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**Playing for the People:
Labor Sport Union Athletic Clubs in the Lake Superior/Iron Range 1927-1936**

Gabe Logan Ph.D.

From 1927 through 1936 the Labor Sport Union, a U.S. communist sport organization, united left wing politics and athletics in what historian William Baker termed an “alternative vision of sport and society.” They considered most U.S. sports as overly patriotic, religious, or capitalistic. Frequent targets included the Amateur Athletic Union, Young Men’s Christian Association, Young Women’s Christian Association, and paternalistic industrial sport programs. The organization also denounced Jim Crow athletics and called for the development of athletic programs to recruit sport enthusiasts into the United States Communist Party (CPUSA).¹

The Labor Sport Union (LSU) drew much of its membership from the urban enclaves of New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. These cities’ industry and immigrant populations engendered a working class consciousness that sought health and recreation in accordance with their political beliefs. The LSU found an equally appreciative audience in the rural iron ore mining and farming regions of Lake Superior. This area, comprised of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, northern Wisconsin, and northern Minnesota, disproportionately, in terms of population, also supported the Labor Sport Union. This paper explains this athletic phenomenon by tracing the history of the LSU in general and in the Lake Superior region in particular. It also clarifies why and how these Lake Superior communities embraced the LSU to promote a rural athletic alternative.

History of the LSU

Historian Mark Naison's study of the CPUSA's sport programs, explains how the Labor Sport Union drew early inspiration from 1920s European labor athletic clubs and meets. These worker sport clubs had impressive memberships, such as over a million in Germany, and a quarter million Austrians and Czechoslovakians. There were also sizable memberships in Belgium, France, and the Scandinavian countries. Most of these European labor sport clubs organized around the Socialist International and their sport organization, the Lucerne Sport International. However, many members were also confirmed communists who shifted sporting allegiance with the Russian Revolution.²

Following Tsar Nicholas' II abdication of the Russian throne in 1917, the Bolsheviks steadily gained power. The revolutionists did not leave social reforms and sports to chance, rather these became instruments of the Communist Party. The Third International, or Comintern, served as their organ for world revolution and international communist movements. In 1921, Moscow directed the Comintern to formally recognize the Red Sport International (RSI) as its transnational sporting body.³

The RSI called for the development of working class athletics and physical culture. It stressed an athletic emancipation from "bourgeoisie capitalistic" sport and distinguished itself from its fellow sporting traveler, the Lucerne Sport International, by denouncing it as too close to capitalist sporting models. That is, socialistic athletes sought to use their skills to become members of the bourgeoisie. By contrast, the RSI saw sport as tool to bring athletes into the communist fold. The RSI called for sport to be used in conjunction with trade unions and as an additional means to free the workers from capitalist control and influence. Thus, the communists pursued autonomous control over left wing athletic labor and recreations.⁴

When the Red Sport International turned its attention to the U.S. there was already a lightly trodden path of worker sports' clubs that had developed in the Young Worker's League (YWL). This international political youth group, formed in 1920, was the CPUSA's youth organization. The YWL emphasized the significance of sports, stressing its "great importance in the United States" and developed plans to utilize athletics as a way to entice future workers to join the party.⁵

This sport movement received publicity in the *Young Worker*, the YWL's organ. A 1923 piece, authored by Sidney Bloomfield, an early district organizer from the Pacific Northwest, argued that sport itself was not a social negative but inherent to capitalist exploitation. He cautioned that sport should not be ignored but rather employed as a tool to reach the young workers. The following year, Max Salzman, a National Executive Committee member of the YWL and a vigorous communist organizer, suggested 'nuclei' shop organizers use summer recreational sports such as hikes and other outdoor activities as a way for workers to discuss communism beyond the bosses' ears. Barney Mass, a St. Louis organizer argued that team sports, such as baseball, could also be used to introduce workers to communist ideology outside the factory floor.⁶

In November, 1924 the *Young Worker* formally called for a U.S. communist sport movement to develop "physical culture on a working class basis." It argued that labor should agitate for workers' sports that highlighted the class nature of athletics and seek formal affiliation with the RSI. However, the *Young Worker* initially differed from Moscow. It suggested the proposed organization should be open to all worker athletes, especially the American-Finnish Athletic Association, American Sport Alliance of the Workers' Party, the Hungarian Young Worker League and Czechoslovakia sports. The editorial called for the

official consolidation of the Young Workers' League Sport and Recreation activities to be formally transferred to the Workers' Sport Organization (a brief forerunner to the LSU). The authors claimed this would allow for continual organization in the trade unions and administration of physical culture. Finally, the paper for a national meeting with representatives from the earlier identified clubs to discuss the problems and potentials of U.S. sports.⁷

In 1925, the CPUSA agreed with the *Young Worker* and officially sanctioned the organization of the Workers' Sport Alliance, under the auspice of the Red Sport International. The manifesto echoed many of the *Young Worker's* points. First and foremost, sports were to be used as a medium for class struggle and to form the creation of "proletarian fighting units against militarism and fascism." Next, athletes should infiltrate, take over, and split off the company team sports. The manifesto maintained that athletes should receive time off for training and compensation for athletic endeavors. Other points lashed out at frequent targets for criticism singling out the exploitive system of the company teams, ideologies of the YWCA, YMCA, the moneyed athletic clubs, AAU, and college sports as tools of capital that the workers paid for.⁸

Following the manifesto, workers' sport organizations blossomed. In Chicago, worker athletes sponsored a 1926 interracial tennis tournament at the Prairie Tennis Club. Over forty male and female African American and Caucasian players competed in the weeklong event. Even the *Chicago Tribune* congratulated the organizers on their "blow to racial precedence" in tennis. Another chapter formed the following year in Detroit, Michigan. Its earliest members belonged to Detroit's Finnish-American athletic clubs and augmented its ranks with recent German immigrants to the city. By the end of the year, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and New York maintained labor-based sport leagues.⁹

In January, 1927 the Labor Sport Union officially organized in conjunction with an indoor track and field meet held at the Finnish gymnasium in Detroit. Twenty-five delegates from thirty sport clubs, representing over 2,000 athletes unanimously approved the LSU. The committee elected Walter Burke, the sports writer for the *Detroit Federation of Labor News*, as chairman, a position he would hold for the next three years. Other elected officials came from Chicago, New York City, and Waukegan, Illinois. Each was a member of Finnish-American athletic clubs and reflected the significant involvement of this ethnic sport group.¹⁰

In August, 1927 the LSU held its inaugural outdoor festival in Waukegan, Illinois with a reported crowd of 5,000 spectators and 300 athletes. The following year saw a second winter indoor meet in Detroit, and the corresponding summer games held in New York City. This became a LSU sporting pattern of sorts to hold winter games in the Midwest followed by summer games in New York. The LSU also encouraged regional athletic meets to parallel the national meets for those who could not attend the latter. Accordingly, athletic meets simultaneously occurred in many mid-sized cities in the Upper Midwest and industrial Northeast.¹¹

The LSU developed athletic clinics that reflected a variety of sporting activities. For example, two Detroit clinics held in 1929 and 1930 featured thirty-three graduating athletes, eleven of whom were female. The attendees represented cities from New York, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Training activities included gymnastics, swimming, tumbling, mass calisthenics, stretches, parallel bars, pommel horse, track, volleyball, and dumbbell exercises. Although the majority of attendees again represented Finnish-American athletic clubs the Detroit Turnvereins were also on-hand to provide additional gymnastic instructions.¹²

