversee the work of the MWIU, but, unfortunately resources did not permit such an action.²⁰

The Profintern exaggerated the severity of the situation: the MWIU was not in "collapse," but neither was it making great progress. In the early spring a strike broke

¹⁸There are two reports both submitted on Sept. 30, 1931, the first covers the period from April 24, 1930 to Sept. 30, 1930; the second covers the period from Oct. 1, 1930 to Aug. 31, 1931. Auditing Report of Max Kitzes, Central Auditing Bureau, Sept. 30, 1931, 13-21, file 515-1-2554, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation; Valtin, 310; Federal Bureau of Investigation, Custodial Detention Report on George Mink, 26 Dec. 26, 1942, 4.

¹⁹Marine Workers Industrial Union of USA, *Minutes of National Bureau Held in New York City*, Feb. 24, 1931, 236, file 515-1-2554, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

²⁰Letter to the Secretariat RILU from the Secretariat ISH, Mar. 9, 1931, 96, file 534-5-220, RTZKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

out among the black dock workers in New Orleans. Unfortunately, the MWIU failed to win the confidence of the strike leaders and instead of shaping tactics watched from the sidelines as the strike, in the words of the port organizer, “drug on” to its inevitable sad conclusion. In California the MWIU provided leadership for a strike by Stockton rivermen which prevented a 35% wage cut. However, the two party organizers involved admitted to making no attempt to push for radical demands and criticized themselves for “hiding the face of the Party.” In October of 1931, at the National Committee meeting, Mink conceded that none of the goals set for him by the American Commission had been achieved. The MWIU, he reported, functioned very well as a propaganda organization, but it had been unable to create a stable membership or carry through genuine organizing on the ships and the docks. Instead, Mink concluded, “we have spread out like mushrooms trying to bite off more than we can chew. Shifting from port to port, starting work in one place and in many cases leaving the job half finished.”²¹

Mink’s National Committee report gives the impression that he accepted the blame for the MWIU’s lack of progress. But, in fact Mink placed the onus for the union’s problems squarely on the CPUSA. William McCuistion, one of the MWIU’s chief organizers recalled many occasions when Mink instructed field workers to make certain that the CPUSA fulfilled its obligations to maritime work. Mink did not harbor any reluctance to take his complaints to the top and frequently berated Party chief Earl Browder about the failure of local Party districts to contribute to waterfront organizing. Of particular concern to Mink was the CPUSA practice of removing talented organizers from the waterfront and reassigning them to other duties.²²

In November 1931 Mink submitted a report to the Comintern formally accusing the CPUSA of neglecting the union. Given that the basic task of the party was to build revolutionary unions Mink found this conduct a flagrant violation of duty, made even more serious by the heightened danger of war against the Soviet Union. The situation could only be resolved by the complete support of the party for organizing in the maritime industry. Mink suggested that a letter be sent from the Politburo ordering all Districts to concentrate on marine by assigning full party sections to the waterfront (two sections each were needed in New York and San Francisco), drawing seamen into the District level leadership, and building the *Marine Workers Voice* into a true mass publication. Mink also recommended that a special war commission be created, comprised of Earl Browder, William Z. Foster, MWIU organizer Harry Hynes, and Mink himself. The commission would meet regularly to lobby such bodies as the International Seamen and Harbor Workers Union for material support.²³

Mink’s sharply worded report had something to offend everyone and the spring of 1932 found him in Hamburg at the mercy of his enemies in the ISH. ISH organizer Richard Krebs confronted Mink at the local Interclub over a personal matter and

²¹Marine Workers Industrial Union, Report for Dec.–Jan.–Feb., 1931, 20–22; Report on Strike of Stockton Rivermen, Aug. 1931, 29–31; Report on the Marine Industry in the U.S.A., September 1931, 43, file 534–7–499; National Committee Meeting, Marine Workers Industrial Union, 140 Broad St., Oct. 10–11, 1931, 24, file 515–1–2554, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

²²McCuistion, after harrowing experiences in the Spanish Civil War, turned against the Communist party and gave lengthy testimony to the Dies Committee. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, 76th Congr., 2nd Sess. *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*, Testimony of William C. McCuistion, Oct. 30, 1939, 6550–6552.

