
Report of the United Communist Party's District Organizer 10 [San Francisco] to Exec. Sec. Alfred Wagenknecht in New York, March 7, 1921.

by W. Costley ["W.W."]

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District 10 [San Francisco]
3.7.21

Execsec:

Yours of the 28th received with the certificates [of party membership] for the men that left [for Russia] yesterday. I did not expect you to send them to me but to see that the party whose name I sent would receive them there. They are all good comrades and we are very sorry to see them go. I hope that you can straighten out the matter there. Flaxman will vouch for them and I will vouch for him. I would like for someone from the office to see them before they leave so they will write here to their friends and let them know that they were properly looked over before they left. It will do the Russians good here to know that you are on the job when it comes to getting certificates.

In regard to the DO work here I want to explain the situation. I have been on the job from the start and to my way of thinking the results are not commensurate with the time and expense put into the work. I attribute the slow growth of the movement here to the fact that the right sort of open work up to the present has not been done, because we have had no comrades capable of doing it. I find myself so busy doing the routine work of the office and attending on men whom I know are good timber. But this is slow work when you have to spend time and money in calling on a party three or four times before you catch him and when you finally see him he has to read up and decide what he will do. Then the trouble is to get

him in touch with the group organizer or to arrange to get him to the group meeting at the right time and place. And after he is in, to get him to attend meetings. The comrades are nearly all working here and attend their union's group meeting lecture, etc., so that all their time is taken up — but the party don't grow very fast. For instance, I have worked for several months in Oakland seeking out different men. Sometimes they have moved away. Sometimes I get an address that is wrong. I have to meet him at a certain hour and usually have to wait on him over the time set.

Well, I finally got the Finns together and I spoke to them last Thursday [March 3, 1921]. I went over Thursday to get an answer from their organizer what they would do about the matter of coming in [to the UCP]. They have had papers from time to time and know all about the situation. The report of the [national Finnish] organization was that they had decided not to affiliate with any movement till they had a chance to look over the situation further. Spring was coming on and many of them would not care to attend to meetings and wanted to use the time for vacations. All of them claimed to be revolutionist, but... but... etc. I found out that they were going to meet that night, Thursday, and I told the organizer I would wait on them and give them a talking to. I met him at 6:00. I waited till 8:00 and went to the hall. Thirty people gathered about 8:30 pm. Then they had certain exercises to go through with, singing, etc. Well I got the floor about 9:15 and I appealed to them in the name of the millions of workingmen that had died in the war, in the name of their women and children and

the thousands that were about to die in the revolution that we had all looked forward to and now was at hand. They talked the matter over in their own language and it appeared that they hesitated to give up the Federation property. It made me as mad to the bone to see them have the psychology of the bourgeoisie deeply embedded in their systems, and I told them so. And I told them furthermore that they were covering themselves with disgrace by refusing to enlist in the ranks NOW, and every moment of delay was a discredit to them. Well, Sunday night [March 6] I spoke to the same bunch in this city [SF]. They have a fine hall like they have in Oakland. I talked to them for about three-quarters of an hour. They had a big crowd present and I was the English speaker. They applauded what I said and the Finnish Organizer here, who is with us, said that I told them just what he wanted me to tell them. They have quite a lot of IWW with them and I told them what I always tell them: that like the AFL, they had led them up a blind alley. And like the AFL, their gains, if any were made, were paid out of the sweat, blood, and tears of poorer-paid workingmen and not out of the pockets of the rich. Like the AFL, they had ignored the unemployed army after they by their mistaken tactics had created it. I [outlined] the OBU argument (standing for the open shop because they don't want the door closed in the face of any unemployed man and wanted it open so the man inside and the man outside could work together to take the shop). This line of argument knocks any AFL or IWW cold.

