
A Farewell to Controversy.

by C.E. Ruthenberg

Unsigned article, attributed to UCP Editor Ruthenberg from content.

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We have been reading, or, to speak more correctly, trying to read, for qualifications between dashes and parenthetical explanations together with numerous footnotes makes reading in the ordinary sense impossible, an issue of *The Communist* published by what is left of the Federation group of the Communist Party.

We thought that there might be some issue which we could discuss with this group, with resulting enlightenment to the Communists of this country. But there seems to be no issue worthy of discussion. The paper in question contains 8 printed pages, mostly devoted to words about the controversy which developed within the Communist Party, but these pages are not filled with a discussion of principles, nor even of organizational questions. They are made up of wild vaporings about “plots,” scurrilous epithets, charges about “running away with party funds,” and like matters.

We cannot compete with the editorial staff of the Federation group in such matters, and therefore the headline of this article. So long as the discussion is on the basis of such matter as appears in No. 6 of the Federation *Communist*, we can only say “farewell.”

Before taking leave of the subject, until such time as an organization question or an issue of principle worthy of discussion is raised, we desire

to present to those interested in the facts, the following statement of the origin of the controversy and its developments.

The Origin of the Controversy.

Early in April [1920], the Chicago District Committee [of the CPA] unanimously adopted a resolution notifying the Executive Secretary [C.E. Ruthenberg] that unless decisions of the Central Executive Committee in regard to organization problems and on charges against members of that body could be satisfactorily explained in a personal conference, the Chicago District Committee would refuse to recognize the authority of the CEC and [issue a call for] a conference of district organizations, and through such a conference call a national convention.

The issues which the Chicago District Committee raised were not issues of principle, but of the integrity of the members of the CEC and of organization methods. Andrew [Nicholas Hourwich] and Ries [John Ballam] were charged with securing party funds through misrepresentations, and the majority of the committee with refusing to carry on the reorganization of the party so as to build the most efficient organization, because this would interfere with its control.†

The Executive Secretary [Ruthenberg] went

†- “Securing of party funds through misrepresentation” relates to Hourwich and his associate “Ries” shaking down the Boston District Organizer for a \$100 “district assessment” towards Hourwich’s travel expenses to a forthcoming Congress of the Comintern. This request for funds was misrepresented as an official action of the CEC, which had previously determined, to the contrary, not to send delegate Hourwich to Russia at the present time. At the March 17-19, 1920 sessions of the CEC, the majority of the committee

to Chicago, met with the District Committee, and after a hard struggle convinced its members that their proposals were not justifiable a short time before a [forthcoming CPA] convention and induced the committee to withdraw its declaration. In other words, the Executive Secretary [Ruthenberg], although personally to a large extent in agreement with the indictment of the majority of the Central Executive Committee by the Chicago District Committee, acted to preserve the unity of the Communist Party, until the convention could take up the questions at issue and succeeded in securing the agreement of the Chicago District Committee.

It was an attempt of the majority of the Central Executive Committee to act against the Chicago District Committee that broke the unity of the party. When the settlement of the Chicago crisis was reported to the Executive Council, in place of accepting it, it moved against the Chicago District. The members of the “majority” knew well now that if the convention was held the Chicago District delegation would come prepared to fight their further control of the party to the bitter end. They proposed to destroy the Chicago opposition before the convention. It was this purpose, from which the Central Executive Committee majority refused to recede, that compelled the “minority” to repudiate the authority of the CEC majority. Before the break took place the “minority” tried to come to an agreement for conduct of the party work and preservation of the party unity until the convention. But the majority of the CEC refused to agree not to remove any District Organizers until the convention;† it refused to give the “minority” an equal opportunity for discussion of the issues in *The Communist*. It was its determination to destroy the opposition in the party before the convention that forced the

“minority” to withdraw from its jurisdiction.

However, even after the break in the committee the “minority” tried to maintain the unity of the party through proposals for a convention in which both groups would be represented. The “majority” did not reply to these proposals for several weeks and then raised impossible conditions precedent to the discussion of the matter in order to make agreement impossible.

The Unity Conference.

Negotiations for a unity convention between the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party had begun prior to the break in the Communist Party. Agreement had been reached on every question but that of the proportion of delegates. Both groups of the Communist Party offered to continue the negotiations. The Communist Labor Party representatives refused to negotiate with the “majority,” but an agreement on the basis previously negotiated, with the exception that the question of proportional representation was left to preliminary conferences of delegates of both parties, was quickly reached with the “minority.” The unity conference was held [Bridgman, MI: May 26-31, 1920] and the United Communist Party was organized when it was found that the two groups were in agreement on principles.

The Party Funds.