The ethnic athlete proved a contentious point as some LSU members called for more “Americanized sports” and to de-emphasize the immigrant athletic flavor in order to reach the “American worker in the trade unions.” One method used to facilitate this idea was a literary labor sport writing contest aimed at the junior members of the LSU and YCL. Writers had to consider sport questions and labor. The winners received financial prizes.¹³

Another more practical solution was the inclusion of different sports specific to each region’s athletic carnivals. For example, the Detroit LSU’s winter athletic meet featured ice skating and hockey. Other regional meets emphasized basketball, boxing, and wrestling. Above all the LSU leadership recognized the significance of baseball and considered it a gateway sport to bring American youth into the movement. However, the attempts more often than not resulted in mediocre results as baseball enthusiasts were hampered by lack of facilities and lackluster organizational development.¹⁴

Despite these early organizational obstacles from 1927-1929, the LSU made impressive membership gains. This is demonstrated by delegates that attended the annual organizational meetings rising from twenty-five to 100 in the three-year period. The two-dollar yearly registration fee likewise ensured affordability. The LSU headquarters moved from Detroit to New York City, a reflection of the eastern region’s larger athletic membership. The LSU also opened chapters in many mid-sized cities such as Worcester, Gardner, and Fitchburg, Massachusetts, Buffalo, New York, Duluth, Minnesota, Superior, Wisconsin, and Rockford, Illinois. These areas added an additional labor sport presence in the urban northeast and Midwest.¹⁵

The LSU remained true to its principles of providing sport equality regardless of race or gender. In the LSU’s Metropolitan Worker Soccer League a match between the Finnish and

Hungarian women's athletic auxiliaries and following dance, helped to procure operating funds for the league and teams. Female athletes also formed baseball teams, such as Cleveland's LSU women's team who offered to take on any other teams at the 1931 Cleveland tournament. Likewise, New York's Workers Soccer League lauded the inclusion of seven full "negro" teams in the league.¹⁶

By contrast, failure to adhere to these principles resulted in quick discipline. In 1931, at the LSU's Penn-Ohio district basketball tournament, the National Secretary, who was in attendance, initially refused to allow the Conneaut, Ohio team to play the Warren, Pennsylvania team because the former was guilty of a "Jim Crow" incident. The Conneaut team publicly apologized, to "thunderous" applause, and the game took place. Another example occurred with the Youngstown, Ohio LSU who refused to desegregate their dance to African American workers. After a bitter discussion the LSU expelled two of the Youngstown members and hosted a later dance where they specifically invited African American workers. In another instance the LSU refused membership to Detroit's *Amil* Athletic Club due to their discrimination policy against African American athletes.¹⁷

Labor naturally remained an overriding issue in the LSU. This was readily recognized at the third LSU national convention held in August, 1929 in New York City. The LSU voiced support for the southern textile strikes, especially those in Gastonia, North Carolina and named Fred E. Beal, the communist leader of the strikers its honorary chairman. The delegates took up a collection to purchase baseball equipment for the strikers. And the convention read letters from the strikers decrying the use of factory basketball teams to entice the youth from playing for the LSU teams in the area. Although the strike ultimately failed and Beal fled to the Soviet

Union, the LSU demonstrated a readiness to align itself with left-wing social causes while strengthening the connections of athletics and labor.¹⁸

At the dawn of the United States' Great Depression, many members of the CPUSA believed capitalism was moribund. Communist rallies and Unemployment Councils dotted the urban landscape as those most affected by the economic collapse often took to the streets in protest. The CPUSA saw the Depression as an opportunity to bring people into the cause and encouraged the LSU to more vigorously recruit athletes, increase their factory presence, and develop additional sporting collaborations with the communist backed Trade Union Unity League (TUUL).¹⁹

The LSU considered these issues at their fourth convention in Cleveland, Ohio during November, 1930. Although the seventy delegate count was down from the previous year's high of 100, the convention proved a productive affair. Members elected Frank Henderson, a Cleveland automobile worker and party organizer, as the National Secretary. Thirteen other members also took over key positions such as a formal editorial staff for the LSU magazine *Sport and Play*, a business manager, and various directors of regional activities. Armed with this bureaucracy, the LSU responded to legal, internal, and international challenges.²⁰

The U.S. postal services initially banned the distribution of *Sport and Play*. A Congressional Committee, headed by New York Representative Hamilton Fish Jr., authored legislation that censored communist works as the economic crises deepened. Fish argued that *Sport and Play* lacked circulation and was too militant as the legal reasons for the ban. The CPUSA responded with several public protests, including approximately 500 communist and LSU members that marched on New York City's post office in 1930. The weight of the protests helped to overturn the ban.²¹

The LSU also had to justify its existence to other CPUSA members. Case in point was a “Jobless Day” protest in New York City. LSU and TUUL athletes organized an awareness run through working class neighborhoods and Central Park. Runners planned to wear armbands and carry banners that called for the seven hour, five-day work week, unemployment insurance, equal pay for equal work, and other labor related causes. The city’s communist organizers refused to allow the LSU to run on the behalf of the unemployed, stating they were not going to allow a bunch of men in their “underwear” harm the seriousness of the march. This caused a sharp rebuke from the *Young Worker*, which admonished New York’s communist leadership to acquaint themselves with the LSU and other comrades in arms.²²

The LSU leadership again brought up the preponderance of Finnish-American athletic club members and how they seemingly did not reach across the aisle to their fellow communist athletes. A poignant example came from Coleman Taylor, a LSU member from the Cleveland District. He echoed the criticism that the Finnish athletes were too insular and did not extend sporting invitations to other athletes and observed that athletic opportunities for women primarily consisted of “being good rooters.” He condemned the lack of political action to halt lynching, asked for additional inclusion of the “Negro” athlete, and noted that local chapters did not understand how they fit into the national LSU scheme. In short, his scathing letter challenged the LSU to do more with their organization beyond using it for “gym time” for the youngsters.²³

The LSU’s answered this internal dissension by developing additional sport programs. The LSU national basketball tournament featured regional playoffs from Massachusetts to North Dakota and culminated in a national championship. The LSU’s soccer programs also received special attention. Unlike the Finnish dominated athletic clubs, the soccer teams tended to field

Ethnic-American teams of Italians, Hungarians, Germans, and Czechs. This allowed for a vibrant soccer presence in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburg and Philadelphia. The leadership unified all the LSU soccer leagues under the Workers Soccer Association (WSA). It implemented a series of charity games to support the Hunger March on Washington and other communist causes. The LSU also fielded an American football team in Buffalo, New York, where the “Reds” competed in the city’s junior football league. And any baseball activity received prominent headlines.²⁴

An international event the LSU embraced was the Red Sport International’s Spartakiad Games, named in honor of the slave Spartacus as opposed to the “Olympic” home of the gods. The Spartakiad Games began in the 1920s and were played every four years. In 1931, the RSI chose Berlin, Germany as the host city for the Third Spartakiad Games. The LSU developed a national competition to select the top athletes to represent the United States.²⁵

For several weeks leading up to the Games, the *Young Worker’s* sport pages highlighted regional runs and track meets. The paper’s sport writers identified top LSU athletes, (especially African Americans), their current times, and best records. The importance of LSU African American athletes addressed the CPUSA’s “self-determination” position for U.S. minorities while striking back at athletic racial discrimination that existed in many sport leagues of the day. Likewise, the emphasis on the worker athlete rather than the athletic club tended to obscure the number of LSU Finnish-American athletic clubs.²⁶

