

Between a Rockefeller and a Hard Place: Diego Rivera's Man at the Crossroads and the Left in the 1930s

Entre un Rockefeller y un lugar difícil: El hombre en la encrucijada de Diego Rivera y la izquierda política en la década de 1930

Artículo recibido el 1 de julio de 2021; devuelto para revisión el 10 de septiembre de 2021; aceptado el 20 de octubre de 2021; <https://doi.org/10.22201/ie.18703062e.2022.121.2803>

Jacob A. Zumoff New Jersey City University, Department of History,
jacob.zumoff@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6270-8969>

Lines of research History of the Communist and labor movement in the Americas in the interwar period.

Líneas de investigación La historia del movimiento obrero y comunista en América durante la entreguerra.

Publicación más relevante *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

Abstract In 1933, Diego Rivera began painting *Man at the Crossroads*, a mural at Rockefeller Center in New York City. After Rivera included a portrait of Bolshevik Revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, and refused Nelson Rockefeller's demand to remove this, the mural was first covered up, and then in February 1934, destroyed. That same year, Rivera painted a refashioned mural, *Hombre, el controlador del universo*, at the Palacio de Belles Artes in Mexico City. The current article examines this controversy through the lens of Rivera's relationship with the Communist left, in particular the pro-Moscow Communist Party, the Trotskyist Communist League of America, and the Lovestoneite Communist Party (Opposition), and argues that this provides a fuller understanding of Rivera's evolving political commitments and the changing politics of his paintings in this period.

Keywords Diego Rivera; Rockefeller Center; Communist Party USA; Trotskyism; Lovestoneites.

Resumen En 1933, Diego Rivera comenzó a pintar *El hombre en la encrucijada*, un mural en el Rockefeller Center de la ciudad de Nueva York. Después de que Rivera incluyó un retrato del revolucionario bolchevique

Vladimir Lenin y rechazó la demanda de Nelson Rockefeller de eliminarlo, el mural se cubrió primero y luego, en febrero de 1934, se destruyó. Ese mismo año, Rivera pintó un mural remodelado, *Hombre, el controlador del universo*, en el Palacio de Belles Artes de la Ciudad de México. El artículo actual examina esta controversia a través de la lente de la relación de Rivera con la izquierda comunista, en particular el Partido Comunista (pro Moscú), Liga Comunista de América (trotskista) y el Partido Comunista (Oposición) dirigido por Jay Lovestone, y argumenta que esta perspectiva proporciona un entendimiento más completo de los compromisos políticos del muralista y las políticas diversas expresadas en la obra de Rivera en aquel momento.

Palabras clave Diego Rivera; Rockefeller Center; Partido Comunista de USA; trotskismo; lovestoneistas.

JACOB A. ZUMOFF
NEW JERSEY CITY UNIVERSITY

Between a Rockefeller and a Hard Place:

*Diego Rivera's Man at the Crossroads and the Left
in the 1930s*

On May 9, 1933, engineers working for the Rockefeller family ordered Diego Rivera to stop work on *Man at the Crossroads*, a mural for the Radio City of America (RCA) building at Rockefeller Center in Manhattan. The family took offense at the inclusion of a portrait of Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin in the mural. After covering up the unfinished mural, the Rockefellers had it destroyed in February 1934, while Rivera repainted the mural, refashioned as *El hombre, controlador del universo* (Man, Controller of the Universe) at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. Scholars have told the story of the conflict between the Rockefellers—the most important capitalist family in the United States—and Rivera—the Mexican painter of the working class and oppressed; they have also chronicled the broader story of Rivera's relationship with the organized left. Those researchers who have looked at the campaign to defend Rivera tend to lack a nuanced understanding of the competing left-wing groups of the early 1930s. Dora Apel is correct that scholars have “superficially examined” Rivera's relationship with the organized left and its impact on his painting, a “key sector” of Rivera's audience. For example, Catha Paquette's well-researched and otherwise comprehensive *At the Crossroads* (2017) is marred by misunderstanding of the left. Even Apel's article seems to distort Rivera's political relationships at times (and is weakened by its reliance on only English-language sources). Understanding Rivera's

relationship to the different left-wing groups in New York City is crucial to understanding the controversy over *Man at the Crossroads* because it illuminates his activities there and provides insight on his intentions and approaches to the Communist images he included in his murals.¹

Through a close reading of the left-wing press of the time, this article examines the “battle at Rockefeller Center,” through Rivera’s relationship to three competing self-styled Communist groups and their role in the campaign to defend Rivera. The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), the Communist League of America (CLA), and the Communist Party Opposition (CPO) all opposed Rockefeller’s attack on Rivera, but from different political perspectives. The CPUSA belonged to the Communist International (Comintern) based in Moscow and led by Josef Stalin; the CLA, led by James P. Cannon, supported the

1. Accounts of the saga of Rockefeller Center murals include: Dora Apel, “Diego Rivera and the Left: The Destruction and Recreation of the Rockefeller Center Mural,” *Left History* 6, no. 1 (1999), 57-75; Mary K. Coffey, “Corporate Patronage at the Crossroads: Situating Diego Rivera’s ‘Rockefeller Mural’ Then and Now,” in Monica E. Jovanovich and Melissa Renn, *Corporate Patronage of Art & Architecture in the United States, Late 19th Century to the Present* (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 15-38; Irene Herner de Larrea, *Diego Rivera’s Mural at the Rockefeller Center* (Mexico City: Edicupes, 1990); Catha Paquette, *At the Crossroads: Diego Rivera and His Patrons at MoMA, Rockefeller Center, and the Palace of Fine Arts* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Susana Pliego Quijano, *El Hombre en la Encrucijada: El Mural de Diego Rivera en el Centro Rockefeller* (Mexico City: Trilce, 2013); Robert L. Scott, “Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center: Fresco Painting and Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, no. 41 (Spring 1977): 70-82. Rivera tells his story in “The Stormy Petrel of American Art: Diego Rivera on His Art,” *Studio* 106, no. 484 (July 1933): 23-26 (clipping in Rockefeller Center Archives); Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Dover, 1991 [1960]), 124-29; other participants’ recollections include Lucienne Bloch, “On Location with Diego Rivera,” *Art in America* 74, no. 2 (February 1986): 103-23; Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1990 [1963]), chapter 26; Bertram D. Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981), chapter 35. There is also a website by Alan Howard of the University of Virginia, “Black and White and Read all Over: Diego Rivera and the Battle of Rockefeller Center,” that contains many primary sources: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/-MAO4/hess/RockRivera/opening.html>. Most work on Rivera deal with his politics, but for a sampling, see: Alicia Azuela, “El escándalo de Diego Rivera, en Detroit,” *La Palabra y el Hombre*, no. 49 (1984): 3-8; Catha Paquette, “‘Revolutionary’ Ideologies and Discursive Struggle: Diego Rivera’s 1934 Mural Commission at the Palace of Fine Arts,” *Latin Americanist* 54, no. 4 (December 2010): 143-62; William Richardson, “The Dilemmas of a Communist Artist: Diego Rivera in Moscow, 1927-1928,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 49-69. The International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston online collection on Latin American art contains items relevant to the controversy: <https://icaa.mfah.org>.

Left Opposition of Leon Trotsky; the CPO, led by Jay Lovestone, supported the Right Opposition sympathetic to Nikolai Bukharin. Of the three groups, the CPUSA was much larger, with between 10,000 and 23,000 members; the CPO had perhaps 1,500 members, while the CLA had fewer than 200 members.² Support among members of the CPUSA for Rivera forced their leadership to defend him against Rockefeller's anti-Communist attacks, despite Rivera's hostility to the Soviet leadership, but the party leadership turned against Rivera quickly, echoing the anti-Rivera attitude of the Comintern-affiliated Communist Party of Mexico (PCM). The CPO and the CLA were more whole-hearted in their defense of Rivera, and each claimed to be close to Rivera, although their politics were often counterposed. Rivera's paintings reflected his evolving complex relationship with the CPUSA, CPO, and CLA; while painting *Man at the Crossroads*, Rivera sought CPUSA approval, but faced with Communist Party hostility, the murals he painted for the Lovestoneites and the Trotskyists in late 1933 are marked by their political ambiguity in dealing with these counterposed political trends. *Controlador del universo* expresses clearer Trotskyist sympathies.

The Politics of Diego Rivera

In the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Bolshevik and Mexican revolutions, Rivera (1886-1957) joined the PCM and helped found the Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores, a pro-Communist artists' union, with David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco (the *tres grandes* of Mexican muralism). In 1925, Rivera was elected to the PCM central committee; in 1927-1928 he travelled to the Soviet Union, and managed the PCM's presidential campaign in 1928-1929. As Apel put it, Rivera "was not only fully engaged by Mexican Communist politics but was one of its leading exponents both organizationally and in print, recognized and acknowledged as a party spokesman."³ At the same time, as Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher wrote, "not satisfied with his artistic eminence, Rivera saw himself also as a political leader" even though "as a politician Rivera was even less than an amateur" who "frequently fell a

2. James Gregory, "Communist Party Membership by Districts, 1922-1950." https://depts.washington.edu/moves/CP_map-members.shtml; Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 29-30; Introduction, *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931-1933* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 2002), 1.

3. Apel, "Diego Rivera and the Left," 63.

prey to his restless temperament.”⁴ Since the mid-1920s, Trotsky and the Left Opposition had been waging a political struggle against what they saw as a political counterrevolution in the Soviet workers’ state that betrayed the principles of Bolshevism, especially in supporting Stalin’s concept of “socialism in one country,” instead of Lenin’s emphasis on the necessity of world revolution. The Comintern and its sections, Trotsky argued, had become a tool of the Stalinist bureaucracy instead of a force to forge revolutionary parties around the world. At this time the Left Opposition sought to be readmitted to the Comintern to fight against the bureaucracy and for a return to Leninism, while continuing to defend the Soviet Union against imperialism.⁵

While in Moscow, Rivera was disturbed by the campaign against Trotsky and became sympathetic to the Left Opposition.⁶ September 27, 1929, the PCM expelled Rivera, with the painter voting for his own expulsion. The official reason was that Rivera continued to accept commissions from the Mexican government under president Emilio Portes Gil while the government repressed Communists. In a document from December 1929, Rivera laid out his differences with the PCM leadership, including opposing the creation of Communist-led labor unions, and declared solidarity with “the international line of opposition defined and headed by comrade Leon Trotsky.”⁷ Since Rivera’s expulsion overlapped with the deepened anti-Communism of the “Maximato,” the six years dominated by former president Plutarco Elías Calles (1928-1934), supporters of the PCM criticized his break with the party as a cowardly maneuver to maintain official patronage for his murals.⁸

4. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929-1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 359-60.

5. See Leon Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin* (London: New Park, 1974 [1928]).

6. Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 358.

7. Diego Rivera, “Mi expulsión del PCM,” December 19, 1929, reprinted in *La Jornada*, August 31, 1986, clipping in ICAA, item 754283; Francisco Reyes Palma, “Diego y el troskismo,” *La Jornada*, Aug. 31, 1986, clipping in ICAA, item 754296; Elías Chávez, “El ‘Traidor y Fascista’ Diego Rivera,” *Revista Proceso*, Nov. 24 (2019); Richardson, “Dilemmas of a Communist Artist”; On Rivera’s expulsion from the PCM see Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 98-99; Wolfe, *Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, chapter 20. See also Diego Rivera, “Raíces políticas y motivos personales de la controversia Siqueiros-Rivera: Stalinsmo vs. bolchevismo leninista,” (December 1935), in Raquel Tibol, ed., *Arte y Política* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1979), 113-114.

8. Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 11.



1. Diego Rivera, *La revolución rusa o la tercera internacional*/*Russian Revolution or the Third International*, 1933, fresco sobre tablero transportable/fresco on movable panel. 0.95 m². Photography Schalkwijk/Art Resource, NY. D.R. © 2022 Banco de México, Fiduciario en el Fideicomiso relativo a los Museos Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo. Av. 5 de Mayo No. 2, col. Centro, alc. Cuauhtémoc, c.p. 06000, Ciudad de México. Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2022.

