
The Skirmish in Cleveland

[events of Dec. 11-12, 1922]

by C.E. Ruthenberg

Published in *The Liberator* [New York], v. 5, no. 12, whole no. 57 (Jan. 1923), pp. 9-11.

“Progressivism” and labor met in conflict at the Conference for Progressive Political Action held in the City of Moses Cleveland on December 11th and 12th [1922].

With the help of Yellow Socialists “progressivism” carried the day but the conditions surrounding its victory spell its ultimate defeat and the victory of labor.

The economic and political experiences of the industrial workers and farmers since the signing of the armistice have resulted in a powerful movement of protest against the political domination of the exploiters. Injunctions and soldiers in strikes, Supreme Court decisions, congressional legislation, all have shown that the government of the United States is merely the machinery through which the railroad kings, the coal barons, industrial magnates, and financial lords protect their right to exploit the industrial workers and farmers, and to advance their own interests as exploiters.

This protest movement expressed itself in the shattering of old party alignments in the November [1922] election. The Cleveland Conference was the first coming together of the representatives of this movement in an effort to give it a definite expression.

Seated in the Engineers’ Auditorium at the opening of the Conference were the representatives of the 16 standard railroad unions, the United Mine Workers of America, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the International Typographical Union, representing 2 million industrial workers; of the Farmers’ National Council, the Farmer Labor League of America, and the National Non-Partisan league, representing a million farmers. Besides these there were the representatives of various State Federations of Labor and Central Labor

bodies, of the Farmer-Labor Party, the Socialist Party, the Workers Party of America, and of some 15 or 20 local unions.

This delegation could from the very beginning be divided into 3 definite groups. On the Right were the representatives of the railroad unions, the representatives of most of the farm organizations, and the Socialist Party.

This group had come to the Conference definitely agreed that a labor party should not be formed. The leaders of the railroad unions and the farm organization had participated in the LaFollette Conference in Washington. They were committed to the policy of the group of progressive representatives and senators who participated in the Washington conference. They are against independent political action by the industrial workers and farmers. They do not want a labor party, a class party which will clearly draw the lines between itself and the political parties of the exploiters of the workers and farmers.

With this group the Socialist Party has allied itself. Its representatives had come to the Conference agreed to fight against the formation of a labor party. Although it declares itself in favor of a labor party, throughout the conference its representatives fought with the Right Wing “progressives” who want to continue to “reward the friends and punish the enemies of labor,” and against the groups which were fighting for this labor party.

The Center group of the conference consisted of the delegates of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, of the central labor bodies, and of the Farmer-Labor Party. This group was for the organization of a labor party. It could probably have won the support of the

United Mine Workers and some of the farmer delegates had it had the leadership to make a fight.

On the Left were the delegates of the Workers Party of America and the delegates from the local unions who had come to the Conference prepared to fight over every inch of ground for the establishment of a labor party.

A Weak Center.

The Right Wing was well organized. It was the machine. Under the leadership of President W.H. Johnston, of the Machinists, and Morris Hillquit, the head of the Socialist delegation, it made a winning fight for progressivism and against the labor party.

It is doubtful, however, whether all the well oiled machinery of this Right "progressive" bloc would have succeeded in railroading through its program had it not been for the irresolution and indecisive character of the Center group.

The Center group lacked leadership. It lacked a group of militants who would not have been afraid to stand up and boldly fight the Johnston-Hillquit "progressive" machine. It made the mistake of postponing its fight until it was too late to fight. It made a half-hearted fight for the seating of delegates from the local unions, and when victory was in its hands, it let that victory slip away through parliamentary stupidity.

The Center group said it was for seating the delegates from the Workers Party and would vote that way, but it was blind to the fact that the seating of the Workers Party delegation was part of the fight for the labor party. The Workers Party and local union delegates would have stiffened the Center. It would have given it a militant Left Wing leadership. Had the Center group fought to seat the Workers Party and local union delegation, it would have won that fight, and in winning that fight would have prepared the ground for victory in the struggle against the "progressives" and for the labor party.