By June, 1931 the LSU’s selection committee identified four athletes, William Duff and A. Preston of New York’s Kaytee AC, H. Lehtinen from Waukegan’s *Into* AC, Uno Asikainen from Gardner, Massachusetts’ *Veikot* AC, and the National Secretary, Frank Henderson to represent the U.S. at the Spartakiad Games. The quintet left New York City and arrived in Berlin

only to discover Germany's Social Democratic government would not allow the Third Spartakiad to take place. Nonplussed organizers relocated the Games first to Stettin, Germany, then managed to hold a few modest events in Berlin. Other events took place in Lichtenstein, and a final set of competitions in Moscow. The Game's reports noted that the U.S. team captured several first place team points and set a relay track record in Moscow.²⁷

When the athletic delegation returned in August, they brought with them the idea of holding the next Spartakiad in the United States. They envisioned a counter-Olympics to the upcoming 1932 Xth Olympiad in Los Angeles. The LSU formally articulated these ideas at their fifth convention in Cleveland. Delegates also elected labor activist Tom Mooney as honoree chairman and linked the counter-Olympics as a protest to his continual imprisonment. Over the next few months the LSU sent out promoters to rally worker athletic clubs to support the event.²⁸

By mid-1932, the LSU was well on its way to their most ambitious athletic carnival: The workers counter-Olympics, scheduled for Chicago, Illinois the birthplace of the CPUSA. Several organizations from hiking clubs to Swedish athletes signed pledges to support the counter-Olympics. The LSU also reached out to other worker's sport groups, including the Lucerne Sport International. Free gym fights took on a sense of urgency as LSU chapters stressed that its members demand their local school boards provide facilities for the athletes to train.²⁹

Conversely, other factors hampered the LSU's ability to inform the public beyond the CPUSA membership. The sports' editors of major papers mostly ignored the press releases. Local qualifying meets often ran into political opposition that forbade the contests. Chicago's Loyola University initially agreed to host the games. However, their Trustee, Sam Insull, a Chicago utility magnate, protested the counter-Olympics in general and the use of Loyola's

facilities in particular. This resulted in a broken contract that sent the LSU scrambling for a venue. Surprisingly, the Muscular Christian, Amos Alonzo Stagg at the University of Chicago agreed to let the LSU use the Stagg Field facilities. Even more disheartening was Chicago's communist party who ignored the game's publications and failed to organize local support.³⁰

The counter-Olympics or its official name, the International Worker's Athletic Meet, began July 28, 1932. Most athletes arrived from the Northeast and Upper Midwest. Due to the venue change organizers eliminated the basketball and swimming meets. Instead, competitions mostly centered on track and field events. A championship soccer match completed the worker Olympics with the strong Red Sparks club of New York defeating Chicago's Englewood team 2-0 in overtime.³¹

The counter-Olympics demonstrate several evolutions of the LSU. First, the event featured LSU athletes from different sections of the nation rather than regional meets. Second, African American athletes competed in de-segregated events and had their accomplishments noted and celebrated as a degree of social justice and as a challenge to Jim Crow athletics. Third, the LSU modestly maintained the Spartakiad tradition as European authorities continued to hamper organizational efforts abroad.

Depending on the historic interpretation, the Chicago games were either an impressive spectacle or a "politically simple, largely ignored, and quickly forgotten" event. Yet for the reported 400 athletes and 5,000 spectators, the games surely meant a degree of justification both athletically and politically. They would also be the high-water mark of the LSU.³²

During 1933 and 1934 the LSU continued to encourage the trends of regional and national championships, athletic desegregation and international competition. This was most successful with their impressive gains in soccer. In New York City over 8,000 spectators turned

out to Crotona Park to watch the Red Sparks play Fichte. Ted Minor, the city's communist mayor candidate, kicked off the ball and gave a well-received speech following the match. Equally impressive were the thirty-five registered teams playing in three division.³³

There were other soccer successes in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia, which also hosted impressive league memberships. These cities along with New York agreed to support a national soccer tournament for the Tom Moony Trophy, which Detroit's Arbeiter AC won in 1934 and New York's Prospect Workers won the following year. The WSA elected George Harvey, an African American soccer player, former boxer, and typesetter from Harlem as their national secretary, again demonstrating a challenge to segregated athletics and in this case leadership. Further, enough players and teams joined the WSA that in 1934 G.C. Leech, a United States Soccer Federation official issued a lifetime ban for any player that laced up for an LSU soccer team.³⁴

The 1934, LSU convention in New York City, demonstrated a willingness to broaden competition and cooperation with other sporting agencies. For example, the soccer and basketball leagues agreed to compete against socialist sport teams in their respective cities. The guest speaker at the convention was New York University's Physical Education Dean, Jay B. Nash, a leading proponent of "whole person development through creative leisure." There was also a trans-border flavor as members from the Canadian LSUs attended. They recounted how the Toronto Goodyear plant employed their soccer team as hired thugs to assault protesting strikers.³⁵

The LSU membership elected Richard Heikkinen as the National Secretary. Heikkinen, was a former leader of the Young Communist League in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He later relocated to Detroit where he became a labor organizer for automobile workers. As the LSU

National Secretary he laid out an aggressive political agenda that continued athletic political action, promoted racial equality, and emphasized an international labor/sporting vision.

An example of Heikkinen's direct athletic action manifested when he spoke at an all-star basketball game between the New York Renaissance, the first professional African American basketball team, and a team of "ex-professionals." The two teams played a benefit for the Scottsboro Boys defense fund. Heikkinen articulated the racial injustices of the case, called for athletic desegregation, and lauded the LSU in showing the way for this action. The reported crowd of 1,000 agreed and gave the teams and Heikkinen a standing ovation.³⁶

The New England LSU, in Gardner, Massachusetts, followed Heikkinen's lead. They also used basketball to host several benefit games that raised \$80.00 for a general strike of furniture workers in the area. They developed collaborations with Jewish Worker's clubs and the two groups organized athletic training schools that stressed conditioning, first aid, and worker's sports history lessons.³⁷

Heikkinen's most grandiose goal was once again sending an LSU athletic team to Europe. This time the 1934 Paris World Sport Congress against War and Fascism would serve as the international labor sport *raison d'etre*. These athletic contests differed from Moscow's Spartakiad in that they called for a united worker's sporting front of communist and socialist against fascism. This mirrored the "Popular Front" movement, which likewise called for left wing alliances to combat the growing threat of fascism.³⁸

From June through August 1934, the LSU held qualifying athletic events and street runs in each of its districts to determine four top athletes to send to Paris. The selections included Nils Erickson from Minnesota, Manny Petcoff from Philadelphia, Joe Geschlicht and Anna Kovacs from New York. For reasons unknown this athletic contingency went through several

changes before settling on Joe Halmos from the Eastern District LSU. He was accompanied by National Secretary Heikkinen and George Harvey the secretary of the LSU soccer leagues.³⁹

The trio arrived in Paris where Heikkinen and Harvey both addressed the reported 150,000 assembly of worker athletes and spectators. Athletically, Halmos placed third in the 200-meter sprint. When they returned, Heikkinen and Harvey reported on the prowess of the Soviet athletes and especially their soccer team, which defeated Norway in the final. They recalled how spectators cheered these athletic endeavors along with the mass singing of the “International,” political protest chants of *Les Soviets Partout* and calls to free Earnest Thalmann, the imprisoned leader of Germany’s communist party.⁴⁰