Rivera and the Communist Party in the United States

In the 1920s, when Rivera was a PCM member, Communists in the United States hailed his paintings. In 1924, Bertram D. Wolfe, a Communist from the United States who was at the time a leading member of the PCM, published an article in the liberal *Nation*, “Art and Revolution in Mexico,” that hailed Rivera as “Mexico’s greatest painter.”⁹ Other writers sympathetic to Communism praised Rivera, such as John Dos Passos in the *New Masses* in May 1927.¹⁰

Rivera’s expulsion from the official pro-Moscow Communist movement in 1929, and his insistence that he remained a Communist artist, posed an acute dilemma to critics and artists close to the CPUSA. Rivera’s genius was undeniable, and for many artists and intellectuals in the United States, Rivera

9. Bertram D. Wolfe, “Art and Revolution in Mexico,” *The Nation* (August 27, 1924): 207.

10. John Dos Passos, “Paint the Revolution!,” *New Masses* 2, no. 5 (March 1927): 15. See also Andrew Hemingway, “American Communists View Mexican Muralism: Critical and Artistic Responses,” *Crónicas*, nos. 8/9 (March 2001/February 2002): 19-23.

embodied the ideal of the revolutionary artist while espousing support for Marxism. As Andrew Hemingway has argued, “the influence of Mexican muralism on some American artists of the inter-war period was fundamentally related to the attraction many of these same artists felt towards Communism.”¹¹ Nonetheless commissions from the Mexican and United States governments and large capitalist corporations, when other left-wing artists faced economic and political hardship caused by the Depression and the anti-Communist Maximato, further comprised him in the eyes of the Communist leadership. The belief of influential CPUSA spokesmen (like the writer Mike Gold) in a direct connection between artists’ politics and the quality of their art accentuated this dilemma. These denunciations from the CPUSA caused Rivera to seek to burnish his left-wing credentials.¹² Painter Ben Shahn, Rivera’s assistant on the RCA mural, recalled decades later that Rivera wanted CPUSA’s support but “he just wasn’t getting it. He would have given his right arm for two inches, say, in the *Daily Worker* or in the *Masses*, and he wasn’t getting it.” Painter Lucienne Bloch, another of Rivera’s assistants, wrote that after being expelled from the PCM, Rivera “wanted desperately to return to the fold, but on his own terms.” This, she speculated, led him to try to make his paintings appear more Communist.¹³

In May 1930, the CPUSA’s *Daily Worker* ran a photo of Rivera at an official May Day march in Mexico City under the title “A Renegade on Parade.” After using an ethnic slur (“greaseball”) to refer to Rivera, the paper attacked him for “help[ing] the Mexican government” and accused him of supporting Trotsky while maintaining “a spiritual affinity with the international Right Wing.”¹⁴

Rivera’s influence among left-wing artists and intellectuals, and the difficulty of maintaining a hard line against him, was underlined when the New York branch of the pro-CPUSA John Reed Club (JRC) invited him to speak at its meeting on January 1, 1932.¹⁵ According to a self-critical statement in the

11. Hemingway, “American Communists View Mexican Muralism,” 13-14.

12. Barbara Haskell, “América: Mexican Muralism and Art in the United States, 1925-1945,” in Barbara Haskell, ed., *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2020), 22-23, 28.

13. Interview with Ben Shahn by Eric F. Goldman, January 17, 1965, in Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Bloch, “On Location with Diego Rivera,” 114.

14. *Daily Worker*, May, 17, 1930.

15. Andrew Hemingway, “John Reed Clubs and Proletarian Art,” part I, *Against the Current*, 177 (July/August 2015), <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc177/p4467/>; Robert C. Vitz, “Clubs,

New Masses, a cultural magazine aligned with the CPUSA, “the invitation was extended to him hastily on the basis of his former record as a revolutionary artist and as result of rumors that he was seeking to return to the revolutionary path which he had deserted when the terror against Mexican workers and peasants was launched in 1929.” Rivera donated \$100, which the John Reed Club accepted “without investigation or proper consideration.” The *New Masses* later denounced the speech as “an attempt by Rivera to achieve a personal triumph” instead of acknowledging “his own unprincipled activities as a supporter of American imperialism and its tool, the [Mexican president Plutarco Elías] Calles government.” The article denounced Rivera for supporting Trotsky and “speaking before the Lovestone group of renegades from Communism, before the social-fascist [Socialist Party] Rand School, and various bourgeois circles.” The article ended by stating that the JRC returned Rivera’s donation as “the money of a renegade [...] with which he hoped to buy himself that revolutionary cloak which he needs to serve his capitalist masters effectively.”¹⁶

In the *Daily Worker*, William F. Dunne cited the JRC’s invitation to Rivera as an example of the “Wrong Tendencies in the Ranks of American Intellectuals.” Dunne labelled Rivera “the renegade and counter-revolutionist, the propagandist in the field of art and culture for the present Wall Street owned Mexican government.”¹⁷ The same issue of the *New Masses* that contained the self-criticism, published an article by CPUSA cultural spokesman Joseph Freeman (using the name Robert Evans) against Rivera. Freeman, who had been living in Mexico City when the PCM expelled Rivera (and was briefly married to Ione Robinson, one of Rivera’s assistants) wrote that “the Mexican worker and peon have done more for Diego Rivera than he has done for them. They furnished him the content which justifies his crude form; they infused purpose and meaning into the hand that progressed from Picasso to Zapata, from Zapata to Lenin, only to falter at a critical moment, to desert the new-found line, and to plunge back into the sterility of middle-class concepts.” Rivera, Freeman continued, “has abandoned the revolutionary movement and turned to painting for the bourgeoisie.” The article described Rivera’s expulsion from the PCM as a consequence of Rivera’s choosing an artistic career and bourgeois patrons over the

Congresses and Unions: American Artists Confront the Thirties,” *New York History* 54, no. 4 (October 1974): 424-447.

16. John Reed Club of New York, “Diego Rivera and the John Reed Club,” *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 9 (February 1932): 31.

17. *Daily Worker*, February 1, 1932.

class struggle; Rivera supported Trotsky, Freeman argued, to justify his desertion from the Communist Party. Rivera had lost “the motive power of his art.” and warned that “amidst the sterility and aimlessness his bourgeois ‘success,’ he must realize that, cut off from the revolutionary workers and peasants, he faces corruption as a man and bankruptcy as an artist.”¹⁸

At about this time, Rivera published an article in the *Modern Quarterly* which addressed such criticism. He described the nineteenth century French artist Honoré Daumier as “a revolutionary artist” although “his origin was bourgeois, [and] he worked for the bourgeois papers, selling his drawings to them.” Rivera noted his expulsion from the Communist Party, but called himself a “guerilla fighter” who “take[s] the munitions from the hands of the bourgeoisie.”

My munitions are the walls, the colors, and the money necessary to feed myself so that I may continue to work. On the walls of the bourgeoisie, painting cannot always have as fighting an aspect as it could on the walls, let us say, of a revolutionary school.¹⁹

The CPUSA stepped up its attacks. The *Daily Worker* was more vituperative in October 1932, calling Rivera a “renegade, colleague of the Lovestone renegade group, who deserted the Communist Party of Mexico and the workers and peasants at a time when they faced murderous attacks by Wall Street’s Mexican fascist dictatorship, and joined the government which was butchering them, is being well rewarded by American imperialism... Like a jackal he follows the class battlefronts in the United States where lie in prisons or in graves the victims of the capitalist attacks.”²⁰

The article’s polemic against Rivera did not focus on his Detroit murals but his work in Michigan with the League of Mexican Workers and Peasants. Details

18. Robert Evans [Joseph Freeman], “Painting and Politics: The Case of Diego Rivera,” *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 9 (February 1932): 22-25. On Freeman’s relationship with Rivera, see John A. Britton, *Revolution and Ideology: Images of the Mexican Revolution in the United States* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 119-120; Stephanie J. Smith, “The Painter and the Communist: Gender, Culture, and the Fleeting Marriage of Ione Robinson and Joseph Freeman, 1929-1932,” *Journal of Women’s History* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 12-34.

19. Diego Rivera, “The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art,” *Modern Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1932): 51-57.

20. *Daily Worker*, October 13, 1932.



2. Diego Rivera, *Man Controller of the Universe or Man in the Time Machine* (El hombre controlador del universo or El hombre en la máquina del tiempo, detail, Vladimir Lenin), 1934, fresco, 485 × 1145 cm. Photography Schalkwijk/Art Resource, NY. D.R. © 2022 Banco de México, Fiduciario en el Fideicomiso relativo a los Museos Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo. Av. 5 de Mayo No. 2, col. Centro, alc. Cuauhtémoc, c.p. 06000, Ciudad de México. Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2022.

are murky, but with Rivera's money and the support of the Mexican consul, the League helped destitute immigrants return to Mexico. Whatever Rivera's motivation, the League's work aligned with the efforts of the US government to deport Mexicans and US citizens of Mexican descent, the Michigan government's desire to limit welfare rolls, and the Mexican government's nationalist vision that Mexicans should remain in their homeland and not emigrate north.²¹ The CPUSA and

21. Dennis Nodín Valdés, "Mexican Revolutionary Nationalism and Repatriation during the Great Depression," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 1-23; Dylan

its legal defense arm, International Labor Defense (ILD), campaigned against deportation of immigrants during the Depression, opposed the League, and advocated the united struggle of immigrant and native-born workers. An article in the *Daily Worker* denouncing the deportation of 433 Mexicans from Detroit, stated that “Attempts have been made in the capitalist press to link the activities of Diego Rivera, who is playing the leading role in the deportations, with the Communist movement.” The CPUSA opposed deportation and repatriation of immigrant workers, arguing that capitalists who had encouraged migration must bear the cost of workers’ livelihood; the CPUSA pointed out that Mexico could not provide a decent life for returning immigrants, especially in the Depression.²²

Rivera and “Leninists” in the 1930s

In the early 1930s, three significant groups existed in the United States that claimed to be Leninist: the CPUSA, and two dissident organizations, the Communist Party (Majority Group)—called “Lovestoneites” after their leader, Jay Lovestone—and the Communist League of America (Opposition), led by James P. Cannon.²³ Rivera maintained friendly relations with the CPO and CLA. Both groups, much smaller than the CPUSA, claimed founders of the CPUSA as leaders, and as their names indicate, saw themselves as Communists in opposition to the actual Communist leadership in the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Communist International. Lovestone sympathized with the Right Opposition around Nikolai Bukharin, and Cannon supported Leon Trotsky’s Left Opposition. As a delegate to the Sixth Comintern Congress (1928), Cannon was won to Trotsky’s view that Stalin was betraying Bolshevism. The CPUSA, led by Lovestone, expelled Cannon and his followers. In 1929, Stalin moved to the left to outflank his opponents in the Soviet Union, and Lovestone found himself on the outs with Stalin. The CPUSA then expelled him and his followers.

A. T. Miner, “*El Renegado Comunista: Diego Rivera, La Liga de Obreros y Campesinos and Mexican Repatriation in Detroit*,” *Third Text*, vol. 6, no. 6 (November 2005): 653.

22. *Daily Worker*, November 17, 1932; Miner, “*El Renegado Comunista*,” 635; Nodín Valdés, “Mexican Revolutionary Nationalism,” 16; Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers and Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 186.

23. There were also other, smaller, groups.

The Lovestoneites, the right-wing of Communist politics in the 1920s, supported the basic tenets of Stalinism, especially “socialism in one country.” But the CPO opposed the Soviet and Comintern’s leadership’s left-wing stance during the “Third Period” (1928-1934). The CPO opposed the Comintern’s view that capitalism was poised for immediate collapse, and opposed Communists’ leaving the established unions to create “revolutionary” unions, and description of social democracy as “social fascism.” The Lovestoneites’ weakness was that their opposition to CPUSA and Comintern leadership was based on factional pique and not a coherent political program: they resented their treatment by Stalin and believed they should be running the CPUSA.²⁴

The CLA supported the struggle of Leon Trotsky’s Left Opposition against what they saw as the degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, encapsulated in Stalin’s advocacy of “socialism in one country.” Like the CPO, the CLA sought to be readmitted to the Comintern, but their goal was a political struggle against Stalin for leadership of the Soviet and world Communist movement. Although Trotskyists opposed the creation of new unions and the concept of “social fascism,” the left-wing rhetoric of the Third Period undercut support for the Left Opposition.