The Conference opened with a prepared speech by President W.H. Johnston, who is chairman of the National Committee. He drew a dark picture, indeed, of how, openly and unblushingly, the government of the United States is a weapon of the exploiters to further their interests as exploiters.

"The government of the United States, legisla-

tive, executive, and judicial," read Mr. Johnston from his manuscript, "is owned by the railroads of the United States." And then in an aside to emphasize his statement, "That will stand the acid test."

"The government of the United States, legislative, executive, and judicial, is owned by the railroads of the United States!" And how does the "progressive" bloc, running from Johnston and Stone to Hillquit, expect to remedy that condition? Through the "direct election of the President and Vice-President by the people" says the program which it jammed through the Conference. How much difference would it have made if the voters had voted directly for Mr. Harding instead of through the Electoral College?

Mr. Johnston continued with a description of the victory which "progressivism" had won on November 7. November 7, 1922, would be compared by the future historian of the United States with July 4th, 1776. He probably had in mind the realization of the other 5 points of the program of futility adopted by the Conference as the basis for his comparison.

Things dragged along without any signs of life or enthusiasm in the Conference until the Credentials Committee submitted its report. The committee recommended, although the call for the Conference was so worded as to make possible the interpretation that delegates from local unions were invited, that such delegates, who were known to favor the organization of the labor party, be not seated.

J.G. Brown, of the Farmer-Labor Party, reported that a minority of the Credentials Committee did not concur in the recommendation. Max Hayes, of Cleveland, Farmer-Laborite, moved to adopt the minority report. It was adopted by a large majority.

The Workers Party Fights.

But the delegates from the local unions were not seated. By no means. The Johnston-Hillquit machine still had a trick up their sleeve. Mr. Hillquit rose to make a point of order, that since the minority of the Credentials Committee had merely reported that it did not concur in the majority report not to seat them and the motion carried was to adopt the minority report, no action had been taken except to vote not to concur in the majority report. Mr. Johnston so ruled. Mr. Hillquit moved to refer the matter of local union

delegates back to the Credentials Committee. And the Center group let them get away with it!

The Center group had won the fight for the seating of the local union delegates, who would have strengthened the advocates of the labor party. It let the machine rob them of its victory, through a ridiculous interpretation, of the slipshod motion its representative made.

The Credentials Committee reported on some minor matters and announced that its report was completed. Immediately C.E. Ruthenberg, spokesman for the Workers Party delegation, was on his feet demanding a report on the credentials of the Workers Party delegation.

The Conference at once showed signs of being galvanized into life. The Credentials Committee stated that no Workers Party credentials had been received. (The credentials were "found" by the committee later, but no explanation was given as to who was responsible for the attempt to dodge action on the admittance of the Workers Party by ignoring the credentials of its delegates).

Edward Keating, editor of *Labor*, rose to demand that the Credentials Committee be instructed not to receive the credentials of the Workers Party if they were presented. Dennis Batt, delegate of the Detroit Federation of Labor, demanded "Why?" and Keating continued with a tirade declaring that the Workers Party was "un-American and against the flag." This was greeted by a storm of jeers from the delegates and the galleries. R.D. Cramer of the Minneapolis Trade and Labor Assembly rose to tell of the constructive work of the Workers Party in his city.

But the Center group missed another opportunity. Had it taken a determined position and made a fight to seat the Workers Party delegation then and there, which its spokesmen said it was ready to do, it could have won the fight. But Hillquit moved to refer the matter back to the Credentials Committee and the Center acquiesced and the storm was over.

On Tuesday morning [Dec. 12, 1922] the Credentials Committee reported, "Your committee believes that the policies of the Workers Party and the Young Workers League are not in harmony with the principles of this conference and recommends that their delegates be not seated."

Chairman Johnston evidently feared that the

storm of yesterday would again break loose. He quickly announced that if there was no objection the report would be adopted and that there was no objection and it was adopted.

Cramer, of Minneapolis, sprang to his feet to move that the report be not concurred in, but Mr. Johnston suavely countered with a statement that he had asked if there was objection and that there had been none, ignoring the fact that he had not given opportunity for anyone to voice objection. The matter, he said, was closed.

Thus the advocates of the labor party suffered their second defeat.

The Labor Party Sabotaged.