The combination of the Paris games and the “Popular Front” against fascism marked the end of the LSU’s autonomy. The organization held joint protest with other athletic groups that protested U.S. participation in the upcoming 1936 Olympic Games. For example, worker athletes, Jewish groups, students, the LSU, and anti-fascist groups came together in New York City and marched on the American Olympic Headquarters. They protested the American Olympic Committee Chairman Avery Brundage’s decision to send a U.S. team to the “Nazi Olympics.” Following the protests the groups formed an Olympic boycott league comprised of forty organizations that formally agreed to continue the dissent by allying itself with the U.S. Congress Against War and Fascism.⁴¹

In early 1935, the LSU and the Workers Gymnastic and Sport Alliance, a socialist sporting organization, formally agreed to merge all labor sport bodies. This included shared sporting facilities, joint athletic activities, and an official worker sport council. Soon after, the U.S.’s Socialist Workers Sport International also joined the group. The resulting organization, the Worker’s Sports League, became the new voice of U.S. worker athletic.⁴²

The Worker's Sport League continued for much of the Depression. One of its highlights was the 1935 athletic carnival at New York's Randall's Island. This occurred following the eruption of the Spanish Civil War, which canceled the People's Olympiad in Barcelona. However, it was unable to sustain itself beyond the Depression and eventually splintered into trade union athletic leagues and other left wing sporting organizations.⁴³

The LSU on the shores of Lake Superior and Iron Range

The Lake Superior and Iron Range proved fertile grounds for the Labor Sport Union due to its Finnish-American population. Immigration historian Roger Daniels noted the radicalism of the Finns when he explained how many arrived in the U.S. as "convinced socialists" or converted to the cause of labor shortly after arrival. When this late nineteenth-century immigration wave fully crashed on Superior's shores the Finns found work in the mines and lumber camps. This mind numbing and backbreaking labor engendered a worker solidarity that found a receptive audience with the immigrants. The rural nature of the work meant sparsely settled communities in addition to the mid-sized cities such as Duluth, Minnesota, Hancock, Michigan, and Superior, Wisconsin. Along with alienated labor, the Finns brought with them a vibrant athletic tradition, initially centered in the Finn halls, which served as gathering points for the communities.⁴⁴

These halls had their roots in temperance lodges. In addition to promoting sobriety the institutions established mutual aid, developed cooperative stores, organized dances, theater, and athletics. The halls also served as a place to debate the roles of religion and worker's rights. This latter activity created groups that eventually left their theologically minded members and

developed their own working people's clubs that emphasized Finnish-American heritage and living conditions.⁴⁵

By 1900, the worker clubs further subdivided and affiliated themselves with labor ideologies of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), socialists, or communists. Regardless of political faction, each club maintained an organizing committee. John Wiita, a leading Finnish-American communist, former teacher at Duluth's Work People's College and later newspaper editor, recalled that the committees structured entertainment, drama, orchestra, women's division, youth division, and athletics. Wiita noted that the sporting events had exceptionally able leaders, held regular training sessions, and participated in district wide summer and fall outdoor festivals. These gatherings showcased the best athletes, plays, musicals, and noted speakers or leading newspaper editors. He emphasized the participants came from the ranks of labor and held talent in fields besides their work.⁴⁶

From 1910-1920, at least eighteen athletic specific clubs competed in the Lake Superior and Iron Range region. Their names clearly show their Finnish ethnic roots. In Michigan's Upper Peninsula there were the *Ponnistus* and *Reipas* clubs from Calumet and Hancock. Five additional clubs, *Huima*, *Visa*, *Kontys*, *Toivon Voima*, and *Hiihtoseura Ritola* were active in South Range, Painesdale, Ironwood, and Wakefield. The communities of Marquette, Negaunee, and Ishpeming also maintained Finnish-American athletic clubs. In northern Minnesota, the *Alku*, club competed in Minneapolis, while *Ponnistus* and *Yritys* hailed from Eleventh and Virginia, Minnesota respectively. There were also Finnish worker athletic clubs in the communities of Duluth, New York Mills, and Hibbing. In Wisconsin, Finnish-American athletic clubs formed in the communities of Iron Belt, Montreal, and Superior. Most of these eventually found a home in the Labor Sport Union.⁴⁷

These sport clubs specialized in gymnastics, weights, calisthenics, swimming, track, and wrestling. The latter activity especially garnered interest. As early as 1910, the Finnish immigrant and athlete, Kalle Lehto managed a wrestling school in Painesdale, Michigan. His champion students wrestled other Finnish and non-Finnish immigrants in Calumet's Opera House or Houghton's Amphidrome in front of large audiences or for "world championships." Men's pyramid presentations, and "graceful performances" of women's athletics also attracted audiences and received accolades "beyond the area."⁴⁸

Naturally, this Finnish-American infrastructure became a prize in the political labor battles of the early twentieth century. The IWW, socialists, and communists all counted strong memberships in the Lake Superior region. However, the nascent CPUSA ushered in the most ambitious plans for organized labor athletics. The Party structured the region by co-opting the Federal Reserve District's numbering system and identified the Lake Superior Iron Range area as District 9. It became an incubator for the Labor Sport Union.

The District contained eighty-five LSU athletic clubs with over 900 members. This was the LSU's second largest membership; only District 2, which included New York and New Jersey had more athletes. Geographically, District 9 dwarfed the other LSU districts. It stretched 1,800 miles east to west and from Michigan's Sugar Island where Lakes Superior and Huron join to Willston, North Dakota, near the Montana border. To the south the district included most of Minnesota and the northern regions of Wisconsin for a total of 409,291 square miles.⁴⁹

Covering the area with few paved roads proved a challenging task that often took weeks to traverse. In the spring and summer muddy or dirt roads impeded fast travel. Conversely, "white-out" conditions and snow covered roads hampered travel in the winter. Those that had

their own cars counted themselves fortunate when assigned to organize the Upper Peninsula. Witte recalled having to travel to LSU chapters during one winter that received snow for sixty consecutive days. Carl Ross, another LSU organizer, remembered hitchhiking across the district, sometimes in the bitter cold temperatures. His accommodations varied from sleeping on pool tables in Ironwood's Finn Hall, to more comfortable barns in northern Wisconsin.⁵⁰

Hopping rails was another popular form of travel in the district. This entailed sneaking into the rail yard, stowing away in a boxcar or in large cargo and riding the rails to an organizational meeting somewhere down the line. Ross recalled another form of covert transportation. He climbed the ladder of a bus and situated himself amongst the luggage that was stowed on top. While certainly dangerous Ross remembered these trips as "typical" for the times and lent a "romantic atmosphere to the [communist] movement."⁵¹

Similar to the CPUSA's national movement, the Young Workers League of America organized the "red" athletes in District 9 prior to and in conjunction with the Labor Sport Union. As early as 1921, the YWL of Sault Saint Marie, Michigan reported a membership of twenty youth who worked in lumber camps and factories. They planned a labor study group and a bi-weekly newspaper. Athletically, the members engaged in gymnastics. Another YWL chapter organized the following year in 1922, in Duluth, Minnesota and Superior, Wisconsin. They jointly hosted a Sunday outing at Duluth's Fairmount Park, which featured labor speakers, music, and exhibitions by the Workers' Athletic Club. The makeup of these clubs and others in District 9 maintained several commonalities. The membership was naturally young, ranging from adolescents to early twenties. Most were in school or worked on farms, the timber industry, housekeeping, or general labor. The club leadership's names suggest Finnish origins representing the communist ethnic majority in the District.⁵²