The existence of three groups claiming to be Leninist confused less sophisticated observers. The Lovestoneites’ emphasized “Communist Unity” in response to these divisions. In a lengthy three-part article, “Some Plain Words About Communist Unity!,” CPO leader Ben Gitlow stressed: “We have sent a very large number of communications to the [official Communist] Party, to the Trotsky group, to the Executive of the Communist International, to Leon Trotsky, and to Joseph Stalin, in particular, dealing with the question of unity.” Gitlow stressed “the most immediate necessity is to unite the movement, to reestablish Party democracy and to make it possible unitedly to tackle the problems before the Communist movement.” CPO calls for “the speediest and most energetic steps to liquidate the crisis [in the international Communist movement] and [to] unite the Communist movement once more”—without analysis of the political issues dividing the Communist movement—read like Humpty Dumpty’s men trying to put him together

24. See Alexander, *The Right Opposition*; Paul Le Blanc and Tim Davenport, eds., *The “American Exceptionalism” of Jay Lovestone and His Comrades, 1929-1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries*; and Jacob A. Zumoff, “The Left in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Party of America, 1934-1935,” *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 85 (Spring 2020): 165-198.

again.²⁵ Nonetheless, such calls resonated among some dissident Communists, for example in Spain.²⁶

During his time in the United States, Rivera established what the historian Robert Alexander termed “close contact” with the CPO.²⁷ This was facilitated by Rivera’s friendship with Bertram D. Wolfe, the associate editor of the *Lovestoneites Workers Age* and director of the New Workers’ School, who had been a member of the PCM central committee along with Rivera. Wolfe became Rivera’s publicist, collaborator, and biographer, and translated for him when he lectured at the New Workers’ School.²⁸

Rivera agreed with the CPO’s emphasis on “Communist Unity.” In July 1932, Rivera donated \$100 to the CPO when *Workers Age* skipped an issue “thus enabling the following issue to appear,” according to a notice on the paper’s front page. The announcement stated that Rivera “was not a member” of the CPO but attached a note to the donation: “I believe that the unification of the Communist Party is absolutely necessary... The Party must open its ranks to all the different tendencies and there should be an open discussion to arrive at a unifying resolution.”²⁹

Since Trotsky’s Left Opposition, the pro-Bukharin Right Opposition, and the Stalinist Comintern leadership all claimed to be Leninists in the tradition of Bolshevism, and until recently had been united in a common movement, their reunification did not seem outlandish. In 1931, Trotsky addressed an open letter to the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, “An Appeal to Communist Unity in Spain,” that stressed: “The policy of artificial splits must be stopped immediately in Spain, advising—not ordering, but just that, advising—the Spanish Communist organizations to convene in the briefest possible period a unity conference which should assure all shadings, under the necessary discipline of action, at least that degree of freedom of criticism which in 1917 was enjoyed by the various currents of Russian Bolshevism, which as in

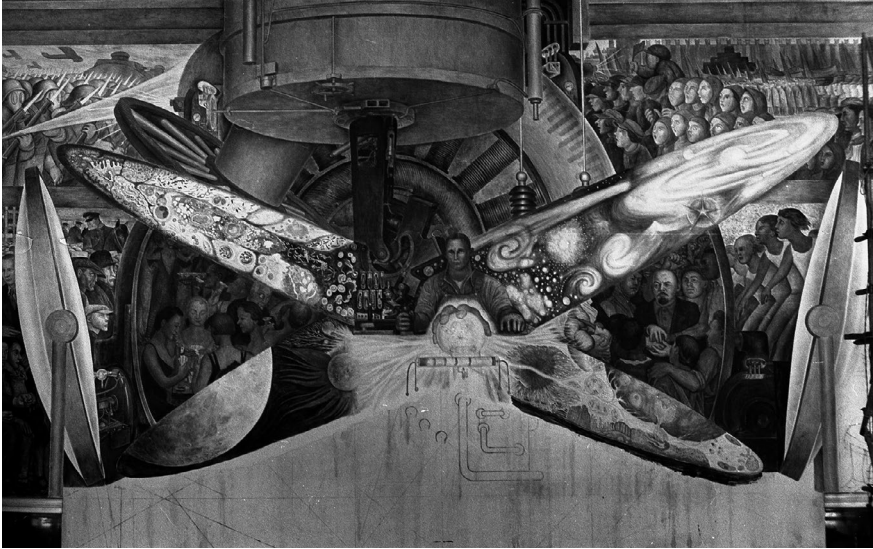
25. *Workers Age*, May 14, 1932; May 21, 1932; May 28, 1932.

26. On Nin and the Left Opposition see Leon Trotsky, *The Spanish Revolution, 1931-39* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973).

27. Alexander, *Right Opposition*, 274.

28. *Workers Age*, January 17, 1932; April 2, 1932; Javier Mac Gregor Campuzano, “Bertram D. Wolfe: política y pedagogía comunistas en los años veinte,” *Sociológica* 35, no. 101 (September-December 2020): 113-138; Wolfe, *Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, 4-5. Donald W. Treadgold, “Bertram D. Wolfe: A Life in Two Centuries,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 20, no. 4 (December 1979): 346.

29. *Workers Age*, July 13, 1932.



3. Full view of the fresco *Man Controller of the Universe or Man in the Time Machine* (El hombre controlador del universo o El hombre en la máquina del tiempo), 1934, 485 × 1145 cm. Photography Schalkwijk/Art Resource, NY. D.R. © 2022 Banco de México, Fiduciario en el Fideicomiso relativo a los Museos Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo. Av. 5 de Mayo No. 2, col. Centro, alc. Cuauhtémoc, c.p. 06000, Ciudad de México. Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2022.

possession of incomparably higher experience and temper.”³⁰ Unity itself was not the goal of the Left Opposition, but Trotsky fought to rejoin the Comintern so that the Left Opposition could win cadres. In the 1920s Trotsky believed that Bukharin’s emphasis on the rich peasantry (kulaks) threatened to undermine the revolution, while Stalin’s industrialization and forced collectivization of agriculture at least bought the revolution time.

The Mural Controversy

In its obituary for Rivera, the *New York Times* pointed out that “the Rockefeller Center incident was bizarre in many respects.”³¹ Rivera—including his

30. *Militant*, July 4, 1931.

31. *New York Times*, November 25, 1957.

personality and his politics—were well known in the United States by the 1930s; more than fifty thousand people attended his month-long exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in December 1931 and January 1932.³² Rivera spent much of the early 1930s painting in the United States, including murals in the San Francisco Stock Exchange Building, the California School of Fine Arts, and the Detroit Institute of Arts. When the Rockefellers contacted Rivera to paint in the RCA building, the artist's murals in Detroit were under attack by religious leaders in Motor City as atheistic, communistic, and sacrilegious.³³

Rivera's murals would share the RCA lobby with murals by Catalan painter Josep Maria Sert and Welsh painter Frank Brangwyn. The Rockfellers' original conception called for Rivera to depict "man at the crossroads and looking with uncertainty but with hope and high vision to the choosing of a course leading to a new and better future." The conception was clear that Rivera's paintings were to be "canvasses" and "done in black, white, and gray."³⁴ After negotiations, Rivera received permission to use color and to paint directly on the wall, using fresco techniques. This changed not only the form but the content of the murals since, as Mary Coffey stressed, "by executing a permanent work of art, Rivera intervened in rather than merely adorned Rockefeller's new corporate tower."³⁵

Although Rivera's description of his painting did not mention Lenin, he stated that the mural would "show the Workers arriving at a true understanding of their rights regarding the means of production" and "show the Workers of the Cities and the Country inheriting the Earth."³⁶ In March 1933—as Hitler was consolidating his power in Germany—Rivera moved to New York City

32. Alejandro Ugalde, "The Presence of Mexican Art in New York between the World Wars: Cultural Exchange and Art Diplomacy," PhD diss. (New York: Columbia University, 2003), 223-243.

33. See Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Alicia Azuela, *Diego Rivera en Detroit* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1985).

34. "Theme Re Painting in Great Hall of No. 1 Building Rockefeller Center," September 30, 1932, in Rockefeller Center Archives.

35. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*, 35.

36. Diego Rivera, "Subject Matter of the Proposed Mural Decorations by Diego Rivera for the Radio Corporation of America Building in the Rockefeller Center, New York City," undated [November 1932?], in Rockefeller Center Archives.

to work on his Rockefeller Center mural.³⁷ Nelson Rockefeller, the 29-year-old head of the corporation building Rockefeller Center, offered Rivera a commission to paint a 63-foot by 17-foot mural near the elevator bank in the RCA building. The theme of the work according to the *New York Times* was “human intelligence in control of the forces of nature.”³⁸

In retrospect, the clash between Rivera, the Communist artist, and Rockefeller, the capitalist, seems inevitable. Rockefeller, wanting to avoid controversy to ease renting office space in Rockefeller Center, sought to use Rockefeller Center to bolster his family’s vision of labor-capital cooperation.³⁹ Rivera, sensitive to Communist criticism, sought to burnish his revolutionary image.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, the commission did not appear strange when it was announced, because Nelson Rockefeller and his mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, a co-founder of MoMA, had long supported Mexican artists. Nor should Rivera’s politics have surprised the Rockefellers: his mural in the Ministry of Education in Mexico City, *Wall Street Banquet* (1928) contains a caricature of John D. Rockefeller Sr., and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller had purchased Rivera’s sketchbook of his visit to the Soviet Union, *May Day, Moscow*.

Rockefeller Center issued a press release in March 1933 stating, “The Rivera mural will be one of the most important elements in the Rockefeller Center decorative program, and the first of the artist’s work to be placed permanently in New York City.”⁴¹ Rivera and his assistants—Shahn, Lucienne Bloch, Lou Block, Stephen Dimitroff, Hideo Noda, Arthur Niendorff and Andrés Sánchez Flores—began work on April 4, 1933, with an original deadline of May 1. The mural featured a worker in its center, with his hands on the controls of machinery; in front of him a hand clutches an orb in which chemical and biological processes of life take place. Emanating from the orb are two ellipses,

37. Azuela, “El escándalo de Diego Rivera, en Detroit,” 3-8.

38. Scott, “Diego Rivera at Rockefeller Center,” 73; *New York Times*, March 21, 1933. The November 2, 1932, contract, signed by Rivera and Todd, Robertson, and Todd Engineering Corporation, is in Rockefeller Center Archives.

39. On Rivera’s defensiveness towards Communist criticism, see Wolfe, *Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*; on Rockefeller’s conception of Rockefeller Center as a beacon of class collaboration, see Joseph M. Watson, “Organization for Cooperation: The Varieties and Vagaries of Labor at Rockefeller Center,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 73, no. 2 (2019): 156-167; Coffey, “Corporate Patronage at the Crossroads,” 24-25.

40. Walter Greer Markle, “Diego Rivera’s Portrait of America: Marxism and Montage,” PhD diss. (Eugene: University of Oregon, 1999), 177.

41. Rockefeller Center press release, March 20, 1933, in Rockefeller Center Archives.

representing the natural forces unleashed by modern technology, that form an X, dividing the mural. The left-hand portion of the mural seems to depict capitalism, including a scene of the idle rich. On the right-hand portion of the mural, there was a procession passing what seems to be Lenin's mausoleum in Red Square. The mural seems to pose the "crossroads" that man faces as between capitalist barbarism and a socialist future.