²³Untitled report of George Mink, Nov. 1931, 92–93, file 543–7–499, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

speculated that he [Mink] had been caught on the losing side of a Comintern faction fight. Mink's difficulties probably had less to do with a faction fight than interagency rivalry. On June 30, 1932 Mink appealed to the Western Bureau of the Comintern complaining that he had been abandoned in Hamburg and protesting his treatment by Profintern officials. These individuals had questioned his credentials in front of non-party members and attempted to assign him to other work. Mink did accept a temporary reassignment, but only after a telegram from America confirmed that he was still MWIU National Chairman, and only after the Hamburg cadres promised to return him to work in the maritime industry when he "was thru with the other assignments." The entire incident greatly angered Mink as he felt it increased organizational antagonisms and detracted attention from such important matters as his plans for the reorganization of the west coast. He also felt personally demoralized and confessed that "I am not very enthusiastic about going back as head of our union, especially under such conditions as exist."²⁴

Unfortunately for Mink conditions did not improve. His return to the United States coincided with two explosions in the New York MWIU branch caused by Mink's blunt personality and resolute focus on radicalism. The initial outburst centered on Communist party member, and MWIU founder, John Johannessen, who, disgusted with the state of the party and the union, submitted a sharply critical article to the *Daily Worker*. Johannessen castigated the Communist party for deluging seamen with demands to participate in open air meetings and signature drives unconnected with their daily lives and for endangering party members' jobs by making them distribute Communist party literature at their place of employment. He reserved particular bile for the party decision to subject the seamen to a "petticoat government" by appointing a woman to represent the maritime workers at a party convention. He denounced the move as a gross insult which "poked fun at the misery, starvation, and social ostracism of the American seamen."²⁵

As unhappy as Johannessen was about the party he reserved his sharpest criticism for the MWIU itself:

The Union [he wrote] is ... open to Marine workers regardless of political or religious beliefs and also regardless of color or nationality and yet we find the union is dominated by fanatic dogmatic sectarians. When an active member returns from a trip and has successfully lined up new members into the union and told them in glowing terms about the rank and file controlled fighting MWIU these workers come in to the Hall they either swallow within a few hours the whole revolutionary program hook, line, and sinker or are classed as a dumb bell or a stool pigeon.

This same small faction, Johannessen continued, controlled all the meetings and swept away suggestions from the floor or from returning ships' delegates. Open-air meetings were even worse: the only distinction Johannessen could see between an MWIU

²⁴Krebs believed that the "other assignment" had been an NKVD-sponsored assassination. No evidence exists to corroborate this accusation. Valtin, 310–312; Letter of George Mink to Dear Comrades, 136–137, file 534-5-230, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

²⁵Lena Davis appears in an October report in a position of authority over the Waterfront Unit; this and her general position within the Party, make her the most likely candidate for Waterfront delegate. Details on Davis taken from Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 236; Detailed Account of Past Incidents related to Marine Work, 38, File 515-1-2995, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

meeting and a meeting of the Holy Rollers was that the union speakers shouted, “to hell with Jerusalem Slim and to hell with everybody,” while the mission speakers shouted, “hurray for Jerusalem Slim and hurray for everybody.”

Union and party chiefs, Johannessen declared, had to drop the idea that good leadership meant “spitting and coughing like Lenin”; they had to start listening to the rank and file, and establish a real collective leadership. The price for neglecting these changes, he concluded, would be to squander the currently ripe conditions for creating a strong waterfront organization. A National Buro meeting in August voted unanimously to expel Johannessen from the MWIU National Committee and ordered him to the west coast. Johannessen instead resigned from both the party and the MWIU and remained in New York rejoining the IWW where he agitated aggressively against his former colleagues.²⁶

The second wave of discontent concerned a small group of Scandinavian Communist party members who banded together to organize unemployed Norwegian seamen. After appealing to the MWIU for assistance the Scandinavians discovered, much to their surprise, that the organization was more of a hinderance than a help. On one occasion the sailors met with Harry Jackson, a bellicose union functionary from the west coast, to seek advice about how to approach the Norwegian consulate with an appeal for unemployment relief for beached nationals. Jackson advised the delegates to enter the consulate office, break up the furniture, and throw the typewriters out of the windows. No mention was made of presenting demands. On another occasion three members of the seamen’s group attempted to report on the activities of a small group of Lovestonites trying to organize on the docks. Instead of praise all three were badgered by Jackson and Mink and accused of disloyalty.