Now that the unemployed are organized here I am going to ask the AFL and IWW fools just what answer they will give to the 6 million men out of work when they ask for advice from these brainy labor leaders. Whether they on the outside should stand for the closed shop or the open shop? Or an alliance between the employed and unemployed men of the land? You know the answer. This is one of the reasons that I would gladly give up the office, providing you let me, of course. I feel confident that I could pay my own way and steer membership in the party much faster when I get out before the public with my line of talk. I know nearly all the old-time radicals in this state and they know me. If I am talking they will come to me instead of me going to them individually. Then I can

make them wise and put them in a group. I can use my lectures on the Pagan foundation of the Christian religion as a <illeg.> to rip the system. I could use my book, *The Plan of Laughing Land*,[†] to preach straight communism, as it is merely an imaginary picture of a communistic society organized on a national scale. I want you to understand that if I do this work I am not asking that I will be exempt from party discipline, but on the contrary I want the work I do to be subject to the supervision of the District Committee. And if at any time they decide my work is not beneficial to the movement, I will stop and stop short. But I am confident that my plan will work. Whatever money I make will also be turned over to the party if so desired. There is only one man that has ever bear me on literature selling on this coast and that man is Arthur M. Lewis, who is there in Chicago.

Now, in regard to the employing the two organizers. F [???], the Russian organizer here, is out of work and as I told you has a wife and two children. He sells almost enough labor organs to pay his own salary. I expect him to do it in a few weeks. What he lacks I have promised to pay him out of my allowance of \$35 a week. I seldom take more than \$20 per week and it makes me pinch to get on on that. I am only too glad to get on with as little as possible. Now we have just had a ball that has been a financial success and the success is chiefly due to the work done by F's [???]'s activity, and getting the Russians to turn out in strong force. He also handles the papers and literature, something that is simply impossible for me to do with the other things I do. The city here is now in a position to grow. There is a weekly meeting of the Study Club that nets \$8 or \$9 every week in collections. Out of this I pay F [???] — and never intended to have the CEC put up a cent of his salary.

Now in regard to Los Angeles, it is different. I had a lot of trouble to get things started there. The man I go lost his job and got it back again at reduced wages. He has no time to do much and then, to make matters worse, he is quarantined in his house because one of his tenants has the smallpox. Well, fortunately, F's [???]'s brother is down there and I told him to take over the work and the comrade there would help him as soon as he was able. Now I received instructions a

[†]- W, Costley *The Plan of Laughing Land, or, The Science of Political Economy in a Nut Shell*. (Oakland: World Press, Inc., 1906).

few weeks ago to put three organizers in the field, Russian, English, and German, and the instruction stated that these organizers must try to find jobs in the place where they were organizing and if they did not get a job, the CEC would pay them \$15 per week. In line with this, I put F [??] to work in Los Angeles. He has just started. That is another reason why I want to work in the open. I could go to Los Angeles and hold meetings and make money, but the men that can speak and sell literature are nearly all in jail. I can't find them here in this neck of the woods. So I am compelled to use what material there is at hand.

I figured out that if the man whom I wrote to you about — “ALBRIC” [Bertram Wolfe], who's the class teacher here (and is fine on economics) — if he could be induced to take over the office (he is an expert accountant and makes good salary). I don't know if he would be willing or not. But if he would be, I would turn it over to him, providing you knew him to be all right. And I am waiting anxiously to hear you answer to my question about him. He is well-known in radical circles. We want to know about him anyway.

I am not making any demands, I simply want to do the best I can to get this district into shape, and I think I can do it along the lines that I suggest. For instance, if I went to Los Angeles I could not work for the money I take here because I would be in the same position as you are — I would have to keep up two homes. I am not married but I have lived here with my landlady for 30 years and she is over 60 years old now and I don't want to leave her without help. I would see the whole damn world sink before she should want for anything I could provide for her. That's the way I feel about her and we are not married but I am bound just the same.

That is why I was compelled to take the \$40 a week when I went east. I hated to do it but I couldn't help myself.

I will send you one each of my books. But I want you to understand that when I wrote *The Plan* in 1906, I did it in three days and when I got out the new edi-

tion I was also in a great hurry. From a literary standpoint the book is full of faults, but from an economic standpoint I will undertake to face the world on the economic soundness of the ideas outlined there. Someday I intend to take my time and get out these ideas in refined literary style. I have a few friends that can whip it into shape for me. But as it is I can put it over strong and make money selling it. There is one thing sure, that no workingmen's government can ever be established without following almost completely the plan outlined here. If they ever perfect their systems in Russia, it will look very much like the “Plan of Laughing Land.” Of course, I am not vain enough to think that these ideas are mine — they are the ideas of men with their imagination developed to the point where they can picture communism in action.