In late April, days after Nelson Rockefeller congratulated Rivera for the mural's progress, the *New York World-Telegram*, ran a story with the headline, "Rivera Perpetuate Scenes of Communist Activity for R.C.A. Walls—and Rockefeller, Jr., Foots Bill." The journalist, Joseph Lilly, wrote: "The painting is a forthright statement of the Communist viewpoint, unmistakable as such, and is being paid for by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., whose opposition to collectivist principles has been unwavering over a lifetime." The article noted that the mural depicted a workers' demonstration with Communist banners. Lilly quoted Rivera's claim that he was "painting for [his] class—the working class."⁴²

Lilly ended his article with a quote from the painter that promised to anger Rivera by downplaying his leftist credentials while offending the Rockefellers by depicting them as complicit in the artists' use of Communist images: "Mrs. [Abby Aldrich] Rockefeller said she liked my painting very much... Mr. Rockefeller, he likes it too. I am not a politician. I am just a painter." In a follow-up article a few days later, "Communists Think Rivera Pulled Punch," Lilly included an interview with Joseph Freeman and artists Jacob Burck, Hugo Gellert and William Gropper, after the four had visited Rivera at work in Rockefeller Center. All were effusive in praising Rivera's talent, but with the exception of Gellert, found the mural disappointing. "He has not portrayed," Burck declared, "the brutality, the starvation and the hunger as it really exists."⁴³ As Alejandro Ugalde points out, "just as Lilly had indirectly questioned John D. Rockefeller's political position, this time he was using the words of the Communist artists to present Rivera as an opportunist and a sell-out artist."⁴⁴

After Lilly's articles, Rivera added Lenin's portrait to *Man at the Crossroads*.⁴⁵ Now, to the right of the central figure, framed by the ellipses, Lenin was

42. *New York World-Telegram*, April 24, 1933.

43. *New York World-Telegram*, April 26 (?), 1933, clipping in Joseph Freeman papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, box 180, folder 3.

44. Ugalde, "The Presence of Mexican Art in New York," 263.

45. Bloch, "On Location with Diego Rivera," 116.



4. Lucienne Bloch, photography. Rivera's fresco, *Man at the Crossroads*, in progress. May 1933. RCA building, Rockefeller Center, New York. Photography courtesy of Old State Studios, Gualala, California.

surrounded by workers, including a black worker, and a soldier who clasped hands. On May 4, Nelson Rockefeller wrote to Rivera about his “thrilling mural,” claiming Lenin’s portrait was not appropriate for a public mural and “ask[ing Rivera] to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin’s face now appears.” On May 6, Rivera replied to Rockefeller, arguing that Lenin was included in his original sketch and could not be removed. Rivera raised that instead of deleting Lenin, that he include “a figure of some great American historical leader,” suggesting Abraham Lincoln, John Brown and other abolitionists, with Cyrus McCormick. Ben Shahn, supported by most of Rivera’s other assistants, opposed the proposed compromise and threatened to strike if the painting were modified at all. When Rivera refused to remove Lenin, the

engineers paid him \$14,000 remaining on his commission, and prevented the painter and his assistants from continuing work. As the headline of the *New York Times* put it: “Rockefellers Ban Lenin in RCA Mural and Dismiss Rivera.”⁴⁶

Lenin at the Crossroads

Most scholars see the reason for Rivera’s including a portrait of Lenin as self-evident, yet as Catha Paquette highlighted, “embedded in the iconic image of Lenin were intensely partisan views.”⁴⁷ Since the Bolshevik leader’s death in 1924, the Communist movement had been fighting over the meaning of Leninism. The Comintern-affiliated CPUSA saw a continuity between Lenin and Stalin, and Leninism meant a battle against Trotsky; for the Left Oppositionist CLA, who called themselves “Bolshevik-Leninists,” Stalin had betrayed Lenin, and Leninism meant a struggle against the Stalinists; and for the Right Oppositionist CPO, Lovestone was the best Leninist and Leninism signified the Lovestoneites’ return to the helm of the Communist movement.

Which Lenin did Rivera seek to include? Dora Apel argues the portrait of Lenin by himself underlines the “conspicuous absence [...] of Stalin” and highlights “an implicit critique of Stalin contained in the mural.”⁴⁸ Rivera did not paint Lenin and Stalin together, as was the fashion in the Soviet Union, but depicted Lenin alone, surrounded only by workers and farmers. Unlike *World War*, *Proletarian Unity* or *El hombre, controlador del universo* (all discussed below), *Man at the Crossroads* includes neither Trotsky nor any other Communist leader. Rivera’s Lenin is ambiguous.

Nelson Rockefeller refused to allow a professional photographer hired by Rivera to photograph the mural, although Lucienne Bloch quickly took photos.⁴⁹ According to Ben Shahn, “Within an hour the building was surrounded by mounted police after we were stopped. We were pulled away... I was on the scaffold with Diego when that happened. They just came and pulled us

46. *New York Times*, May 10, 1933. There is a copy of Rockefeller’s letter to Rivera in Ben Shahn papers, box 21, folder 18, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Both letters are reprinted in Howard Greenfeld, *Ben Shahn: An Artist’s Life* (New York: Random House, 1998), 93-95.

47. Paquette, *At the Crossroads*, 165-66.

48. Apel, “Diego Rivera and the Left,” 60.

49. Bloch, “On Location with Diego Rivera,” 116; *New York Times*, March 28, 1999.

away.”⁵⁰ Rivera’s unfinished mural was covered with paper, and the Rockefellers indicated (falsely) they would not destroy the painting. According to the *New York Times*, “Radical groups seized upon the conflict to issue statements condemning the halting of work as comparable with the vicious deeds of Hitler.” The paper added: “His fresco, [Rivera] insisted, was not Communist propaganda, but the propaganda of the artist for his ideas. The official Communist group, he explained, had criticized both the fresco and himself for his work in collaboration with the Rockefellers.”⁵¹

In his autobiography, Rivera wrote that upon leaving Rockefeller Center for the last time, “one of the very scenes I had depicted in my mural materialized before my eyes. A demonstration of workers began to form; the policemen charged, the workers dispersed; and the back of a seven-year-old girl, whose little legs could not carry her to safety in time, was injured by the blow of a club.”⁵²

Rivera wanted to sue Rockefeller, but his lawyer, Phillip Wittenberg, informed him that under US law, Rockefeller had fulfilled his obligation by paying Rivera and was free to do with his property as he wished. Rivera turned to the press and the left to pressure and embarrass the Rockefellers.⁵³ Not all the coverage was hostile to the Rockefellers—many papers defended the family’s right to make whatever demands they wished on vendors like Rivera—but even the most hostile reporters increased Rivera’s reputation as a Communist.⁵⁴ Wolfe recalled that “the affair now became a *cause célèbre*” and “bigger and bigger demonstrations picketed Radio City, each demanding the unveiling of the covered mural.” The CPO found out through Wolfe and, according to *Workers Age*, “members of the Communist Opposition immediately got in touch with the Trotsky group, the C.P.L.A. and the Communist Party-controlled Workers School.”⁵⁵ A member of the Trotskyist CLA recalled that “as we were having a branch meeting, a messenger notified us that Rivera was dragged off the

50. Interview with Ben Shahn by Forrest Selving, September 27, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/shahn68.htm> (accessed April 19, 2021).

51. *New York Times*, May 11, 1933.

52. Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 128.

53. Markle, “Diego Rivera’s Portrait of America,” 180.

54. A sense of the press coverage outside of New York City can be seen in the “Rivera scrapbook” from May 1933 in the Rockefeller Center archives.

55. *Workers Age*, May 15, 1933. The Conference for Progressive Labor Action was led by A. J. Muste, whose successor organization fused with the CLA in 1934.

scaffold and in the Rockefeller Center and virtually held prisoner in an attempt to stop him from continuing the work” and “called upon us to demonstrate.”⁵⁶ Artists and writers throughout the country wired protests.⁵⁷ The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that “some of Rivera’s assistants” brought word “to Communist headquarters in New York and about 10 o’clock, two hours after Rivera received notice, a group of about 100 sympathizers of the artists paraded with banners until dispersed by the police.”⁵⁸ The *Daily News* described “a demonstration of 200 Soviet sympathizers” in Midtown that “resulted in several skirmishes with police.”⁵⁹

The Left Reacts to Rockefeller’s Attack on Rivera

Despite hostility to Rivera, the CPUSA could not ignore Rockefeller’s attacks. Robert Minor, a celebrated cartoonist before becoming a CPUSA leader, wrote a front-page article in the *Daily Worker* in May 1933, titled “Rockefeller, Hitler Against Worker, Solider, and Negro.” Noting that Rockefeller’s move against Rivera took place on the same day as a mass book burning in Berlin, Minor argued:

Diego Rivera, painting for Rockefeller, had deserted the Communist Party. Diego Rivera was no longer a revolutionist. But he had nothing to sell to Mr. Rockefeller but his talent and the cadaver of his old love and hate.

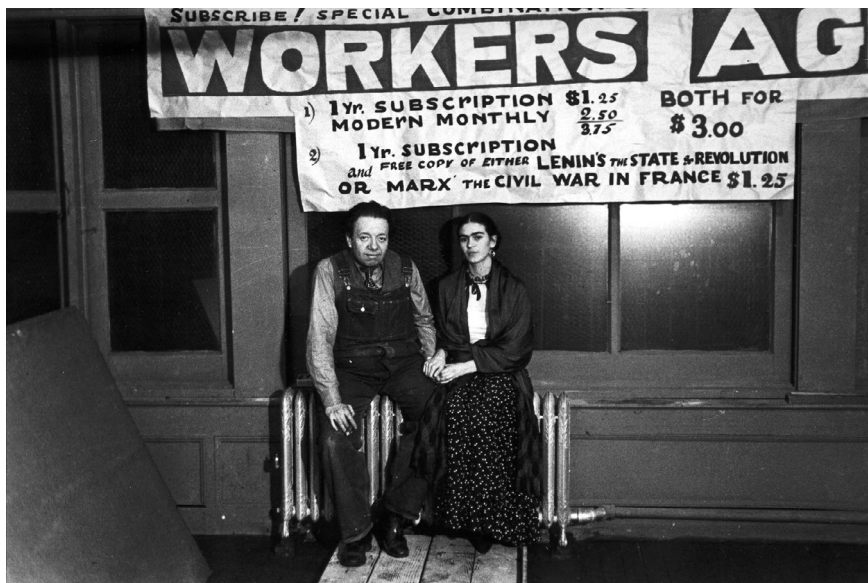
Promised by Rockefeller the freedom to paint what he wanted, and bereft of creativity, Rivera decided to paint Lenin because “there was nothing else to paint.” Minor described the Rockefeller’s dismissal of Rivera as “one of the lightning flashes in the stormy skies of the decline of capitalism.” He concluded by promising that “Not too long after the German masses will hang its butcher Hitler, many men of the class and role of Rockefeller will face a revolutionary tribunal of American workers, soldiers and Negroes. It may be in the same

56. Morris Levitt to Max Shachtman, May 10, 1933, in Max Shachtman papers, Tamiment Library, box 6, folder 26.

57. Wolfe, *Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, 329.

58. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 10, 1933.

59. *Daily News*, May 10, 1933.



5. Lucienne Bloch, *Midnight at New Workers School*, 1933, photography. Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo at the offices of the Communist Party (Opposition). Photography courtesy of Old State Studios, Gualala, California.

great hall at the Rockefeller Center.”⁶⁰ Minor presented the dispute as a misunderstanding because in the CPUSA’s eyes Rivera was no more a Communist than Rockefeller was. In a protest telegram to Nelson Rockefeller, on the other hand, the Boston John Reed Club was more positive towards Rivera, described the mural as depicting the “international proletariat under Lenin’s leadership,” and promised to “rally thousands of sincere artists, cultural workers, to protest capitalist attempts to suppress cultural activities.”⁶¹

Workers Age ran a front-page article about the attacks, and described how the CPUSA “in the most shameful manner [...] refused to do anything,” but “the other organizations agreed and the demonstration took place.”⁶² The Trotskyist *Militant* ran a front-page article that described Rivera as “one of the foremost artistic geniuses of the present generation,” and described the protest outside

60. *Daily Worker*, May 11, 1933.

61. John Reed Club of Boston to Nelson Rockefeller, May 12-13, 1933, in Rockefeller Family, Record Group 2, Series C, folder 707, Rockefeller Archives Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

62. *Workers Age*, May 15, 1933.