On October 29 the Scandinavians submitted a lengthy report to the Communist party entitled “Detailed Accounting of Past Incidents Relative to Marine Work,” which outlined these and other grievances. The authors demanded to know what was going on. Why didn’t the MWIU support fellow Communists in their attempts to organize the unemployed? What was the meaning of tactics like those suggested in the Norwegian consulate and others at the Seamen’s Church Institute at which five committees were formed, some to fight and some to shout? Such tactics, the writer declared, “have been totally detrimental to the seamen’s cause and to Marine work”; the only solution that the report’s author could see was that “since the underlying causes of uneasiness lies with the National office,” and Comrade Mink is chairman of that office, he should be removed immediately.²⁷

The New York situation generated a crisis the result of which was that while Mink remained Chairman of the MWIU he became much less visible in the day-to-day operations of the union. Mink’s signature, which previously had appeared on all important union documents, disappeared after the fall of 1932, to be replaced by the signature of Roy Hudson, the National Secretary. Mink reappears in the record as a regular participant in the deliberations of the national committee of the TUUL. Mink had frequently pointed to the weakness of the TUUL as one of the factors holding back the development of revolutionary trade unions so the change in responsibilities could be

²⁶J. Johannessen, “Seamen and the Revolutionary Movement,” 22–24, File 515-1-2995, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

²⁷“DETAILED ACCOUNTING OF PAST INCIDENTS RELATIVE TO MARINE WORK,” To: Communist Party of United States, New York City, NY, Oct. 29, 1932, 36–38, File 515-1-2995, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

seen as an opportunity for Mink to put his advice into practice by strengthening the organization. However, it is much more likely that the move was intended to “kick” Mink upstairs and was a form of punishment. Mink’s lackluster performance as member of the TUUL National Committee bears out the latter interpretation. Normally loquacious and argumentative Mink remained silent during most of the meetings he attended. In September he gave a brief (one paragraph) report on the Boston longshoreman’s strike, saying only that “nothing could be done” because of inadequate CPUSA support.²⁸

The relationship between the ISH and the MWIU also remained poor. In December 1932 Hudson forwarded a selection of correspondence between the two organizations to the Profintern in the hope of improving the situation. Most of the letters berated the MWIU in general for not following ISH instructions, but one singled out Mink for individual criticism. The letter responded to a newspaper article the MWIU had forwarded to Hamburg which described a sailor’s delegation that Mink had led to the White House which threatened a seamen’s march on Washington if relief demands were not met. What, the ISH wanted to know, was the so-called National Chairman doing “threatening” when it was the duty of Communists to act.²⁹

By late 1933 circumstances had combined to a point that Mink reluctantly accepted reassignment to Europe. Al Richmond, an MWIU cadre, spoke to Mink shortly before his departure and recalled that he was very unhappy and bitter about being taken out of the United States. Bruce Nelson, who cites Richmond in *Workers on the Waterfront*, believed that the American party transferred Mink, but this is unlikely. Mink’s original commission had come from the international apparatus, his union operated independently of the CPUSA, and he had survived other attempts by the national party to remove him. It is much more likely that it was the continuing friction with the ISH and Mink’s apathetic performance as a member of the TUUL National Committee which prompted his reassignment.³⁰

This explanation is supported by the fact that the Comintern did not regard Mink’s failure with the MWIU as serious enough to remove him from international work. Instead of being either recalled to Moscow or returned to the rank and file of the ISH he was assigned to anti-Fascist propaganda work in Europe. An altercation in a Copenhagen hotel (some sources claim it was an attempted rape) led to his arrest and 18-month imprisonment in Denmark. Upon his release Mink returned to Moscow, made an eloquent defense of himself before the Comintern, and was assigned to work in Spain. Accounts of his activities there vary widely: some accused him of being an enforcer for the NKVD, one source even elevated him to head of NKVD activities in Barcelona, but others claim he was only a dutiful anti-Fascist volunteer.³¹

Mink’s whereabouts after 1938 are very shadowy. William McCuistion, a former MWIU organizer and Lincoln Brigade veteran, had contact with Mink in the United States in 1939 and the FBI believed he was traveling extensively between the USSR and

²⁸TUUL National Buro meeting, Sept. 28, 1932, 23, file 515-1-2979, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

²⁹Letter of Roy Hudson to Profintern, Dec. 18, 1932, 131; Letter of the International Seamen and Harbor Workers Union to the MWIU, Nov. 23, 1932, 132, file 534-5-231, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

³⁰Nelson, 92-93.

³¹Nelson, 91-92; Valtin, 312-313; FBI Internal Security-Custodial Detention report on George Mink, Dec. 26, 1942, 6, 14-15, 27; Testimony of William C. McCuistion, Investigations of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States, Oct. 30, 1939, 6551.