I will be glad to get the Theses [of the Communist International]. I spoke to S [??] last night at the ball and he wants to get a few groups that he can make up out of those registered in the technical order. I will give him material for these.

I told the organizer in Oakland to first take in S [??] and then call on me when he was ready to organize the first group.† As I told you, [J.E.] Snyder wants to come in with a group.‡ That is up to you. If you say take him in, why we will do so. But as to his group, I know some of them — two in particular — that are too mouthy altogether.....

I just came from the meeting of the committees that are to work in the unions meetings on the Unemployed Matter. We have 4 committees, two men each; I myself will go before the Labor Council Friday night and other large meetings. We will arrange for a large mass meeting in the California Hall (holding about 1200 people) about the 15th or 18th of the month. I am waiting for the paper to get here [*The Toiler*, it would seem] so that we can sell it and get some finances for the work. I don't know yet what money has been taken in on the C [??] Saturday, will know in a week or so the full amount. Whatever it is, we will use some of it to pay for the hall, but I feel confident we can clear all expenses from the collections.

†- “Groups” consisting of from 5 to 10 members were the primary party units of the underground UCP.

‡- J.E. Snyder was editor of the Socialist weekly *The Oakland World* during the 1917-1919 period. He was either a member or an extremely close sympathizer of the Communist Labor Party after the formation of that organization in August 1919. He was arrested in December 1919 for purportedly having violated the California Criminal Syndicalism law and the newspaper he edited was captured in short order by Socialist Party regulars shortly after his arrest.

As for the names of the committee I sent to you. They were the only ones in the party I could get and I had trouble in getting them, and one has now gone away and I am hunting for a substitute. If you want me to be on that committee, why just write my name. As for Rags [???], he is working and cannot attend meetings. This town is short of the type of men that would take part in an unemployed movement. The mere thought of jail makes them turn pale. And they are in mortal fear of a clubbing.

This brings me to the handling of the pamphlets. As I told you, I have kept them in reserve until we have the crowd organized and headed up a little and my plan was to distribute them on the waterfront and the shipyards, where thousands of men herd up every day. I wanted in particular to distribute a big bunch of them in Oakland so as to stir up that S.B. FENTON THOMPSON. Sooner or later his case will have to be attended to and I see a way of tending to it. The unions in the Labor Alliance decided to hold a meeting for lifting the blockade there in Oakland. And if I can get them to back me up in a free speech fight, I will take the lead and tell F.T. to go to Hell. He is a thorn in our side here because he has declared that no radical shall speak in Oakland. And if B.M. [Bob Minor] comes out this way we want to be sure to have the stage cleared for him in that town. And the only way to do it is to fight him. So far I have never been stopped by police orders and I am enclosing you an old clipping to show just how I won. A Free Speech fight in this town when the so-called regs [regulars] deserted me and left me alone to make it stick. And I did. I was pulled night after night in succession and got enough financial support from the public to pay for the fight in court and won. I spoke during the war, when all the reds went into hiding. They pulled me and I was interviewed by both the local and federal offices and they were not able to find a lawful reason for a charge. From my experience in radical work I have sort of got into the habit of going it alone. All the wise ones told me when I organized the Unemployed the last time that it couldn't be done and I did it and held them together for 4 years. I am anxiously waiting to see what is being done in the East to get them together and start some-

thing. This is the time when big things can be done. The matter of working among the military forces has not been started because we have no men to work on that line. Every available man will be enlisted to work in the unemployed, but if you sent any literature we can distribute it among them. There are a lot of them here and many of them are red and still more are a strong pink.