Rockefeller Center on May 9, highlighting the “crowd of revolutionary workers, many Left Oppositionists and sympathizers among them.” The paper announced that on the coming Saturday, May 13, Rivera would speak under the auspices of the Trotskyists’ International Workers School at Town Hall, a Midtown venue that seated 1,500 people.⁶³ In its report on that meeting, the *Militant* highlighted “the active and often leading role of the Left Opposition, with which Rivera showed his political sympathy.” The CLA helped organize a “provisional united front committee,” joining with pro-CPUSA organizations including the John Reed Club, National Student League, and League of Professional Groups, and independent groups like the Industrial Workers of the World, the Lovestoneites, and other left-wing groups.⁶⁴

According to the *Militant*, at this meeting the delegate from the John Reed Club “insisted on placing as the very first item on the order of business[...] a long resolution which in effect condemned Rivera for a whole series of past acts having nothing to do with the question of the Radio City murals.” In response, three members of the committee, including its chair, Ben Shahn, drafted a six-point resolution “as a guiding line for the conduct of the protest against Rockefeller vandalism and demand in freedom in class expression in art” (in the *Militant’s* words). The delegates from the John Reed Clubs disputed the fifth point, “that since the fight was directed against Rockefeller, it should not be weakened by recriminations as to certain actions of Rivera or of any of the participating organizations included in this united front comm[itee].” The *Militant* stressed that since the sixth point guaranteed each organization participating in the united front the right to its own views and “the full right of criticism” of other groups, that the fifth point “was not a ‘non-aggression pact,’ but an attempt to prevent the organs of the united front committee from being used for an attack on Rivera based on allegations as to his activities in Mexico, in the Soviet Union, in Detroit and elsewhere.” In response, the representatives of the John Reed Clubs pulled out of the committee and later claimed that they had been excluded.⁶⁵

On Sunday, May 14, the united-front committee held a mass meeting of 600 people at Irving Plaza in lower Manhattan. Martin Abern, a founding

63. *Militant*, May 13, 1933. Information on Town Hall, <http://thetownhall.org/visitors-information>.

64. *Militant*, May 20, 1933.

65. *Militant*, May 20, 1933. Quotes are from the paper’s coverage, not from the resolution itself.

Trotskyist leader, chaired the meeting. Abern allowed Phil Bart, a member of the John Reed Club, to speak, even though the JRC refused to join the united front. Other leftists booed and hissed when Bart referred to Rivera as “Mr. Rivera” (instead of “comrade”). Rivera spoke in Spanish, with Wolfe translating. “I beg you to omit the name Rivera from this fight,” he was quoted in the *Militant*, “and when the day comes that something more than painting or talk is required—on that day, either with your good will or without it, comrade Rivera will stand in his place with the rest of the revolutionary workers.”⁶⁶

The next day, Monday, May 15, the united-front committee met to plan a demonstration in Columbus Circle for that Wednesday. Supporters of the CPUSA—representatives of the John Reed Clubs and the International Workers School—again denounced Rivera but, in the end, agreed to participate in the upcoming demonstration. The flyer to “Protest Rockefeller Vandalism” listed speakers, including Abern from the Trotskyists, Wolfe from the Lovestoneites, A.J. Muste, and representatives from the Industrial Workers of the World and the League for Industrial Democracy. At least four speakers from CPUSA-aligned organizations, including Freeman (for the JRC) and Minor (for the Workers’ School).⁶⁷ According to the *Militant*, “the Wednesday mass meeting and demonstration, while not impressive from the point of view of size (some 1000 participants with banners at most), did represent a genuine united front of all sections of the labor movement.” Several hundred demonstrators marched to Radio City, carrying banners against Rockefeller’s attacks on Rivera, then past Rockefeller’s house on 54th Street, chanting “Unveil Rockefeller’s Murals!” The *Daily News* headline describing the Columbus Circle protest was: “200 Reds Boo Rockefeller in Rivera Demonstration.” According to the tabloid, the protesters marched to the Rockefeller home on 54th Street shouting, “We want Rockefeller—at the end of a rope!”⁶⁸ The *Militant* concluded: “The campaign has demonstrated the soundness and effectiveness of the united front tactic on which the Left Opposition stands: unity in action, without confusion of banners, without compromise to sectarianism on the one hand or opportunistic ‘non-aggression’ pacts on the other.”⁶⁹

66. *New York Times*, May 15, 1933; *Militant*, May 20, 1933.

67. The leaflet is reproduced in Pliego Quijano, *El Hombre en la Encrucijada*, 114.

68. *New York Daily News*, May 18, 1933.

69. *Militant*, May 20, 1933.

An Associated Press dispatch underlined that the May 17 protest “was one of the few times that radical groups have effected a complete united front.”⁷⁰ This was not carried out under the Lovestoneite formula of “Leninist unity,” of submerging political differences between groups. Nor did it reflect the CPUSA’s concept of a “united front from below,” based on organizations casting off their own politics in favor of the Comintern. In a small way, the protest reflected Trotsky’s concept of a united front, of hostile left-wing groups joining in common action while continuing the political struggle between them. Tragically, while the CPUSA participated in the united front in New York to defend Rivera, against what they compared to a Nazi book burning, their counterparts in the Communist Party of Germany and the Comintern refused to organize united-front workers’ militias against the Nazis and instead denounced the Social Democratic Party as “social fascists,” allowing Hitler to come to power without a shot being fired.⁷¹

Historian John Lear writes that “the ‘Battle of Rockefeller Center’ only deepened Rivera’s political break with the Stalinists,” since only the Trotskyists and the Lovestoneites defended Rivera because, “in spite of their distinct positions, the groups shared an opposition to Stalin and welcomed Rivera as a fellow dissident.”⁷² Greer Markle similarly notes that “there was a notable silence from the CPUSA.”⁷³ In broad strokes this is true, but in May 1933, the Communist Party tried to balance its opposition to Rockefeller’s anti-Communist attack and their disgust with Rivera.

The ambiguous attitude by the CPUSA to Rivera was emphasized by Rivera’s participation in two pro-Communist rallies in Columbia University. On May 15, Rivera participated in a 5-hour, 1,500-strong student protest against the firing of left-wing economics instructor Donald Henderson.⁷⁴ Rivera likened Henderson’s case to his own: “Capitalism will dismiss a college instructor on

70. See, for example, *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 18, 1933 and *Excelsior*, May 18, 1933.

71. See Leon Trotsky, “For a Workers’ United Front Against Fascism,” December 8, 1931, and “What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat,” January 27, 1932, both in *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York: Pathfinder, 1971).

72. John Lear, “Diego Rivera Paints the Proletariat,” in James Oles, ed., *Diego Rivera’s America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 162-183. I thank professor Lear for sharing this essay before publication.

73. Markle, “Diego Rivera’s Portrait of America,” 183.

74. *New York Times*, March 28, 1932; *New York Times*, April 4, 1932; *New York Times*, August 31, 1932; *New York Times*, October 20, 1932; *New York Times*, April 5, 1933.



6. Diego Rivera addresses a protest at Columbia University shortly after his commission for the Rockefeller Center Murals was cancelled, 1933. Photo Getty Images.

one hand, and pay \$21,000 on the other, just so not to be criticized,” he told the *Columbia Spectator*. (Since Columbia owned the land underneath Rockefeller Center, the comparison was less theoretical than it may have seemed.) “The minute an artist, or an economist digs a little deeper than the capitalists like, they kick him out.”⁷⁵ He told striking students they should “wrest control of the university from Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, a capitalist.” While Rivera spoke, the meeting turned into a melee after a member of the crew team tore down a wreath the protestors had placed at the campus’ Alma Mater statue. “Then strikers, students, and police joined in a free-for-all,” according to the *Daily News*. “Heads were cracked, eyes blacked, clothes torn and three demonstrators were arrested.” The Mexican newspaper, *Excelsior*, ran an article about Rivera’s appearance at the demonstration.⁷⁶ On May 19, Rivera spoke at

75. *Columbia Spectator*, May 15, 1933. In the later 1930s, Henderson became head of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers (UCAPAW), in which the CPUSA was influential.

76. *New York Times*, May 16, 1933; *Brooklyn Times Union*, May 15, 1933; *Columbia Daily Spectator*, May 16, 1933; *New York Daily News*, May 16, 1933; *Excelsior*, May 16, 1933 (clipping in ICAA item 798400).

an “open meeting” at Columbia in defense of the Scottsboro Boys, nine black youths framed up for rape and sentenced to death in Jim Crow Alabama. Rivera appeared with professor Franz Boas and William L. Patterson, head of the CPUSA-aligned International Labor Defense—the same group that had attacked Rivera in Michigan.⁷⁷ It is unlikely Rivera participated in these protests without tacit support of CPUSA leaders, but it is notable that the coverage of the Columbia strike in the *Daily Worker* does not mention Rivera.⁷⁸

A few months later, in October 1933, the *Daily Worker* announced the party-aligned John Reed School of Art in New York City would offer a course on fresco painting; one instructor was Hideo Noda, an artist “who worked with Diego Rivera at Detroit and Rockefeller Center,” implying this was a qualification, not political treason. A month later, the paper disdainfully noted that Rivera had “endorsed [Jean] Cocteau’s film, ‘The Blood of a Poet,’ and we’ll be looking for his name on Ex-Lax and Feenamint ads” since the film “represents the ultimate in the intellectual and artistic decadence of a section of the French bourgeois intelligentsia.”⁷⁹ In November 1933, the Detroit John Reed Club organized an “anti-imperialistic art exhibition” with works by Rivera, Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco.⁸⁰

Rivera After His Dismissal

Within days of being dismissed by Rockefeller, Rivera had another contract cancelled, for a mural in the General Motors Building in Chicago. (He would not receive another mural commission in the United States until he painted *Pan-American Unity* in San Francisco in 1940, which was his last US mural.) Rivera announced that he would stay in New York City and use his Rockefeller fees to paint frescoes (without a charge) for the offices of the Socialist Party’s Rand School of Social Sciences (7 East 15th Street), the Trotskyists’ International Workers’ School (120 East 16th Street), and the Lovestoneites’ New Workers’ School (51 West 15th Street).⁸¹ Rivera would have preferred to reconstruct

77. *Columbia Daily Spectator*, May 19, 1933.

78. *Daily Worker*, May 16, 1933.

79. *Daily Worker*, October 23, 1933; November 13, 1933. Ex-Lax and Feen-A-Mint were laxative brands.

80. *Detroit Free Press*, November 12, 1933.

81. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 12, 1933.

the Rockefeller Center murals; the left-wing groups he approached had small, cramped, and temporary offices.

Since the leadership of the New York Socialist Party—perhaps more anti-Communist than the Rockefellers—did not want a portrait of Lenin adorning their offices, Rivera planned a mural portraying Eugene V. Debs, Abraham Lincoln, and John Brown. The Rand School planned to charge admission to watch Rivera paint and raise money to prevent foreclosure.⁸² There is no indication that Rivera painted a mural for the Rand School, but in late May he spoke there on revolutionary art, with painter John Sloan. (Sloan, a member of the Socialist Party, had worked with the *Masses* and painted its June 1914 cover depicting the massacre of striking miners in Ludlow, Colorado, by guards in the pay of a Rockefeller-owned company.)⁸³

From May to December, Rivera and his assistants painted murals at the CPO's New Workers' School then the CLA's International Workers' School. Lucienne Bloch described the premises of the New Workers' School as a "walk-up third floor of a rickety building" and "a real firetrap perfumed with the long-lasting stench of stink bombs, compliments of the official Communist Party."⁸⁴ Because the Lovestoneites did not expect to stay in their offices long, Rivera painted on 21-moveable fresco panels. Rivera's murals covered some 700 square feet of wall space in a small rectangular 46 × 22 foot room. The New Workers' School murals presented United States history from colonial times to the 1930s, highlighting struggles of the oppressed and working class. To help Rivera, Wolfe and Bloch tracked down images of relevant historical events and people, and Wolfe wrote notes about them. One panel, *World War*, alluded to *Man at the Crossroads*, and included a depiction of the Ludlow massacre and Lenin and Trotsky in front of red flags and a hammer and sickle.⁸⁵

The culminating panel in the New Workers' School murals was *Proletarian Unity*, situated between panels illustrating the rise of Mussolini and Hitler.

82. *New York Times*, May 13, 1933; May 21, 1933. On the threatened foreclosure of the Rand School, see *New York Times*, May 4, 1933. The anti-Communism of the SP Old Guard is dealt with in Zumoff, "The Left in the United States and the Decline of the Socialist Party."