The CPUSA noticed the success of these and other District rallies. In late 1923, the Communist Party sent the indefatigable YWL officer and organizer, Max Salzman, on a whirlwind organizational tour of District 9. He successfully aligned Young Worker League chapters throughout the region. Salzman headquartered out of Waino and Brantwood, Wisconsin and soon established YWL in these towns along with Phelps and Superior. His travels to Michigan's Upper Peninsula likewise proved successful as YWL's organized in North Ironwood, Ironwood, Painesdale, Mass City, South Range, Negaunee, Ishpeming, Hancock, Eben Junction, Munising, Sault St. Marie, and Bai De Wasai. He also had success in Minnesota, organizing early chapters in Cloquet, Chisholm, Hibbing, and Cromwell, which complimented the St. Paul and Minneapolis chapters.⁵³

Carl Ross recalled the fluidity of the Finn Hall athletics, YWL and the LSU when he explained the communist athletic programs in his hometown of Superior, Wisconsin. The Finn Hall organized in 1923. The weekends usually featured local plays and served to bring the Finnish community together. He stressed how athletics were the most important activity. These were the "core" of the hall due to their numbers and ability to raise great interest in the community. The Superior team, *Yritys Voimistulu Seura* competed in gymnastics, track and field. The gymnasts featured adult men, women, boys and girl's teams. They had a proper coach, Evert Bjorklund, who also worked for the Finnish newspaper *Tyomies* as a linotype operator. Bjorklund taught formal routines that likely originated from Finland. There were also annual competitions with other Young Worker League squads and Finn Halls that took the team west to Duluth and Cloquet, Minnesota and east to Ironwood, Michigan.⁵⁴

The Superior Hall also entwined athletics with politics and community. For example, it maintained "Socialist Sunday School," Young Pioneer, and Young Communist Leagues. The

curriculum included Finnish language, literature with socialist themes, music, poetry, and drama. At least once a week and sometimes up to three times if there was an athletic meet, the hall's athletes moved the furniture aside, unfolded a wrestling mat, set up the parallel bars, trapeze bars, an indoor track, high jumps, and other sporting equipment.⁵⁵

Community labor issues also received attention. In 1925, the Superior YCL used the hall to host a six-week training school that featured courses on the American labor movement, Leninism, American imperialism, and social theory. Harry Gannes, secretary of the Young Worker's League and Charles Hathaway, editor for the *Daily Worker*, were guest lectures. The courses drew over 400 attendees, including sixty children of the Finnish Worker's Party. Hall organizers expected the graduates to spread the ideology following the completion of classes. In 1927, the Superior club lent its support to the LSU and was an inaugural member of the organizational meeting in Detroit.⁵⁶

Athletes of the region's YCL and LSU also provided security details. When CPUSA presidential candidate William Foster visited Duluth in 1928, Carl Ross' father gave his son a blackjack and ordered him to ride up front in the car and to stay by Foster throughout his visit to make sure "there were no problems." Ross explained the communities had a "tactic assumption" that the athletes were to be Foster's bodyguards throughout his tour of the region.⁵⁷

Other examples of red athletic clubs aggressively promoting left wing politics included the use of flags. For example, in 1907, Ironwood, Michigan's *Konty's* Athletic Club declared they would march behind the Stars and Stripes while carrying a red flag. Ironwood authorities blocked the street with fire engines, the police force, and a freight train to prevent the march. Simultaneously, the chief of police entered the hall and confiscated the flag. This was not an isolated incident. Other athletic clubs in Ontonagon and Eben Junction, Michigan, Wano,

Wisconsin, and Sebeka, Minnesota flew the communist banner while conducting social and athletic events. These political displays forced heated battles with authorities or the community leaders.⁵⁸

An important Finnish-American celebration that showcased athletics was *Juhannus* (Midsummer's day). This yearly festival brought the various Finnish-American factions together to celebrate their ethnic identity and culture. Here theater, music, politics, and athletics shared public space. Case in point were the 1913 festivals in the Mesabi Iron Range communities of Virginia and Ely, Minnesota. It included choirs, brass bands, union organizers and lectures from the People's Work College. There were also athletic competitions that featured a five-mile race for men and a 100-yard dash for women. Likewise, the Mesabi Co-Op Park or the People's Park, organized in 1929. Its founders incorporated 240 acres for recreational use for Finnish-American farmers and laborers who became weary of discrimination by the host society. This rural location showcased athletics, artists, activists, and politicians of the working people. Their *Juhannus* festival was and continues to be a weekend of cultural, social, and educational events.⁵⁹

These summer festivals served as templates for future athletic and ethnic protests and celebrations. The LSU often used *Juhannus*, and later, "festivals of labor" and "festivals of struggle" to demonstrate their athletes' abilities and physical prowess. For example, in 1928 a gathering in Duluth's Fairmount Park that drew several thousand people. The Virginia Finnish Dramatic Association performed the play *Hyatt Rymatty Lassa*. Labor activists spoke, and a joint LSU/Finnish American Athletic Club track meet took place that included forty races. The LSU also held a mass physical training exhibition that featured men and women plus a special exhibit of 100 children gymnasts.⁶⁰

Such celebrations of athletics and Finnish culture soon expanded beyond *Juhannus* festivals. In late summer of 1928, Aura, Michigan's *Wesan* AC hosted the LSU teams from Ironwood, Hermann, and Ishpeming, Michigan for a regional track meet. Likewise, Montreal, Wisconsin's *Vesa* LSU team hosted forty two LSU athletes from Ironwood, Michigan to Duluth Minnesota for a late summer track meet.⁶¹

By the early 1930s the LSU athletic meets became more aggressive by marching in public parades and later competing in athletics. For example, in 1932, the Young Communist League organized a Festival of Struggle rally to draw attention to the unemployed in Ishpeming and Negaunee, Michigan. The region's LSU teams marched through the towns' streets with fellow protesters before performing in the local park. Likewise, the Green, Michigan LSU marched in a local May Day parade. They carried signs that invited the crowd to support the LSU and the Red Sport International and later took part in the regional athletic meet in the community park.⁶²

The formal creation of District 9's Labor Sport Union coincided with the CPUSA's "Bolshevization" policy. This dictate instructed party members to emphasize labor commonalities while de-emphasizing membership ethnicities. While this helped formalize communist athletics under the LSU it did so at the expense of the Finn Hall athletic leagues. That is, while many Finnish-Americans held an affinity for communism, many others did not. This created a schism over who controlled the Finn halls. Numerous Finns proved uncomfortable signing these cultural institutions over to the communists and instead elected to remain neutral.

A consequence of this action caused the older generation to withdraw their athletic support, coaching expertise, and limited the use of facilities. This meant as the second generation

of Finnish-Americans took control of LSU athletics they did so without the Finn halls and had to find alternative facilities, usually school gymnasiums. This split also produced an athletic transition. District 9's second generation preferred basketball, baseball, and other regional sports over gymnastics. This sporting change had mixed results. While the LSU clubs gained athletic competition with the addition to other LSU teams they did so at the expense of fine facilities and without recruiting many workers to the labor sporting cause.⁶³

An example of this new leadership is seen in Jack Salo, Duluth's Finnish American Athletic Club's (FAAC) basketball coach, who was also an early director of District 9. Salo grew up and competed in sports in Erie, Pennsylvania. His family later relocated to Minnesota. In 1927 he became coach of Duluth's FAAC. Similar to other Finnish athletic clubs the Duluth organization competed in gymnastics, track, and field. However, Salo also incorporated boxing, wrestling and basketball. It was this latter sport that the team especially excelled. Or as one player remembered "the Duluth FAAC was the team to beat."⁶⁴