The report of the Committee on Organization followed. Here again the advocates of the labor party lost an opportunity to fight for their views. They permitted the Hillquit report providing for the continuance of a Conference for Progressive Political Action to be adopted without a squeak of opposition. The report of the Organization Committee should have been the signal for a determined fight to incorporate in the organization plan provisions for the labor party, but the Center let it pass, thus piling up another decision against their position.

One thing the organization plan does provide that leaves open the door for building up the labor party. In such states in which the state conference decides to do so by majority vote, it is given the right to go into the election as a party under the name it may decide upon. This should be the cue for the advocates of the labor party to go into the state organization to form state labor parties which can be unified at the next national conference, or at a conference called by these labor parties for that purpose.

Having succeeded in keeping the labor party advocates silent while decisions were piled up against them, the official machine attempted a final coup to complete its work. The Center was waiting for the report of the Program and Resolutions Committee to make its fight for the labor party. Keating, chairman of the committee, made a plea for a brief statement of principles and then read 6 points of a legislative program and a recommendation from the Program and Resolutions Committee that no other program

or resolution be even considered.

Had the recommendation been adopted the Conference would have adjourned without having even discussed the question of organizing a labor party. But this was too much for the delegates on the floor. There was a revolt and the official machine met its only reverse. The Conference decided that all resolutions be reported with the recommendation of the committee.

This brought the resolution calling for the formation of a labor party to the floor of the conference. At the Tuesday evening session it was debated and failed to carry by a vote of 52 in favor and 64 against, a vote which shows that if a determined fight had been made from the beginning, the labor party proposal would have been carried.

After motion referring other resolutions calling for the recognition of Soviet Russia, the release of political prisoners, and repeal of criminal syndicalist laws to the newly elected National Committee, which will undoubtedly see that they are buried, the conference adjourned.

Hope for a Labor Party.

While, with the aid of the Socialists, the group which is seeking to turn the movement for independent political action by the industrial workers and farmers into the morass of a new progressive movement led by such middle class leaders as LaFollette and Borah, and fighting for such middle class policies as are stated in the program of the conference, won an official victory at the Cleveland Conference, the movement for the labor party is not dead.

The Cleveland Conference has made the labor party a bigger issue than ever. It has clarified the struggle through making the alignments definite. The leaders of the railroad unions are definitely on the record as against independent political action by workers and farmers in their class interest. The Socialists are aiders and abettors of the group that is trying to head off the labor party in the interest of the middle class policies of LaFollette and Borah. The group consist-

ing of the Farmer-Labor delegates, the delegates from the central labor bodies, state and local, and from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which wants a labor party, has been solidified. It is this latter group which will be the nucleus of the labor party, the role of the Socialists in the conference was to stultify themselves. Supposed to be advocates of independent political action and a labor party, they put their votes and the parliamentary knowledge of their leaders at the service of the progressive machine to kill the labor party. They sat silent while the same epithets which for years were hurled at the Socialist Party — “un-American and against the Constitution” were being used against the Workers Party. Later they disowned these epithets only to proclaim their adherence to “the method of democracy” as against “dictatorship,” with the echoes of “democracy” as practiced at Albany still ringing in their ears.

The Workers Party, although barred from the Conference, came out of it a victory. The question of the Workers Party and its determined stand for a class party of workers and farmers dominated the Conference. At the Cleveland Conference the Workers Party made its first appearance in the life of the American workers and farmers as a definite political force.

The emotion aroused by the Workers Party in the minds of the conservative union leaders who were the “progressives” of the conference was illustrated in the exclamation of one of them. “Here those fellows are holding an amalgamation conference in Chicago to undermine us in our organizations, and we meet to organize a political movement, and here they are again knocking at the door.” He may be sure that the Workers Party will keep on knocking, and that knocking will become such a pounding that the door will open.

The Workers Party will continue the struggle begun at Cleveland. The Cleveland Conference was only the first skirmish in the campaign to build a mass political party of the workers and farmers in the United States. Such a party is bound to come out of experiences of the workers and farmers and in it the Workers Party will have a place and will ultimately win the leadership of the working masses of this country.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2011. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.