The address of the man you know [???] is 912 Apgar St. I remember distinctly putting the card in the letter. Just the address, it was in his own handwriting and I was not sure whether it was Apgar or Afgas, so I saw him again and he told me Apgar. He says he is working on a bunch of good men but the work is slow as he can't get them together. He says he will collect the names and let me round them up. If S [????] gets his group together in the near future, I will work out of that and line them up there and split them as they grow.†

Somehow or other I think that all my letters don't go to you. Did you get my letter about Snyder? If so instruct me what to tell him in regard to his paper.‡ His sub list will be quite valuable to us and the LO [Legal Organ, *The Toiler*]. And while the matter is on my mind, I want to say that we have worked the circulation from 100 to 500 per week. We were able to do this because of the price of 2¢. The profit made from the paper I have used to pay F [???], whose labor has built it up and soon expects to make it 1000 per week. Now we have just received notice that the price will be 3 1/2 cents, quite a sudden jump, which put F [???] out of business since he couldn't make salt on this margin. Also the CP here is selling [Lenin's] *The Infantile Sickness* for 25¢, but our price is 50¢. These handicaps make it hard for the lit sales. I don't know the conditions there but if it is possible to lower the rate I would wish you would see to it. We need that money to pay F [???] with, otherwise he will have to go to work and we will lose his services in this field.

We will clear something like \$300 to \$400 on the ball of the 5th. I will forward it to you as soon as we get it all straight. I will be glad to see you reimbursed for the convention expense and the literature. I hate to see the District behind financially. The sec-

†- For security reasons the underground primary party units, the "groups," were to consist of no more than 10 members, requiring the "splitting" into additional units as they expanded.

‡- Presumably, the reference here is to *The Oakland World*, which Snyder formerly edited.

tion committee did not take up the auditing last night as it was so late when we got through with the reports of the ball. So I am sending another unofficial report so you will have some line on the situation here.

So far we are paying out money for the unemployed movement. I just don't know what plans you have for raising finances but if you have any pleas let us know. I have told the committees that visit the unions not to ask for assistance at this stage of the game, but later we of course will have to work them, as it is much for their benefit as it is the unemployed to work together.

Don't forget the group receipts, we need them badly. I can get some printed here if you say so, if you have none on hand.

The Irish here are all right as far as having men equipped and trained for the real business. I feel sure they will support us in every way outside of group organization. And it is possible they will get in right. I will see the names you sent me but one of them is a yellow [social democrat] of the first water, "Conway" — but he may have changed now as many of them are beginning to change.

What do you think of Lena M. Lewis? She is secretary of the yellows here. I had a talk with her and she would come in, I am sure, if she could see her way clear to make a living in the movement. She can't do anything but talk and thus her economic circumstances will compel her to stay with them till something else turns up. If you want me to get her I think I can do it. We could make some good use of her out here and at the same time hit the yellows a good blow. The Editor of the *World*, [Maynard] Shipley, has resigned and they are dropping out one by one.

The unites for trade relation with Russia are growing fast, we have a good representation there and their work so far is right in line. I had a talk with one of the leaders who had been supplied with lit by Chep [??] of the CP. He told me he was in full sympathy

with Communism, but he rather inclined to the belief that the CP were right on Unity. I had a talk with him for half an hour and explained just what the trouble was with the CP. He said he had 150 men in the pink [social democratic] unions that he could get in line and told me to call on him for a further talk at his house. When I told him about the necessity of the movement in this country having an American expression, even though the contention of the CP that they had a majority was true (which we don't admit), it brought him in line. I have several men working in the unions and they feel confident that they can bring the pink leaders around. I feel like this also.

I think the unemployed movement will enable us to put over the argument that will make them move. The general sentiment expressed in the meeting last Sunday by the delegates (for lifting the blockade) was that their reactionary labor leaders were the greatest barrier to progress. I think they are about to break away from the control of this machine. I laugh to myself to hear them complain of the tyranny of the "Old Man of the Sea" that they have so firmly established on their backs. Fine result of 40 years of union activity. When I josh they take it good naturedly.

Yours fraternally,

W.W. [W. Costley].

P.S. I am sending by this mail the certificates you sent me to a man there where you can get in touch with the men that will leave there [for Russia] on the 19th. His name is Anton Dowsy c/f Morris SOLOTOFF, 4415 — 12th Ave., Brooklyn, NY. I think it would be a good thing for me to have a dummy certificate so the groups could see it. And I would like to know if the CP has the authority to issue them and if there is any new of Unity — they are all here standing on tip-toe waiting for it. WW.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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