The Duluth FAAC initially balked at joining the LSU. From 1927-1932 the club preferred to remain independent. They played YMCA teams, high schools, and other ethnic clubs along with LSU teams. However, in 1932, the LSU aggressively organized and promoted District 9's Midwestern Basketball tournament. This persuaded the FAAC to formally join the LSU where their winning team won the Midwest championship four out of five years.⁶⁵

This basketball tournament proved to be a popular and geographically diverse affair. For example, in 1934, thirty-six teams from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and South Dakota whittled down their entries to ten sides that travelled to Superior, Wisconsin for the Mid-West regional championship. The Gilbert, Minnesota team won and travelled to Chicago for the semifinal game. They lost to Chicago's LSU Roseland Sparks, by a point. The Sparks then travelled to

New York City where they were runners up to Brooklyn's Kaytee AC, the eventual champions and LSU athletic powerhouse.⁶⁶

In Upper Michigan, Ironwood's Atlas team proved the regional basketball power. In 1933 they successfully eliminated LSU teams from Phelps, Rock, Newberry, Hancock, and Negaunee. This enabled them to enter the national tournament in Cleveland where they were eliminated. Atlas repeated their winning ways the following year by again capturing the Upper Michigan title. They represented the region in Chicago, where they bowed out early in the tournament to the afore noted Roseland Sparks.⁶⁷

Carl Ross recalled the realities of playing winter basketball in these far-flung communities. In one instance, the Superior, Wisconsin team piled into a single car to make the trip to Northern Minnesota. The game took place in a country Worker's Hall with a pot belly stove heating one end of the court while the other end remained frozen. The temperatures required the players to compete in long underwear. On the return trip, the car's radiator froze and the team pushed the car to the closest farm about a mile away. They woke up the farmer and filled the radiator with hot water. One poorly dressed player suffered frozen feet from the snowy trek. The team carried him into the farmhouse to thaw him out before making the trip back.⁶⁸

Baseball in District 9 had modest success but never surpassed the popularity of basketball or track and field events in terms of competition and community support. Also, LSU baseball organizers had difficulty organizing a national tournament as they did with basketball. However, LSU baseball did organize in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and South Dakota. For example, the Young Communist League and LSU clubs organized baseball teams in the Wisconsin communities of Atwood, Owen, Phelps, Waino, Oulo, Markham, Hutter, and Brantwood. This last town supported the Pep AC, which won eleven of their thirteen games in the 1931 season. One of

their only defeats came against Ironwood's Atlas team that featured pitching ace Jack Keskenin. He struck out sixteen Brantwood batters and established a new LSU pitching record. By 1934, New York Mills, Minnesota reported eight LSU teams actively competing in baseball leagues as did the *Jyry* AC in Fredrick, South Dakota.⁶⁹

The LSU's policy to deemphasize ethnic identity naturally played out in District 9. In a series of letters to *Tyomies* editors, Manno Heiskanen, a member of Ironwood's LSU *Myrsky* team, explained how non-Finns identified the club name as a target for ridicule and that the name inhibited reaching out to non-Finnish athletes. He explained that the name worked well in the past, but with the advent of the LSU, sport could no longer be played for sport's sake. Instead, sport must be used to strengthen workers for eventual battle with capitalism. He argued that LSU clubs should divorce themselves from simple translations such as referring to *Myrsky* by its English name "Storm." He called for an entirely new name that would welcome all worker athletes. He concluded that the region rid itself of "traditionalism" in order to eliminate all traces of ancestry and by doing so reach the masses.⁷⁰

A follow up-letter from Cloquet, Minnesota's *Yritys* club agreed that using English pronunciations would likely increase non-Finnish athletes. However, it would do so at the expense of Finnish speakers who supported the clubs financially and with attendance. This writer suggested that translated names be retained and "Americanized" only if they were difficult to pronounce. To emphasize his point he signed the letter *Piikkikenka* (Spike-Shoe) to demonstrate how only half of the paper's readership (Finnish speakers) would understand his argument.⁷¹

The results of the debate manifested in several ways. Most LSU teams such as Cloquet's *Yirtys* maintained their Finnish name. While Ironwood's *Myrsky* became the Atlas AC.

Likewise, Aura, Michigan changed its name from *Wesan* to the Red Sparks, other teams such as Duluth, retained the ethnic Finnish American Athletic Club moniker. Further compromises dictated that meetings be conducted in English rather than Finnish in order for the younger generation to “express themselves rather than sit on the side-lines.” Also, the athletic division of District 9 changed its correspondence name to the Midwest Sport Alliance rather than the Finnish *Keskilannen Liltto* (Midwest Alliance).⁷²

Identity aside, the region proved adept at pulling together for specific causes and further demonstrates the malleability of the LSU, YCL, and second generation Finnish-Americans. For instance, at Duluth’s 1929 International Youth Day Torchlight Parade, athletes and YCL members hitchhiked or “freight hopped” trains to attend the event. One LSU athlete, Gene Saari, arrived on the freight train from Sugar Island, Michigan. Saari would later become a prominent organizer of the steelworker’s union. Likewise, Martin Maki, a future organizer for the electrical workers, freight hopped from Newberry, Michigan. Matt Solva, an eventual organizer for the timber industry was also there having arrived from Iron River /Crystal Falls, Michigan. There were also youth organizers from Northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. In short, while the protest was a gathering of the LSU athletes and Young Communist League leadership, it also served as an incubator for future labor organizers when they came of age.⁷³

Another important aspect of the LSU and District 9’s athletic promotion was the emphasis on athletic clinics. These varied from organizational meetings, YCL athletic gatherings, LSU sponsored clinics, and formal training sessions hosted by professional coaches. These retreats often included structural strategies, specific sport coaching techniques, first aid, and hygiene. Further, these regional clinics emphasized communist ideology and direct action

along with athletics. Organizers expected attendees to communicate all of these lessons to their respected LSU clubs.

One of the most successful organizational clinics occurred in 1930 at New York Mills, Minnesota. Attendees employed the LSU lessons and organized Minnesota clubs in Virginia, Heinola, Sebeka, Wolf Lake, New York Mills and Fredrick, South Dakota. The clubs staged regular track and field events during the summer months and showcased wrestling and gymnastics in the winter. These towns became the LSU strongholds of the northern region.⁷⁴

Other training schools such as the one in Green, Michigan developed regional athletic leaders to help promote the sport movement in the Upper Peninsula. In addition to athletics and communist ideology, camp attendees learned how to organize strikes. In this case they protested against the frugality of the kitchen staff's rations of one biscuit and cup of coffee for breakfast. The camp staff explained that by striking and protesting they could increase their biscuit ration to two, which they did. One member recalled the practicality of this lesson and jokingly referred to learning it at "Communist Bible Camp."⁷⁵

Several coaching clinics took place in Waino, Wisconsin at the community's famous Round Hall, a frequent locale for communist meetings. The LSU had multiple objectives. These included training participants for organizational leadership in athletics along with communist indoctrination. In one particular clinic athletes learned calisthenics and drills during the day and listened to influential communist speakers at night including future CPUSA leader Gus Hall who was in attendance.⁷⁶

Two other examples demonstrate an activism unique to District 9's LSU. In 1933, Rock, Michigan's YCL under the leadership of future LSU President Richard Heikkinen successfully organized 650 community farmers, athletes, and school children who prevented Sheriff Miron

from enforcing a foreclosure on Albert Norton's farm. The impetus for the protest emerged from a coaching clinic in Rock's Finn Hall. The next day the communist contingent and organizers traveled to the county courthouse and successfully won a five-year extension for Norton. Perhaps inspired by this action, that same year, Carl Ross and Unto Immenen led another LSU training school in Waino, Wisconsin, that again emphasized athletics and politics for the thirty-seven athletes. Following the courses the contingent traveled to Iron River, Michigan where they also stopped a foreclosure.⁷⁷