83. *Nuevo Mexicano* (Santa Fe, NM), May 18, 1933; *Masses*, June 1914.

84. Bloch, "On Location with Diego Rivera," 120.

85. Markle, "Diego Rivera's Portrait of America," 191. For a physical description of the murals and Rivera's method of painting them, see 196-200. See also James Wechsler, "History as a Weapon: Diego Rivera's Portrait of America," in Luis Martín Lozano and Juan Coronel Rivera, eds., *Diego Rivera: Complete Murals* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), 370-386.

A portrait of Lenin joining hands with a black worker, a white worker, and a farmer is at the center of the panel, as in *Man at the Crossroads*. At Lenin's level, but in the background, are Stalin, Marx, Engels and Trotsky. Bukharin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Clara Zetkin are lower, and below them are CPUSA leaders during the 1920s: William Z. Foster, Lovestone, Cannon, C.E. Ruthenberg, and Wolfe. Cannon and Ruthenberg hold a banner inscribed, "Workers of the World Unite." Despite the presence of the slogan, and the title of the panel, the Communists appear anything but united. Some of the leaders (Marx, Lenin, Ruthenberg and Trotsky) focus straight ahead, others' eyes are directed sideways, while only the black worker seems to be looking to Lenin.

Critics tend to interpret *Proletarian Unity* as expounding the Lovestoneite advocacy of what Wolfe described as "unity between the tactical tendencies into which the Communist movement has gotten divided."⁸⁶ John Lear asserts that this mural "advocates Communist unity in the face of fascism" because "Lenin not only locks hands with a white and black worker, but, flanked by Marx and Engels, unites the sectarian left, joining contemporary Soviet rivals [...] and their US counterparts, the leaders of the Communist Party, the CP, and the Trotskyist Communist League." A recent study of the Lovestoneites asserts that the panel "reflects aspects of the group's orientation in the early '30s, favoring the unity of Communist forces." Greer Markle writes that "the panel illustrated the CPO's position that all communist, leftist, and working class organizations needed to unite to combat the spread of fascism." According to James Wechsler, the mural seeks "to warn how disunity *could* facilitate the advance of fascism" (emphasis added). For his part, Wolfe described the mural's central element as "the eager, nervous, taut hand of the teacher, seeking to point out to the American workers the Leninist path to Communist unity of working class solidarity and power" and the "common union of all the oppressed against the rising tide of fascism and rebarbarization, of crisis and war, in a common struggle for a workers' world."⁸⁷ For the Lovestoneites, the evident disunity of the Communist movement was only tactical, not principled, and could be overcome just by reassembling the Comintern as it existed earlier.

86. Bertram D. Wolfe, "Diego Rivera on Trial," *Modern Monthly*, 8, no. 6 (July 1934): 338.

87. Le Blanc and Davenport, eds., *The 'American Exceptionalism' of Jay Lovestone*, caption between 377-378; Lear, "Diego Rivera Paints the Proletariat"; Markle, "Diego Rivera's Portrait of America," 23; Wechsler, "History as a Weapon," 371; Diego Rivera, *Portrait of America: With an Explanatory Text by Bertram D. Wolfe* (New York: Covici-Friede Publishers, 1934), 230-31.

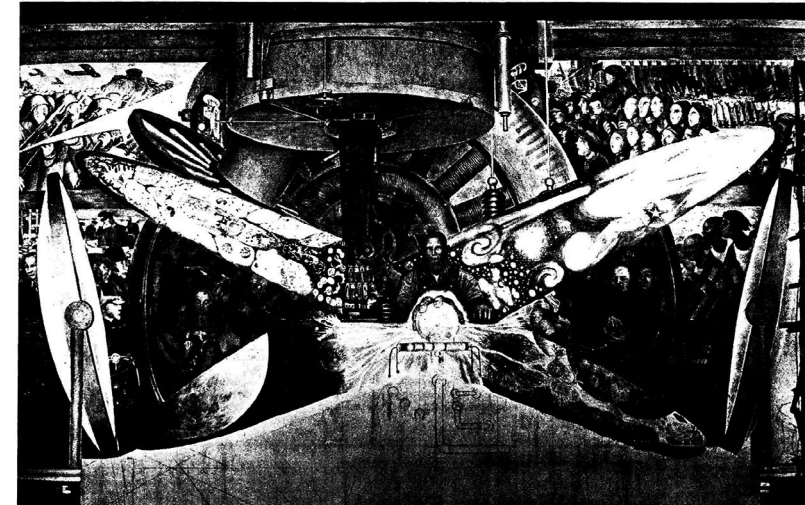
RIVERA SUPPLEMENT

Workers Age

VOL. 2, No. 15.

NEW YORK, N. Y., JUNE 15, 1933.

Price 5c



THE UNFINISHED MURAL

This unusual photograph and the detail or photographing. Unfortunately, a good third of the main wall and both side walls are not included. The parts cut off, due to the technical difficulties of photographing, include an unemployment demonstration with police just starting to break it up, a group of workers issuing from their factory and listening to a working class prop- agandist. The side walls contained pic- tures showing the liquidation of religion and the liquidation of treasury. A descrip- tion of the plan of the picture is contained in Diego Rivera's article.

THE RADIO CITY MURAL

For the last twenty years I have thought that the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat had need of its own artistic expression, especially in the field of the plastic arts, for a work of art can say the most complicated things in the most simple and direct form that will speak clearly to all that have eyes to see. Furthermore, it is highly important to create a class taste, not merely for the advantage it may bring to the worker in his personal life but even more for the clarification of his class position and strengthening of his confidence and determination to struggle. With this aim, my comrades and I painted in Mexico a long series of mural paintings which were useful for the masses of workers and peasants of Mexico. It seemed to many that our work was successful merely because in Mexico there existed a well-devel- oped tradition of popular arts among the masses. Therefore, it became desirable that we test our theories among the workers of the United States who are not influ- enced by any tradition of peasant art. This motivated my eager ac- ceptance of the opportunity to paint walls here in the United

States. The most important and complex of my American paint- ings is the series of frescoes in Detroit in which I realized as cor- rectly as possible an analysis of the relations of the worker to the means of production and the natu- ral forces and materials involved, creating a beauty appropriate to the proletariat. The real reason why my work in Detroit aroused so much attack was because it was completely and implicitly a product of dialectic materialism, and its opponents, tho they had never heard the term, felt instinctively outraged by the nature of the painting.

It was for this reason too that the workers reacted in its favor without any request or explana- tion on my part, proving that the proletarian art, born of the roots of popular art, is immediately ac- cessible to the proletariat of a country in which such popular arts are not developed and proving fur- ther that it is not true that the proletariat has "bad artistic taste," but rather an immediate apprecia- tion of beauty, provided it has con- tact with its life and expresses its needs. * * *

by Diego Rivera

The Case Of Rockefeller Center

Those who gave me the work at Radio City knew perfectly well my artistic tendencies and my social and political opinions. And the Detroit affair had just served to make very clear the nature of my reaction to the environment of the United States. They did much urging to persuade me to accept the work, which I finally did only on condition that they would give me full liberty to paint as I saw fit. My interpretation of the theme and my sketches for the painting were discussed and approved. The theme they assigned was: Man at the crossroads, looking with uncer- tainty but with hope to a better world. My interpretation, natu- rally, portrayed the crossroads with the road to the left as the socialist world, that to the right, the world of capitalism. The steel worker, in the midst of a connected system of machines which give him control of energy and means of knowledge of the various aspects of life, the infinitely great and the infinitely small, and a simulta-

neous vision of the most distant and the nearest things, and power over the forces of nature and the vegetable products and mineral wealth of the earth. The axis of the composition was determined by the cylinders of a telescope and microscope, and their two visual fields, crossed like a pair of scis- sors with a luminous sphere as its central pivot, containing the rep- resentation of the atom and the cell, controlled by the hand of mechanical power; between the two arms of the worker which were placed upon electric controls, while his vision was directed forward. At the sides, arranged in horizon- tal zones like the floors of a build- ing, were, at the left, an image of a May Day demonstration in Mos- cow, projected by television, and below, the workers of a factory gathered during the lunch hour to listen to a working class leader. At the right, in the upper part, war—at attack of infantry equip- ped with masks and flame-throw- ers, and supported by tanks and airplanes. And, below that, as a consequence, a demonstration of unemployed workers in Wall Street corner South Street, with the mounted police just in the act of

attacking and dispersing the dem- onstration; in the background, crossed, an elevated structure and the steeple of a church. In the ellipse, representing the micro- scopic and telescopic views, on the side nearest the war, the wounds and the microbes of decomposition and infection and those of the typical plagues and diseases of war. On the lower edge of the ellipse, the microbes of venereal disease, syphilis, etc., and adjoining a sec- tor showing a scene of gaming, drinking and dancing of members of the bourgeoisie, reminiscent of Marx's observation that such a scene was the overflowing scum of capitalist decay. Beneath this, in the astronomic field, was rep- resented the moon, dead planet, and near the center, the sun, in eclipse. In the same field, on the left, con- stellations and nebulas in ascending evolution. Near this, a group of young women, youth and pioneers of the Communist movement. On that side, in the microscopic field and balancing the sun, focus of vital energy, was represented a cancerous invasion of the human body as the negative element due to a misdirected concentration of

(Continued on next page)

7. The unfinished mural, *Workers Age*, frontpage, July 15, 1933, <https://www.marxists.org>

This is not the only reading of the mural. Rivera knew—as did the Lovestoneites—that the question of a united-front against fascism divided the CPU-SA, the CPO, and the CLA. For Trotsky, the disastrous course of the Comintern and the German Communist Party in not attempting to stop Hitler—and the lack of opposition to this within the Comintern—underlined the bankruptcy of the Comintern, since “an organization which was not roused by the thunder of fascism and which submits docilely to such outrageous acts of bureaucracy demonstrates thereby that it is dead and that nothing can ever revive it.” For Trotsky, this showed the need for a new revolutionary international, which he called the Fourth International.⁸⁸

The Lovestoneites, in contrast, continued to call for “Communist unity” after Hitler came to power. This difference between the two groups was laid bare in a debate between Lovestone and Cannon on March 5, 1934, at Irving Plaza in front of more than a thousand people. Lovestone argued (as *Workers Age* summarized) that “despite the ruinous tactical course, the CI has not departed from the fundamental premise of Communism” and “no principle[d] basis exists for establishing a new or ‘Fourth International.’” Cannon, according to the *Militant*, “showed how Lovestone completely ignored the significance of the great debates which had occurred in the last year” and “could just as well have made the same speech two or three years ago with no change.”⁸⁹

Proletarian Unity—painted immediately after Hitler’s rise to power—is ambiguous: was Rivera endorsing the Lovestoneite version of “proletarian unity” or the Trotskyist version? This ambiguity would be a weakness in a political manifesto but helps transform Rivera’s mural from didactic propaganda to art. In the same way Leonardo’s *Last Supper* does not make sense for those unfamiliar with the New Testament, those unfamiliar with left-wing debates about the rise of Hitler cannot understand Rivera’s *Proletarian Unity*—even while those familiar with these debates tend to interpret the mural as supporting their view. Missing the murals’ political subtleties, many critics

88. Leon Trotsky, “It is Necessary to Build Communist Parties and an International Anew,” July 15, 1933, in Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, 431.