The constantly reiterated statement by the Federation group, that the Executive Secretary [Ruthenberg] “ran off with the party funds,” is the shallowest kind of hypocrisy. It is an appeal to that kind of legalism which the Federation group itself condemns as being the tactics of sentimentalists and compromisers.

— consisting of Hourwich, John Ballam, Max Cohen, Alex Bittelman, and “Black” — declined to reprimand Hourwich and “Ries” for their actions or even to force them to return the funds to the Boston district organization, triggering the crisis.

†- Reference is to Chicago District Organizer Leonid Belsky (“Ed Fisher”) and Boston District Organizer Marion Sproule (“Alice Smith”), both of whom the CEC sought to remove as soon as possible.

Once the issue was forced to a decision by the tactics of a majority of the CEC, the issue was power, and to ask that the Executive Secretary [Ruthenberg], who spoke for a majority of the party and who was supported by a majority of the District Organizers and Federation representatives present at the meeting at which the break took place, should meekly turn over to a minority of the party the funds and other property under his control, is to appeal to that mawkish, sentimental legalism which gives the lie to the pretensions of being simon-pure Bolsheviks, which the Federation group so loudly proclaims itself.

The Executive Secretary [Ruthenberg] had previously served an ultimatum on the Executive Council, stating that if it persisted in its disruptive tactics, he would be compelled to repudiate its authority and administer and hold the party funds subject to and for disposal by a party convention. This convention has been held. A majority of the members of the Communist Party were represented, the accounts of the Executive Secretary were audited and found correct, and the funds have been turned into the treasury of the United Communist Party.

Principles.

The Federation group tried to camouflage the real questions which brought about the break by raising some imaginary division on the question of principle. It seems, however, to have thought better of it, for in the 8 pages of its *Communist* these questions are severely let alone. True it still mouths the word "principle," as this group has always done, but there is no discussion of principles.

The principles of the "minority" and of the former membership of the Communist Labor Party are now stated in the Program of the United Communist Party. If the Federation group wishes to have a real discussion about principles, if it is in disagreement with the principles of the United

Communist Party, we will welcome a discussion of these differences, and are certain that they will retire as quickly from such discussions, because they will not have a leg to stand on, as they have retired from the discussion between the "minority" and "majority."

Organization.

The organization form advocated by the "minority" is expressed in the Constitution of the United Communist Party. As against the Federation of Federations, 3 or 4 separate parties loosely united by an Executive Committee, which is what the Communist Party had been from its beginning, the United Communist Party presents a completely unified form of organization. The spokesmen of the Federation group have been ardent exponents of centralization in party organization but their centralization remained a theory when they were confronted with the fact that their sacred autonomous Federations would have to be sacrificed if centralization was to be achieved in fact.

The United Communist Party has achieved that centralization. It refused to sacrifice this organization principle in order to obtain the dubious support of those Federation elements which place their nationalistic group organizations above the good of the Communist movement. It has already secured the support of the best elements in the Federations, and when the issue is clearly presented to the remaining language groups, it is certain that all who want to build a powerful party, that will really be able to function in the life struggles of the workers of this country and in a revolutionary crisis, will throw their support to the United Communist Party.

Membership.

The Federation group makes many big claims as to membership support, but these claims

are hot air. The United Communist Party is not dependent upon guesses for information about its membership. Some 6,119 members of the Communist Party participated in the election of delegates to the unity conference. That figure represents at least 60 percent of the reorganized membership of the Communist Party. Since the publication of the Program and Constitution of the United Communist Party, other former members of the Communist Party have joined it. It already holds a dominant position in the Communist movement and its strength is increasing.

Conclusion.

With this summary of the controversy we say farewell to the Federation groups so far as discussion of the question is concerned. The United Communist Party will use its resources and press for other purposes than mudslinging. It turns to the task of agitation and organization among the workers of this country.

It will prove its right to recognition as The

COMMUNIST PARTY in the revolutionary struggle itself, not by words but by deeds.

As for what remains of the Federation group, the doors for admission to the United Communist Party are wide open for all Communists. The more quickly the Federation group realizes that the task of building a Communist movement and a party that will assume the task of leadership and direction in that movement is hopeless for it and the sooner it unites with the United Communist Party, the greater will be its service to the International. Absorption now in the United Communist Party means that the Communists who support it will immediately become factors in a virile and aggressive organization. The alternative for this group is a lingering death, and meanwhile futility.

Are the members of the Federation group strong enough to compel the sacrifice of the inordinate ambition for control of its leaders to the good of the Communist movement in this country and the Communist International?

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

Second Edition, Feb. 2007 — adding attribution of “Ries” = Ballam and correcting a footnote.

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