Mexico in 1940. Pierre Broue, a French Trotskyite, confirms Mink's presence in Mexico, but comments that some believe that Mink died in a gunfight in Barcelona during the suppression of the anarchists. His identity was then assumed by another Comintern agent who used it while setting up Leon Trotsky's assassination. This is not likely as McCuistion, who knew Mink well, claimed to have actually seen him in 1939. Broue is certain that Mink had some connection with the Trotsky murder, a conviction reinforced by the fact that elements within the Trotskyite movement attempted to kill Mink in revenge. No trace of him (or his alleged impostor) can be found after 1942.³²

After Mink's 1933 departure from the United States the MWIU, under Roy Hudson's direction, changed tactics to focus on highly specific reformist goals. Certain shipping lines, seen as especially vulnerable for one reason or another, were targeted for a series of mini-strikes over particular issues such as the number of buckets available for washing on deck. Eager to avoid a tie-up in port most captains gave in and a series of small victories resulted. In Baltimore the MWIU even briefly took control of federal relief for beached sailors and established a party-controlled hiring hall. These successes were quickly reversed, however, and old problems persisted. In a report made to the Politburo in 1934 Hudson cited union membership at 2165; however, he quickly qualified that figure, noting that only 300 of those were "old members," the remaining 1865 were the result a recent recruiting drive.³³

On May 9, 1934 a longshoremen's strike broke out in San Francisco which rapidly spread beyond the docks to engulf San Francisco (a general strike) and to briefly paralyze west coast shipping. Although put down in a matter days the strike greatly excited Communists in both the United States and the Soviet Union because of the leading roles played by the party. The author of a widely circulated report entitled *Lessons of the San Francisco General Strike* took great pride in the fact that the *Western Worker*, the Party publication on the coast, was designated the official strike organ. This accomplishment was possible, he continued, because of the domination of the strike committee by secret Communists seeded over the course of three years into the AFL Longshoremen's Union in California. Although careful to include the MWIU in his praise of the party's work the report's unnamed author made it plain that it was the secret faction in the ILA which racked up accomplishments. Wherever the MWIU worked alone, he noted, the strike failed. Revolutionary unionism, the report implied, was a dead end—the future lay in internal control of the reformist unions. The Comintern agreed and in less than a year ordered the MWIU liquidated. Its former members were instructed to join the ranks of their old rival the ISU.³⁴

Mink's American career lays to rest any thought that Mink was no more than an honest trade unionist and that the MWIU was primarily an indigenous expression of American radicalism. The Profintern ordered Mink to create the union and the Comintern oversaw its operations, ordering its termination when it proved unable to serve Soviet needs. Equally discredited, however, is the image of a well-organized, highly disciplined international Communist movement. The records of the MWIU

³²Pierre Broue, "George Mink." *Cahiers Leon Trotsky* (1979) 179. (Courtesy of David Hornstein.)

³³Testimony of William C. McCuistion, *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda*, Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, 76th Congr., 1st Sess. 1939, vol. 11, 6640; Nelson, 96–100; Report of Comrade Hudson on Marine Workers Conference Made to Politburo April 19, 1934, 157, file 515–1–3444; *Lessons of the San Francisco General Strike*, file 515–1–3400, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

³⁴*Lessons of the San Francisco General Strike*, Aug. 22, 1934, file 515–1–3400, 6–10, RTzKhIDNI, Moscow, Russian Federation.

reveal disorganization, fiscal disaster, bootstrap techniques, and a striking degree of tension and internal rivalry at the highest levels of the Comintern and its subordinate organizations. The discord sprang from several causes, such as bureaucratic empire building, the frustration of always working at the limit of available resources, and personal animosity. But perhaps the most important reason for the acrimonious atmosphere is that the various individuals and groups involved were under constant pressure from Moscow to achieve goals which were impossible to attain.

At the beginning of his Comintern mandate Mink believed that he had the formula for success: begin with a tested cadre, appeal to the radicalism inherent in all workers, and make full use of existing resources. The Comintern felt Mink's goals were too ambitious and continually urged him to leaven his approach with more reformist techniques, while the CPUSA resented his claims upon their money and personnel. Mink persisted in his initial course and believed to the end that he would have succeeded if not for lack of support from the Communist party. However, Roy Hudson cooperated with the Communist party and followed the Comintern's advice to the letter, but enjoyed no better success and within two years presided over the dissolution of the MWIU.

The problem which defeated both Mink and Hudson was the impossibility of mixing reform and revolution in the same organization. If revolutionary goals are placed first reformism becomes merely tactical, a situation intolerable to a mass-based organization, as revealed by the New York crises. But if reformism is put first it results in a weakening of the revolutionary tone of the union making it nothing but a duplication of mainstream organizations and one whose only distinction is its loyalty to a foreign power. However, a revolutionary faction within a larger organization can have it both ways and, through careful maneuvering, even control the larger organization. By failing where the International Longshoremen's Association succeeded the MWIU helped convince Comintern leaders to shift from the Third Period policies of revolutionary confrontation to the mass-based, but often clandestine practices and policies of Popular Front Communism. Ironically, in the process, George Mink, the advocate of open revolutionary goals, became, at least in the popular imagination, George Mink the archconspirator.