Washington State’s radical reputation was already well established by 1919.

The Socialist Party of Washington had been a powerful force in local electoral politics; the IWW flourished in the timber camps and in cities such as Seattle and Spokane. And in February of 1919, Seattle’s AFL unions had led the first self-described General Strike in American history.
Inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 and energized by the Seattle General Strike, in 1919 the left-wing of the state Socialist Party broke away to form a branch of the Communist Party of America (CPA). A rival party, the Communist Labor Party, was founded at the same time by former members of foreign-language sections of the Socialist Party. In Washington, as elsewhere throughout the country, the two factions merged in 1921 to become the Communist Party USA.

Seattle became the headquarters of CPUSA District 12, encompassing Washington, Oregon and Idaho.
The 1920s were an inauspicious time to build a new radical movement. The local Party joined efforts to build a national Farm-Labor Party and worked within the Seattle Central Labor Council to push the labor movement leftward. But mostly it concentrated on its own survival. Bitter factional and cultural divides within the Party combined with harassment and repression to inhibit Party growth. Communists were expelled from the SCLC in 1925. Immigrant Communists, still the bulk of the Party in the 1920s, were deported by the dozens. By the end of the decade, the Washington State Communist Party boasted no more than around 500 members.
With the onset of the Great Depression, the CPUSA appeared vindicated in its longstanding critique of the capitalist system. The Party began attracting more converts and sympathizers and became increasingly visible and influential.

The Washington State Party turned its attention toward poverty and unemployment. By the spring of 1932, at least 25 percent of the workforce, some 40 to 50 thousand workers, were unemployed in the city of Seattle.
The CP established Unemployed Councils to organize and politicize the mass of jobless men and women. The Councils focused on educating workers about the failure of capitalism and the socialist future and on mass political action to block tenant evictions and pressure lawmakers into allocating more funding for public works and relief to the poor and unemployed.
The CP Unemployed Councils were quite successful in a few cities across the country. Locally, however, the Councils were quickly out-organized by a rival group led by former Socialist Party leaders: the Unemployed Citizens League (UCL). Focusing on self-help and practical aid rather than revolutionary politics, the Washington State UCL attracted a widespread following and spawned a nationwide movement to organize the unemployed.
By the summer of 1932 the CP had given up organizing its own Unemployed Councils in favor of a strategy of “boring from within” the UCLs, which meant that Party members would join UCL locals and attempt to turn them away from self-help toward a more radical agenda using more confrontational tactics. Largely successful in this effort, by 1934 the UCL was a communist-dominated movement.
Communists also played a critical role in the revitalization of organized labor in the Pacific Northwest in the 1930s and 1940s. Party members could be found in nearly every union, but were especially prominent in the maritime, timber, and canning industries. Party unionists helped lead some of the major strikes of the period, including the 1934 waterfront workers strike, the 1935 timber workers strike, and the 1936 Seattle Newspaper Guild strike. They were also among the most outspoken champions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, working to push many AFL locals into the new CIO in the late 1930s.
The Northwest Communist Party’s appeal among African American and immigrant workers helped push forward the CIO’s broader vision of interracial industrial unionism.
Interracial unionism was but one part of a broader offensive against racism initiated by the CP beginning in the early 1930s. Nationally, this effort was highlighted by the Party’s defense of the Scottsboro Nine. Locally, the CP carried out its own celebrated legal defense in the case of Ted Jordan, an Oregon man falsely condemned for murder.
The CP’s anti-racism activism is one of its most important legacies. In an era when very few white-led organizations paid any attention to civil rights, the CP made it a top priority. Here in Washington State, the Party picketed “Whites Only” businesses, fought anti-miscegenation legislation, and publicized instances of police brutality against African Americans.
The CP also advanced its civil rights vision by actively recruiting African Americans and promoting them to leadership positions within the Party and in unions where Party members had influence. The Party nominated Revels Cayton for Seattle City Council in 1934. Cayton had been head of the Northwest district branch of the International Labor Defense and would go on to become an key leader in the Marine Cooks and Steward Union and, in the 1940s, head of the CIO on the West Coast.
In the mid 1930s, Communist Parties around the world became increasingly worried about the rise of fascism in Europe. Consequently, they became much more open to forming coalitions with liberals and non-communist radicals in a variety of political, civil rights, and labor causes including support for the New Deal, the AFL, and the CIO. This “Popular Front” strategy was more successful in Washington State than in perhaps any other place in the country.
In large part this was due to the success of the Washington Commonwealth Federation and the Washington Pension Union. The WCF functioned as a left-wing caucus of the state Democratic Party, working to set legislative priorities and to get progressive candidates nominated and elected on the Democratic ticket. In some cases, notably the election of Hugh DeLacy to the U.S. Congress in 1944, these Democrats were secretly members of the Communist Party. The WPU was a mass organization that lobbied for higher old age insurance for the elderly. At their peak in the late 1930s and early 1940s, each organization boasted tens of thousands of members statewide and the WCF largely controlled the state Democratic Party apparatus.
The Party vacillated between ardent, often effusively patriotic support for the Allied effort in World War II to equally militant isolationism, and back again. The CPUSA’s policy shifts on the war effort, which the Washington State Party followed dutifully, were a reflection of the Soviet Union’s own shifting set of foreign policy prerogatives and severely undermined the CP’s credibility for many erstwhile supporters both within and outside of the Party.
The success of the Popular Front and the influence that the Communist Party in Washington State wielded in the 1930s and early 1940s provoked a strong backlash when the political winds changed in the late 1940s. Suspected Communists were fired from jobs and blacklisted while several Party leaders were forced underground. Under pressure, the AFL and CIO purged Communists from their ranks.

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Washington state witnessed four high-profile episodes of government-sponsored anticommunism: the first occurred back in 1930 when the Fish Committee came to Seattle; the 1947 Canwell Committee hearings investigated “un-American” activities at the UW and in the Washington Pension Union, among other places; in 1953 seven Party leaders were tried for conspiracy to overthrow the federal government under the Smith Act; and in 1955 and 1956, the House Committee on Un-American Activities held hearings in Seattle.

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The Red Scare decimated the Party in Washington State and across the nation. The CPUSA also continued to lose members over its all-out support for the Soviet Union, especially in the wake of Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin’s crimes in 1956. However, the social movements of the 1960s helped spark a partial revival of the Washington State CP. The Party played a supporting role in the anti-war and civil rights movements and saw a modest rebound in its membership.
The Washington State Communist Party continues to play a supporting role in labor, civil rights, and environmental struggles across the state. Its numbers and influence have dwindled significantly since its heyday in the 1930s, however. Unsuccessful in attracting younger members and damaged by the collapse of communism in the USSR and eastern Europe, the Party was forced to close its Seattle office in 2001.
Daren Salter created this slideshow May 2009.

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