As on the national level, the District addressed the "race" question. One instance involved Duluth's FAAC coach Jack Salo. In 1927 and 1928 he attended formal coaching clinics at Superior State Teacher's College led by some of the most innovative sport minds of the day including Dr. Jean Meanwell from the University of Wisconsin, Notre Dame's Knute Rockne, University of Kansas' "Phog" Allen, Southern California's Howard Jones, University of Oklahoma's Hugh McDermott, and University of Pittsburgh's "Doc" Carlson, whose famous "Figure 8 offense" Salo employed with the FAAC's boys and girls basketball teams.⁷⁸

In addition to an innovative understanding of sports, Salo recalled an African American attendee at the clinic that no one except himself would speak to or associate with. He was "disgusted" with his fellow participants' treatment of the minority attendee. Carl Ross echoed this sentiment. He remembered how the YCL and LSU discussed at length the role of African American citizens and athletes to the region's rural areas and small towns. The YCL carried the argument into the public schools. Or as Ross recalled, the race question set the Communist apart from others.⁷⁹

In 1932, the Labor Sport Union hosted its Counter-Olympics in Chicago. Prior to this the organization began an ambitious promotional tour of the districts. A.L. Harris, a staff member of

New York City's Jewish Henry Street Settlement and an LSU organizer, joined Carl Ross on a tour of District 9. They spread the word of the Counter-Olympics, how to hold tryouts and the purpose of the games as they related to the freeing of labor activist Tom Mooney. The two covered over a thousand-mile during the winter. Harris was not properly dressed for the Upper Midwest winter and spent most of the journey hunkered down in the car's back seat wrapped in a blanket. To further complicate matters, the car's head lamps went out forcing them to make much of the drive in the moonlight. Nonetheless, Ross recalled he was an excellent speaker that astutely laid out the purpose of labor sports, the Counter-Olympics, and Tom Mooney's imprisonment.⁸⁰

Harris obviously persuaded many. The District's Counter-Olympic tryouts took place in Minnesota's Mesabi Park, and Negaunee, Michigan. The selected team of forty-two athletes travelled to Chicago in two donated trucks from the Mid-West Cooperative Alliance. This was the "red" or communist controlled arm of the Central Cooperative Wholesale. They were one of the largest athletic contingent at the games. Their only nourishment for the trip was bread and milk, which might explain an otherwise un-noteworthy athletic performance. Still, two athletes from the region, D. Gronholm from Rumely, Michigan and Saimi Maki from Eben Junction, Michigan finished fourth in the 100-meter race and third in the girl's long jump respectively. There was also Toivo Lavii from Rock, Michigan who hitchhiked, "flipped" railcars, and dealt with a vagrancy arrest in Milwaukee, who nonetheless still attended the games to show support.⁸¹

District 9 also held regional tryouts to select top athletes for the 1931 Spartakiad games in Berlin and the 1934 Paris World Sport Congress against War and Fascism. In the former, a National Youth Day protest march took place in Duluth in conjunction with the tryouts. The YCL and LSU objected to military spending, unemployment, wage cuts, and racism. Over 2,500

protesters gathered at the courthouse and listened to speeches by the groups. The throng defiantly paraded through the city despite not having a permit, which officials refused to grant. The following day, protesters again gathered at the courthouse and signed various pledges including the LSU cause to free Mooney. The selected LSU athletes advanced to Chicago but were unable to best Waukegan's sprinter, H. Lehtinen from the *Into* AC, who represented the "western LSU" at the Spartakiad Games.⁸²

Tryout for the 1934, Paris Games likewise received attention in District 9. Competition took place in four locations in Upper Michigan and several in Minnesota before culminating in a final tryout at Mesabi Park. Once again politics and sport mixed. The LSU tryout at New York Mills, Minnesota became a protest street run against a religious rally that a local church hosted at the same time. In the end, twenty-one-year-old Nils Erickson of Chisholm, Minnesota, the son of a Finnish farmer, won the right to represent the region. Unfortunately and for reasons unknown he did not make the trip to Paris.⁸³

District 9 also contributed leadership to the Labor Sport Union. Duluth's FAAC coach Jack Salo recalled his time as the director of the Midwest LSU. His duties required him to assist any club or members in any branch of athletics. These vague directions likely aided him in navigating the political waters of the early days when Finn halls had to decide if they intended to remain independent or join the LSU. This flexibility also aided greater competition since it established a precedence of the region's LSU clubs playing against non-LSU without damaging ramifications.⁸⁴

Salo's successor, Carl Ross, completed one of his legendary trips to the LSU's 1934 national meeting in New York. Ross recalled that he and a friend hitchhiked from St. Paul, Minnesota to New York City. His luggage included a handbag of sandwiches. The journey

required several rides to Indiana where they rented a small tourist cabin that was heated with corn cobs. Next they thumbed to Pittsburgh and found a ride to New York City. However, this required riding 400 miles in a rumble seat in the frigid December air. The *Young Worker* celebrated this journey and admonished other district leaders to show the same level of commitment as Ross.

On the return trip Ross made it back to Pittsburgh where he spent the night in jail, not for vagrancy but because hobos could do that as “stopover points.” He received additional rides to Chicago and then to Madison, Wisconsin. There he jumped a mail train’s water tender and road it home to Superior, arriving ten hours later. He recalled how this type of mobility was a model of the country’s communist leadership.⁸⁵

Another District 9 leader, Richard Heikkinen, was the LSU’s last National Secretary, serving from 1934-1936. As noted earlier, Heikkinen was a strong proponent of the “Popular Front” movement. He attended and spoke at the 1934 Paris Peace Games. His reports to the LSU recalled the instances of athletic and political solidarity at the games and how these ideologies should serve as a model for worker sports in the United States. He carried this message back to the Midwest where he conducted an extensive speaking tour of Lower Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and much of District 9.

In Superior, Wisconsin, the local LSU convinced Central High School’s principal to let Heikkinen speak about his Paris experiences and the threat of Fascism. An audience of 900 students attended. Heikkinen later gave this talk in St. Paul to an audience of 1,000 at the Jewish Community Center. It too emphasized the “Popular Front” and proposed boycott of the 1936 Olympics. This resulted in an anti-Fascist Midwest coalition that lent their voice to the Olympic protest movement.⁸⁶

In the LSU's final years, three events signaled its demise in District 9. First, the regional headquarters moved to St. Paul, Minnesota. This distanced LSU communication out of the region to a peripheral section of the District. Second, many Finnish-American LSU clubs chose to align themselves athletically with the Finnish Co-Op athletic league rather than Popular Front organizations. Third, the short lived Karelia experiment, where thousands of Finnish-Americans reverse immigrated to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s drained potential LSU members and also contributed to its demise.