89. *Militant*, March 10, 1934; *Workers Age*, March 15, 1934. Apel misdates the debate as taking place a year earlier, and perhaps because of this error, wrongly states that the CPO “did not comment” on the debate; see Apel, “Diego Rivera and the Left,” 75, n. 53.

dismissed them as propaganda; CPUSA writers disliked them *because* of their political subtext.⁹⁰

As Hitler consolidated his rule, such political ambiguity became harder to maintain. Despite his extensive work painting for the New Workers' School and his friendship with Wolfe, Rivera moved closer to the Left Opposition in the summer of 1933. In May, Rivera lent the CLA \$200, part of which was used to finance a trip by Max Shachtman, a leading member, to visit Trotsky in Turkey. During this visit, Shachtman informed Trotsky of Rivera's support for the Left Opposition. Trotsky in turn wrote to Rivera on June 7, 1933. Although he recalled being impressed by photographs of Rivera's frescos that he saw in a magazine in 1928, he had not realized "that the maestro Diego Rivera and the other Diego Rivera, the close friend of the Left Opposition, are one and the same person."⁹¹

The Lovestoneites publicized their connection to Rivera. In June, *Workers Age* issued a "Rivera Supplement," with photographs of the unfinished mural and two articles by Rivera.⁹² In August, the paper published a response by Rivera to the *Daily Worker's* attacks, and a photograph of Rivera painting at the New Workers' School. For the next six months *Workers Age* ran photographs of Rivera's murals at the New Workers' School, and in early December Rivera spoke there.⁹³

In spring 1934 Covici-Friede published *Portraits of America*, a 231-page book that reproduced Rivera's murals in the United States, including at the New Workers' School, and contained essays by Wolfe on historical figures in the murals. In the introduction Rivera indicated his goal "that this portrait may be in some small degree useful to a few hundreds, or thousands, or as many as possible, of the millions of workers, who in the near future, will carry out the formidable task of transforming, by means of revolutionary struggle and

90. *New York Times*, December 16, 1933; Wolfe, "Diego Rivera On Trial."

91. Rose Karsner to Arne Swabeck, May 24, 1933, in James P. Cannon papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, box 15, folder 7; Reyes Palma, "Diego y el trotskyismo"; Leon Trotsky to Diego Rivera, June 7, 1933, printed in *La Jornada*, August 31, 1986, clipping in ICAA, item 754283. A copy of the original French letter is in ICAA, item 794670; the Spanish translation is printed in Olivia Gall, *Trotsky en México y la vida política en el periodo de Cárdenas, 1937-1940* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1991), 205-206.

92. *Workers Age*, June 15, 1933.

93. *Workers Age*, August 1, 1933; August 15, 1933; September 1, 1933; September 15, 1933; October 1, 1933; December 1, 1933; November 1, 1933; January 15, 1934.

proletarian dictatorship, the marvelous industry of the super-capitalist country into the basic machinery for the splendid functioning of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of the American Continent.”⁹⁴

Workers Age advertised the book as “in effect a brief Marxist history of the United States.” The book fulfilled Wolfe’s ambition, going back to his time in the CPUSA, to provide a Marxist analysis of United States history.⁹⁵ In April 1934, *Workers Age* advertised a course taught by Wolfe based on this book (and presumably, Rivera’s murals) that provided “a Marxist analysis of the decisive turning points and driving forces that shaped modern America, its economy, its class structure, and its ideology.”⁹⁶ In 1937 the Lovestoneites bought all remaining copies and sold them for \$1.50 (\$2 off the cover price) and, with half a dollar more, included a year’s subscription to *Workers Age*.⁹⁷

In contrast to frequent *Workers Age* articles, during this period the *Militant* ran one article about Rivera, announcing the start of work on two mobile murals at the International Workers’ School. The article praised “the magnificent conception that has inspired Rivera’s work” and invited “all readers to visit the School Hall [...] and examine the murals while they are being painted.”⁹⁸ These murals were *The Russian Revolution* (better known as *The Third International*) and *Fourth International*. The first painting depicts Trotsky, Lenin and other Communists, hands in militant salute, reviewing the victorious Red Army in front of red banner reading “III International,” “СССР” and a hammer and sickle. (This scene is similar to the top right corner of the New Workers’ School panel, *World War*.) The second painting (which has since been lost) features images of Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Engels, Trotsky, Lenin, Marx, along with several US Trotskyists and their children in front of a banner, “Workers of the World Unite in the IVth International!” Catha Paquette asserts that Rivera included Lovestone in this painting, indicating that Rivera wanted the CPO to be part of the Fourth International.⁹⁹ This is unlikely: no figure resembles Lovestone, and including Lovestone in this mural would have made no

94. Diego Rivera, introduction to *Portrait of America*.

95. Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 246-46. See also Bertram D. Wolfe, *Marx and America* (New York: John Day, 1934).

96. *Workers Age*, April 15, 1934.

97. Markle, “Diego Rivera’s Portrait of America,” 260.

98. *Militant*, December 16, 1933.

99. Details on *Fourth International* can be found in *Dogs Days*, caption between 364-365.



8. Nelson A. Rockefeller/Official photograph, *The White House, Washington*, 1975 [9 January], <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004672352/>.

political sense. (And if Rivera had done this, it is doubtful that the Trotskyists would have wanted to work under Lovestone's gaze.)

The Destruction of Man at the Crossroads

After finishing these murals in late 1933, Rivera returned to Mexico. In February 1934, Rockefeller Center officials destroyed Rivera's unfinished mural, although historians disagree whether this was on purpose or a mistake in the process of removing them to be donated to the MoMA.¹⁰⁰ Rivera's earlier insistence that the paintings be fresco murals instead of paintings on canvas made it more likely that the murals themselves would be destroyed when the painter and his patrons fell out. The dispute over the murals was often framed as a conflict over the right of capitalists like Rockefeller to control artwork as if it were any other commodity to be bought and sold. If Rockefeller's destruction

100. *New York Times*, February 13, 1934; See Servando Ortoll and Annette B. Ramírez de Arellano, "Diego Rivera, José María Sert, y los Rockefeller: una historia con cuatro epílogos," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2004): 4; Alejandro Ugalde, "Maintenant c'est la bataille!: Diego Rivea y el muralismo mexicano en Nueva York, 1933-1934," *Nierika*, no. 4 (2013): 18-19.

of the murals underlined that the capitalist could exercise maximum control over the murals as physical objects, it also underlines the limits of that control over the artist's creative efforts. The original contract that Rockefeller sent to Rivera contained the provision that

the canvases shall at all times remain our property, and shall be turned over to us unimproved or improved by you, as the case may be, whenever this contract be terminated through any default or otherwise. We shall insure the canvases against loss or damage of all kinds in such amounts as we shall decide upon.¹⁰¹

Rivera's insistence on painting highlighted the contradiction between the first sentence giving Rockefeller capitalist ownership over the painting and the second sentence that pledged Rockefeller to protect them. Capitalists can own the walls, Rivera demonstrated, but they cannot own the art. Perhaps more ironic is the fact that, despite Rivera's insistence that the paintings be done in color, their destruction meant that the murals are known through Bloch's black-and-white photographs. Rivera stated that "the act will advance the cause of the labor revolution" and that "the assassination of my work will bring about a wider dissemination of the teachings of Lenin among workers, so that it is a victory for the proletariat."¹⁰² Rivera again used the media to bolster his image as a Communist artist.

Within days Rivera announced he would repaint *Man at the Crossroads* in Mexico, and in June the Mexican government commissioned Rivera to paint a reconstruction in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City.¹⁰³ In one sense, this resolved the issue, since the new mural (*El hombre, controlador del universo*, or Man, the Controller of the Universe) contains the portrait of Lenin that Rockefeller opposed. While similar to the Bloch photograph of the Rockefeller Center mural, the new mural's politics are more strident and unambiguous: Besides Lenin, *Controlador del universo* contains, in another section, Trotsky, Cannon, Marx, and Engels carrying a red banner (in English, with Spanish and Russian translations less prominent), "Workers of the World Unite in the IVth International." Leading Trotskyists in the United States, Arne Swabeck and Max Shachtman, look out from behind the banner, while appearing over

101. The contract is in the Rockefeller Center Archives.

102. *New York Times*, February 13, 1934; *Brooklyn Times Union*, February 14, 1934.

103. *Daily News*, February 15, 1934; Paquette, "Revolutionary Ideologies," 143-162.

Marx's shoulder—not carrying the banner—is a portrait of Wolfe lecturing the revolutionary cadres from afar. Dora Apel states that “Jay Lovestone appears to the left of the banner, perhaps indicating Rivera's continued hope for the rapprochement of the Lovestoneites with the Trotskyists.” The figure, however, is not Lovestone, but Cannon (painted in a fashion similar as in *The Fourth International* the CLA offices). Misidentifying Cannon for Lovestone is not just a simple error; akin to confusing Judas Iscariot with Jude Thaddeus in the *Last Supper*, it results in a distorted meaning of the painting.¹⁰⁴

Shortly after the mural's destruction, the Lovestoneites organized a meeting in their offices, adorned by Rivera's murals. John Sloan, president of the Society of Independent Artists, called the destruction of the mural “premeditated art murder” and announced he would never exhibit in Rockefeller Center.¹⁰⁵ On Sunday, February 18, one thousand artists and others opposed to the mural's destruction rallied in Irving Plaza.¹⁰⁶ Jacob Burck, representing the John Reed Club, endorsed the protest and called for a boycott of Rockefeller Center. On February 20, four groups aligned with the CPUSA—the John Reed Club, Unemployed Artists' Association, the National Student League, and the Workers' School—sponsored a united-front protest against the destruction of the murals. The call “to all cultural workers—students—artists” declared: “The barbarous destruction of the fresco by the Rockefeller vandals is [...] primarily a political act, and act of propaganda on behalf of oppression and against the forces of liberation which find leadership and inspiration in Lenin.”¹⁰⁷

Dozens of Mexican artists and professionals signed a protest to the Rockefellers. “A work of art is that which is useful to productive man and which helps the progress of humanity,” the statement said, while “useless or false art is that which creates in the mid of man the opposite effect, i.e., renders worthless the activity and usefulness of humanity I favor of the personal interests of those who hold financial power.” Signatories included Frida Kahlo, Ramón Alva de la Canal, Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, María Izquierdo, Roberto Montenegro, Juan O'Gorman, Pablo O'Higgins, Rufino Tamayo, Frances Toor,

104. Apel, “Diego Rivera and the Left,” 70.

105. *Los Angeles Evening Post-Record*, February 13, 1934.

106. *Daily News*, February 18, 1934; *New York Times*, February 19, 1934.

107. *Daily Worker*, February 21, 1934; “To all Cultural Workers—Students—Artists,” leaflet for February 20, 1934, united-front demonstration, in William Gropper papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; I am grateful to Jams Wechsler for providing a copy of this leaflet.

and Isabel Villaseñor, along with Jesús Alfaro Siqueiros, the younger brother of the muralist.¹⁰⁸

Several artists—including Ben Shahn—declared they would boycott the Municipal Art Exhibition, scheduled to be held in the RCA building on February 27. Sponsored by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, and selected by a committee including the directors of the Whitney, the MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum, the exhibit featured some 1,200 works by artists associated with New York City. Artists picketed the exhibition's opening to protest the destruction of the Rivera murals.¹⁰⁹ On Saturday, March 3, artists and other Rivera supporters protested “Rockefellerism” at Irving Plaza. A leaflet for the protest declared: “A work of Art, even when bought and paid for by an individual, morally becomes the property of the people.”¹¹⁰ The Society of Independent Artists held its exhibition elsewhere. Lucienne Bloch entered a piece, called “In Memoriam,” which consisted of a 4-foot by 7-foot board displaying her photographs of the destroyed mural, with a detailed view of Lenin's portrait. The John Reed Club exhibited a joint work that depicted the destruction of the Radio City mural and protests against the Municipal exhibit.¹¹¹

Conclusion

In the immediate aftermath of the destruction of *Man at the Crossroads*, the CPUSA continued with its contradictory attitude towards Rivera. In early April 1934, the CPUSA's literary expert, Mike Gold, used his column in the *Daily Worker* to compare Rivera to Upton Sinclair, the muckraking author who had recently broken from the Socialist Party to run for governor of California as a

108. “Abstract” of letter to Rockefellers, February 26, 1934, in Rockefeller Family, Record Group 2, Series C, folder 707.

109. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 11, 1934; *New York Times*, February 13, 1934; *New York Times*, February 14, 1934; *Daily News*, February 28, 1934. According to the *Times*, a protest statement was signed by A. S. Baylinson, Maurice Becker, George Biddle, Hugo Gellert, H. Glintenkamp, William Gropper, Edward Laning, Louis Lozowick, Walter Pach, Helene Sardeau, Ben Shahn and John Sloan.