In an effort to strengthen the Popular Front Movement, Minnesota's Young Communist League advised District 9's Labor Sport Union to establish its leadership base in St. Paul. The LSU agreed and set up shop in the second story of a retired prostitute's house. This move did not facilitate the athletic success previously enjoyed in the Lake Superior region. Instead the St. Paul achievements included securing public school gyms for members and to highlight federal relief problems to the city council. There was also modest success in organizing some of city's Italian-American athletes. However, the Popular Front and 1936 Olympic protests never achieved wide spread appeal in the Twin Cities.⁸⁷

Outside of St. Paul, the District's Finnish American athletic clubs turned inward. Much of the region's economic base supported the cooperative store movement, which offered consumer goods at lower costs and were community owned. In the mid-1920s and 1930s several of these stores aligned themselves with the Communist and became "red" co-ops while the non-communist stores were "white" co-ops. By 1935, the stores developed a sport league that coincided with the LSU's decline. Consequently, many former LSU teams began competing in the Co-Op leagues. Especially significant was the Mid-West Cooperative League basketball championship that featured teams from Upper Michigan, Northern Wisconsin, and Minnesota.⁸⁸

The Karelia experiment encouraged young Finnish Americans to leave the United States for Russia. These were precisely the athletic demographics the LSU needed to sustain itself. Further, as word came back to the U.S. about the Soviets' mistreatment and eventual murderous actions toward these immigrants, relatives in the United States often distanced themselves from communist organizations such as the LSU. Interestingly, it would be these wayward Finnish-Americans that helped introduce baseball to the Soviets. These ex-pats formed exhibition teams that played in Moscow, Leningrad, and Petroskoi.⁸⁹

Conclusion

At best, the Labor Sport Union only marginally impacts the nation's sporting historiography. Nonetheless the CPUSA continued to use sport as a platform, most famously by challenges to Jim Crow institutions and the desegregation of sport. However, in the Lake Superior and Iron Range region this sporting anomaly had significant implications. The LSU united the "red" Finnish-American communities under a sporting banner. It served as a catalyst for direct action in challenging foreclosures and promoting labor solidarity. Through Secretary Richard Heikkinen, the area sought to impress its regional vision of labor sport on a national level. Finally, the concept of labor and sport continued after the collapse of the LSU under the direction of the Co-Op Leagues. Thus, while a short chapter in U.S. sport, this work explains why these left wing athletes played not only for themselves but also for the people.

¹ William J. Baker, "Muscular Marxism and the Chicago Counter-Olympics of 1932," in *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. S.W. Pope, Sport and Society Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 284, 285-289. Mark Naison, "Lefties and Righties: The Communist Party and Sports During the Great Depression," in *Sport in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Donald Spivey, Contributions to the Study of Popular Culture, Number 12, (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 129-135.

² Naison, "Lefties and Righties," 131.

³ Draper, Theodore, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 173.

⁴ *Resolutions and Decisions: Third World Congress of the Red International Labor Unions* (Chicago: The Trade Union Education League, 1924), 38-40. *Young Worker*, "Sports and Working Class Youth, part one," April 18, 1925, 4; "American Workers Must Fight for Sport Organization of their Class, part two," April 25, 1925, 2; "Manifest of the Red Sport International," May 9, 1925, 4.

⁵ Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 92. MarxistHistory.Org, "Communique to the 2nd Convention of the Young Workers League of America from the Executive Committee of the Young Communist International, April 10, 1923 <http://www.marxisthistory.org/subject/usa/eam/ycleaguedocuments.html> The Young Worker's League was also known as the Young Communists' League.

⁶ Daeha, Ko, "Rough Beginnings" *Communism in Washington State: History and Memory*, Pacific Northwest Labor and Civil Rights History: The University of Washington <https://depts.washington.edu/labhist/cppproject/index.shtml> Young Communist League (1921-1946) Organizational History, "First National Convention YWLA --- Brooklyn, NY --- May 13-15, 1922," <http://www.marxisthistory.org/subject/usa/eam/ycleague.html> *Young Worker*, "The Sport Problem in the United States," April, 1923, 13; "What to do in the Summer?" July 1, 1924, 2; "Sports Work or Workshop Drives?," November 1, 1924, 3.

⁷ *Young Worker* "Call for a Formal Sport League," November 15, 1924, 3.

⁸ *Young Worker*, "Sport and Youth" April 14, 1925, 4 and "American Young Workers Must Fight for Sport Organizations of Their Class," April 25, 1925, 2.

⁹ *Young Worker*, "Interracial Athletics," and "LSU and Prairie Tennis Club hold Inter-Race Tournament," September 15, 1926, 2,3; "Finnish Workers Have Field Meet in Detroit," January 23, 1926, 3; "New Life Seen in Movement For Organization For Labor Sports Union in the United States," January 29, 1926, 4, and "Worker's Sports," October 1, 1926, 4.

¹⁰ *Young Worker*, "Labor Sport Union launched at Detroit Conference," January 15, 1927, 1-6; "How a Worker Sports Club Affiliates with the LSU," October, 1928, 4; "Bosses Try Smash LSU New England Sentence Leaders," April, 1930, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.* and *Souvenir Program Labor Sports Union Second Annual Olympics August 25-28, 1928 at Wingate Park Brooklynn, New York*, Collection Call Number PE. 036, Box 52, Labor Sports Union (Chicago, Illinois) 1928, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives Printed Ephemera Collection on Organizations, New York University Libraries. *Young Worker*, "Three Hundred Worker Athletes at Labor Sport Union Meet" August 1, 1927, 1-5-6; "Conference Held to Boost Labor Sports," February 1, 1928, 5; "Two Hundred labor Athletes Compete in L.S.U. Meet," February 15, 1928, 5; "Labor Sportsmen Prepare For Big Events in N.Y.," March 1, 1928, 5; "Labor Sports to the Fore," August, 1928, 2; "Arranging for an indoor Athletic Tourney," February, 1929, 3; "Labor Sports," August 1, 1929, 5; "LSU to Hold Meet in Ohio," June 2, 1930, 8; "Valo A.C. to Hold Contest for Labor Sport Magazine," November 17, 1930, 8; "May 31 Day of Tryouts All over the US", March 30, 1931, 8. *Tyomies*, "Urheilun," and "SU:n Olympialaisten voimistelukilpailut v:na 1928," July 20, 1928, 2-3; "L.S.U. Records Established at 1927 Olympic Meet," August 3, 1928, 3.

¹² The Erickson, Eva Helen Papers, Finnish American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹³ *Young Worker*, "Sports" September 1, 1927, 1,7; "Labor Sport Union Conducting Literary Competition on Sports," January 1, 1928, 4.

¹⁴ Files of the Communist Party of the USA in the Comintern Library, Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGSPAI), *Communist Party of the United States of America*, collection (*fond* 515), sub-collection (*opis* 1), folder (*delo* 3053), page (*listok*) "Minutes National Executive Board Labor Sports Union, March 21, 1932," p. 5; "Minutes National Executive Board Labor Sports Union, April 25, 1932," 29. This archive is accessible through the Library of Congress' INCOMKA Project, housed in the European Reading Room. The collection includes over 4,000 files of CPUSA records, dating from 1919 to the late 1930s. Hereafter abbreviated as RGSPAI, *fond* (f.), *opis* (o.), *delo* (d.) and *listok* (l). *Tyomies Seventieth Anniversary Souvenir Journal 1903-1973* (Superior, WI; Tyomies Printing Press, 1973), 25. *Young Worker*, "200 Athletes Compete in LSU Event," February 15, 1928, 5; "Arranging for an Indoor Athletic Tourney," February, 1929, 3; "Labor Sport Union Convention to be Held September 26, 27, 28," August 25, 1930, 8; "Detroit to Have Carnival of Winter Sports," January 26, 1931, 8.

¹⁵ *Principles and Constitution of Labor Sports Unions of America*, "Labor Sports Union of America," 3. Collection Call Number PE. 036, Box 52, Labor Sports Union (Chicago, Illinois) 1928, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives Printed Ephemera Collection on Organizations, New York University Libraries.

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