110. Leaflet for March 3, 1934, protest at Irving Plaza, in collection of New-York Historical Society, Broad-sides (SY1934 no. 68). I thank Mariam Touba, reference librarian at the New-York Historical Society, for bringing this leaflet to my attention.

111. *New York Times*, April 11, 1934; *Daily Worker*, April 26, 1934. The *Daily Worker* credits Hideo Noda for painting this piece.



9. Diego Rivera is shown at work on his new mural. The bacteriological detail appears in the center; under it is the scene of dancing and bridge playing. By *World-Telegram* staff photographer. New York, 1933, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015650853/>.

Democrat (i.e., a capitalist party). “Politically, Rivera has been as unreliable as our own Upton Sinclair, and latterly, he has fallen into the group of Lovestone renegades, those curious people who call themselves ‘Communists’ yet whose chief activity seems to be in sabotaging and slandering the work of the Communist Party [...] all for the most splendid ‘revolutionary’ reasons!” Gold added: “But just as historically one must take into account the revolutionary importance of some of the novels and tracts of the neo-Democrat, Upton Sinclair, so one must not deny the gigantic importance to revolutionary art of Diego Rivera’s murals.”¹¹²

112. *Daily Worker*, April 7, 1934.

Jacob Burck's review of Rivera's *Portrait of America* in the *Daily Worker* in May 1934 dripped with hostility: "Rivera first perpetrates his opportunism and depends afterward on his ability to surround it with a verbal screen of red-sounding phrases to hide it." Burck re-evaluated *Man at the Crossroads*, complaining, "the Communist Party was not shown as the leader of the workers" and that "the American worker painted by Rivera had a curious resemblance to the renegade Lovestone who claims to be the only existent legitimate heir to Leninism in America."¹¹³

The *New Masses* published an article by Siqueiros in late May 1934, "Rivera's Counter-Revolutionary Road," that contained a tirade against Rivera, calling him the "most outstanding mental snob of his time," a "mental tourist" who "delivered all of us over to the government," as well as a "confusionist," "trade-union opportunist," "demagogue," "saboteur of the collective work," "saboteur of *El Machete*," "agent of the government," "technically backward," a "dilettante in revolutionary art," the "official painter of the new bourgeoisie," a "renegade," an "aesthete of imperialism" and a "painter of the Trotzky-Lovestone [*sic*] coalition."¹¹⁴

In November 1934, the Mexican Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR: League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists) that was aligned the PCM and linked to the JRC and similar pro-Communist groups in France and the Soviet Union, began publishing a journal, *Frente a Frente*. The cover of the first issue featured an engraving by Leopoldo Méndez, "Calaveras del Mausoleo Nacional" (Skeletons of the National Mausoleum). Using the style of José Guadalupe Posada, the cover caricatured the inauguration of the Palacio de Bellas Artes as an exclusive government party, featuring two skeletons, Rivera, labelled "IV Internacional," on a chair with a dollar-sign on the back, and Carlos Riva Palacio, head of the ruling Partido Nacional Revolucionario, on a chair with a swastika.¹¹⁵

113. *Daily Worker*, May 19, 1934.

114. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Rivera's Counter-Revolutionary Road," *New Masses*, vol. 11, no. 9 (May 29, 1934), 16-19.

115. *Frente a Frente*, November 1934; Deborah Caplow, "Leopoldo Méndez, Revolutionary Art, and the Mexican Print: In Service of the People," (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1999), pp. 139-148; see also Carlos Alberto Sampaio Barbosa, "A revista mexicana *Frente a Frente*: ambigüidades y tensões entre fotomontagens vanguardistas e gravuras," *Artelegie*, no. 7 (2015); Luis Velasco-Pufleau, "La *Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios* (LEAR): l'antifascisme communiste au Mexique," *Aden*, no. 10 (October 2011): 185-203.

The third issue of *Frente a Frente* (May 1935) carried a polemic by Siqueiros, “Diego Rivera, Pintor de cámara del gobierno del México.” Siqueiros attacked *Hombre, el controlador del universo* as “counterrevolutionary” and “an opportunist work, a demagogic work” for not dealing with capitalist misery in Mexico. He asserted: “Diego [...] continues making the same errors as always: archaic technique; passive and mystical forms; individualistic methodology; opportunist strategy, etc.” Referring to the Rockefeller Center controversy, Siqueiros wrote that Rivera “repeated the fresco that he had begun in Radio City in New York, claiming in this way to answer Rockefeller.” Under a photo of the section of the mural featuring Trotsky, the caption stated: “The ‘Communist’ painter supporter of the IV International, exhibits in this, his archaic technique, his opportunist attitude, and his counterrevolutionary line.”¹¹⁶

In the mid-1930s, as Rivera moved closer to the Trotskyist movement, pro-Moscow Communists became more vituperative. David Alfaro Siqueiros, expelled from the PCM in 1930, was central to this. As Rivera put it in a polemic against his former comrade, “The official party has come to use Siqueiros on an international scale as an instrument to attack Rivera for his sympathies towards the Bolshevik-Leninists, whose positions he fully accepts.”¹¹⁷ After the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in July-August 1935, the Communist parties in the United States and Mexico tried to implement the popular front. While it might be expected during the popular front that the PCM would have softened its approach to Rivera, the muralist’s support for Trotskyism precluded rapprochement. The line between Stalinism and Trotskyism became firmer in the late 1930s, as Trotsky denounced the popular front as class collaborationism that betrayed workers’ revolution in Spain and elsewhere, and Stalin became more vehement in his denunciations of Trotsky. Rivera helped Trotsky obtain political asylum and move to Mexico in January 1937, which deepened the PCM’s hatred against him. Rivera was a prominent Trotskyist until breaking

116. David Alfaro Siqueiros, “Diego Rivera, Pintor de Cámara del Gobierno de México,” *Frente a Frente*, May 1935 (clipping in ICAA item 774385).

117. Rivera, “Raíces políticas,” 111; see also Maricela González Cruz Manjarrez, *La polémica Siqueiros-Rivera: planteamientos estético-políticos, 1934-1935* (Mexico City: Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, 1996). On Siqueiros’s expulsion from the PCM, see Alicia Azuela de la Cueva, “Militancia Política y Labor Artística de David Alfaro Siqueiros: De Olvera Street a Río de la Plata,” *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, no. 35 (January-June 2008): 116-117; Siqueiros entry in Lazar Jeifits and Víctor Jeifits, *América Latina en la Internacional Comunista, 1919-1943: Diccionario Biográfico* (Santiago de Chile: Ariadna, 2015).

with him in 1939, just before the founder of the Red Army was murdered by agents of Stalin. Rivera returned to the PCM before his death in 1957.

The CPUSA, unlike the PCM, did not deal with Rivera on a regular basis. Nonetheless, his influence on left-wing artists and intellectuals remained immense. “Inspired by the publicity accorded Diego Rivera’s destroyed Rockefeller Center mural,” warned painter Arthur Millier in the August 1934 *Los Angeles Times*, “the Communist party is enlisting more artists to drive home its substantive aims through painted wall pictures.”¹¹⁸ Millier was only half correct: the CPUSA sought to extend its influence among muralists while eschewing Rivera himself. In 1934, two artists’ groups close to the CPUSA—the Artists’ Committee of Action, which had been organized to protest Rockefeller’s destruction of Rivera’s mural, and the Artists’ Union (formerly the Unemployed Artists Association)—published the journal *Art Front* and echoed the CPUSA’s hostility to Rivera.¹¹⁹ According to the November 1935 issue: “He isn’t a friend of revolutionary painting and he doesn’t paint for the workers,” since “Rivera has used Communism rather than furthered it.” The article asserted that the Mexican government’s “patronage of a nationally and internationally famous Communist is an astute move on the part of a fascist demagogue. Rivera is used as a mask to delude and confuse a socialistically and revolutionary minded Mexican people.”¹²⁰ The next issue continued the attack, calling Rivera “a willing prostitute who makes his work pay,” by helping the “Mexican fascist government” deceive Mexican workers and peasants. The article reassessed the struggle over *Man at the Crossroads*: “By sticking his thick neck into Mr. Rockefeller’s noose and then raising such a howl when the rope was tightened, he successfully created the illusion that he was a noble martyr of the people.”¹²¹ The CPUSA had washed its hands of Rivera.

Over the next decades, the CPUSA on occasion referenced the destruction of the Rivera murals, but ignored the party’s own contradictions or the role of the CLA and CPO. A series in the *Daily World* in 1975 about the CPUSA and artists contained a part titled, “Artists vs. Rockefeller: The Struggle Snowballs,” that discusses the incident and the CPUSA’s role in organizing artists, but neglects

118. *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 1934.

119. Patricia Hills, “Art Front,” in Joan M. Marter, ed., *The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), vol. 1, 148.

120. Mary Randolph, “Rivera’s Monopoly,” *Art Front*, vol. 1, no. 7 (November 1935): 5.

121. Mary Randolph, “Rivera’s Monopoly (Conclusion),” *Art Front*, vol. 2, no. 1 (December 1935): 12-13.

10. Irving Underhill,
*Rockefeller Center &
St. Patrick's Cath*, New
York, 1933. Photography,
[https://www.loc.gov/
item/2015647626/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2015647626/).



Rivera's politics. An article in 1978 on Mexican Art likewise describes *Man at the Crossroads* with no political context. A decade later, historian Norman Markowitz's review of a documentary about Rivera described the muralist as "a Marxist and partisan and the Communist movement, even if his freewheeling nature did lead to entanglements with sectarian rivals of the world's mainstream Communists, i.e., Trotskyites and, in the US, briefly, Lovestoneites."¹²² This, at least, mentioned these "sectarian rivals" but did not go into details.

For the CPO and the CLA the Rockefeller controversy remained a minor part of their history. During the Popular Front in the mid-1930s, the Comintern abandoned rhetoric of immediate revolution in favor of supporting "progressive" capitalist forces, and Trotskyists gained influence and support among left-wing intellectuals and workers, eventually becoming the Socialist Workers Party. Rivera's break from Trotsky dampening their enthusiasm for him, although *El controlador* still resurfaces as an illustration among Trotsky-influenced groups. The Lovestoneites moved further to the right, eventually dissolving their organization altogether early in the Second World War. Lovestone became infamous for his unprincipled maneuvers and assistance to the AFL bureaucracy's war against Communist influence in the labor movement, and during the Cold War, his collaboration with the CIA.

122. *Daily World*, August 21, 1975; *Daily World*, June 3, 1978; *People's Daily World*, September 13, 1988.

Wolfe continued to write on Rivera, even after abandoning Lenin, revising his biography in 1964.

For the Rockefellers, the controversy was a temporary embarrassment. Eventually, Rockefeller hired Catalan painter Josep Maria Sert to paint a mural, *American Progress*, on the walls that had been cleared of Rivera's mural. Originally a anti-Republican coup in Spain, Sert supported the anti-Republican in 1936 that led to Civil War.¹²³ Through at least the 1960s, the public relations office at Rockefeller Center received questions about the Rivera painting.¹²⁴ Nelson Rockefeller served as governor of New York (1959-1973) and then Gerald Ford's vice president (1974-1977). To the extent that most liberals or leftists remember him, it is for the draconian drug laws that bear his name or the massacre of dozens of prisoners on his orders at the state penitentiary in Attica in 1971.

The battle of Rockefeller Center was much more important in the life of Rivera, even after he broke from Trotsky and re-joined the PCM before he died. Examining the controversy—and the murals painted by Rivera in 1933-1934—through the lens of the politics of the Communist movement in this period provides a better sense of the development of both. ❁

123. David de Montserrat Nonó, “Ja ho faig jo, Míster Rockefeller,” *La Mira* (May 14, 2019): <https://www.lamira.cat/persones/1178/ja-ho-faig-jo-mister-rockefeller>; Ortoll and Ramírez de Arellano, “Diego Rivera, José María Sert, y los Rockefeller”; Jorge Latorre Izquierdo, Marcos Jiménez González and Clare Elizabeth Cannon, “The Atlántida of Capitalism: The Murals of Sert in the decorative programme of New York's Rockefeller's Center,” *Communication & Society*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2021): 369-386.

124. The Rockefeller Center Archives contain examples of inquiries and responses about the destroyed Rivera murals.