
The Workers Party Convention

[Chicago — Dec. 30, 1923 to Jan. 2, 1924]

by Philip Kerr

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Workers Party gatherings are usually noisy affairs. The Third National Convention which opened December 30th [1923] and closed January 2nd [1924] at Imperial Hall, Chicago, was no exception.

Fifty-three delegates were in attendance representing nearly as many shades of opinion. One was reminded of the “Left Wing” Conference of June 1919, which at that time was aptly characterized as a heterogenous mass of confusion.

That the present aggregation, permeated as it is with many contradictions and conflicting views does not fly asunder is explainable only when one considers the weighty influence of (1) the big stick of the Third International which hovers over their head, and (2) the realization on the part of the officialdom that their jobs depend upon at least a semblance of an organization.

The first session was occupied chiefly with the lengthy report of the National Executive Secretary, C.E. Ruthenberg. His report was a glowing eulogy of the year’s activities. The dying Trade Union Educational League was proclaimed to be a gigantic success while at the same time he bewailed the fact that several of their members had been expelled from the different unions. He, as well as the others, completely ignored, or were not aware of the fact that these expulsions were chiefly the result of the bungling tactics of the TUEL.

Their conception of how to develop class consciousness among unionists is by lampooning and lambasting the reactionary officialdom, crying “amalgamation,” securing endorsements of central bodies, “capturing” offices, and imitating to the best of their ability the tactics of P.T. Barnum. That they have failed miserably is a matter of record. Moreover, by discrediting themselves with the rank and file of the unionists, they have made it increasingly difficult for

others engaged in revolutionary union activities.

The questions of the Labor party, and the “United Front” (which with the WP has degenerated into and in fact never was anything more than a united farce) gave Ruthenberg unlimited opportunity for the free play of his imagination. While those outside the WP know, and even a considerable section of the WP rank and file have come to understand, that the Federated Farmer-Labor Party was a fiasco from its first inception, the officialdom have tried to bluff it into life and even now continue to parade their stillborn child as a prodigy.

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There are not so blind as those who refuse to see. What Ruthenberg and his associates refuse to see or profess not to see is that it was their bungling tactics which made the July 3-5 [1923] FLP “conference” a total failure. Whatever chance there was for a real federated labor party was destroyed when the WP packed the convention with delegates from singing societies, fraternal organizations, gymnastic clubs, and a host of other such groups. Every move the WP made was a colossal blunder and the debacle which resulted was an inevitable consequence.

Though they knew it was a total failure they continued to claim for it a membership of 600,000 and so reported to the Third International. They counted individuals and whole organizations who repudiated it from the very beginning. Ruthenberg now denies that they ever claimed a membership of 600,000. In refutation of the above contention we quote a statement of John Pepper in *The Worker* (July 21, 1923):

The new Federated Farmer-Labor Party is a mass party. It is the first mass party of workers and farmers in the United States. Mass is something relative. Historical circumstances decide whether 10,000 or a million stands for a mass. But no one can deny that a party of 600,000 workers and farmers is a real mass party.

A trick, characteristic of Ruthenberg's whole career, was brought out very forcibly at the convention. While the WP has been trying to convey the idea that the FFLP had 600,000 members and the TUEL had 2,000,000 and so expressed itself that even Trotsky got that idea, when pinned down at the convention, Ruthenberg, through whose hands all reports pass, crawled and pointed out that what *he* always claimed was that these organizations "represented" that many members. Even if *he* were as subtle in his phraseology as there is reason for believing there was, others of the organization were more crude. This is a shyster lawyer's trick. "Represent" may mean anything or nothing since delegates can represent an actual membership which supports them or they can represent no one but themselves.

At no time has the TUEL nor the FFLP been much more than representative of a part of the WP, though at all times they endeavored to deceive the workers and even their own members into believing that they were much broader. Such perversion and charlatanism will never succeed. These are not the tactics of revolutionists but of common opportunists and tricksters.

The convention was severely jolted by the passing of the buck between Foster and Ruthenberg regarding the failures of the WP in Chicago. Each blamed the other but neither they nor their respective supporters realized that the inherent defects in the WP made the failures in Chicago and elsewhere inevitable, and that the worst is yet to come.

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The Workers Party was organized in December 1921. In the ensuing spring the Executive Secretary issued the following statement: "The party has a membership of 25,000 and has been daily adding to the number of organizations affiliated." This was before the United Toilers joined them, which added some numerical strength. Every once in a while since that time they have issued statements to the effect that the party was growing by leaps and bounds, at the same time claiming a membership usually of 20,000.

At its recent convention Ruthenberg reported that the average membership for July, August, September, and October 1922 was 12,394. The average membership from July to October 1923 was given as 15,233. (Writing in *The Worker*, September 22, 1923, Ruthenberg said: "The Workers Party of America is the only Communist organization in the United States today. It has a membership of 20,000. It is financed by those 20,000.")

Taking them at their own word and comparing their 25,000 of early 1922 with the convention figures of 1924 (15,233), the WP instead of growing as they claim has on the contrary lost practically 40 percent of its membership.

Again, when it is considered that the same element which heads the WP were leaders in the "Communist" Party and "Communist" Labor Party of 1919, with a combined membership of over 60,000, it will be seen that instead of growing they have gone back until they have but 25 percent of that which they started out with, assuming that it now has an actual membership of 15,233, as Ruthenberg now claims.†

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Ruthenberg, running true to form, advocated several alliances and the forming of a "third" party which may be best understood from the statement of his mentor, John Pepper, appearing in *The Worker*, December 22, 1923:

†- Archival documents indicate that the WPA had an average paid membership of 15,395 in 1923, which represented a significant increase over its 1922 average paid membership of 11,024. At no point did the group ever have an actually paid membership of 20,000 — although it may well have had that many adherents in 1923 and 1924, if one includes those in dues arrears and those dues-exempt due to unemployment. Neither did the nascent CPA and CLP of 1919 ever have an actually paid membership remotely approaching 60,000, a wild claim voiced during the 1919 succession battle. The combined CPA and CLP probably had something in the general ballpark of 25,000 to 30,000 duespayers at the time of their September 1919 formation, a number which quickly plummeted to a fraction of that figure in the wake of the mass repressions of November 7, 1919 and January 2, 1920.

We can and must have concessions, in order to win the backward masses, but note the less we always represent the class struggle viewpoint and the future of the revolution. We can and must accept in South Dakota or in Minnesota, or in the May 30th [1924] convention the candidacy of [Robert] LaFollette as President if the majority of the workers and exploited farmers want to nominate him. But under no circumstances can we do what some comrades propose — take the initiative in nominating LaFollette, that we shall recommend him to the workers and exploited farmers. We Communists cannot under any circumstances assume the responsibility for LaFollette in the eyes of the workers and exploited farmers. **But we can and must vote for LaFollette if the mighty masses of workers and exploited farmers who are not as yet class conscious put him up as candidate.** (Emphasis ours.)

These ideas were incorporated in the November thesis drawn up by the CEC and recommended to the convention for adoption. This was a little more than some of the delegates were able to digest. Sufficient clarity on such questions being lacking among the leadership of the WP, they gut the Gordian Knot by having the matter referred to the Third International for instructions.

The question of shop nuclei and industrial branches which agitated the convention considerably gave the syndicalist element which is strong in the party an opportunity to air their views. Some were in favor of putting the organization entirely on an industrial basis, i.e., membership grouped in branches according to the industry in which they work, instead of upon the present territorial basis. Others were in favor of using both forms, the latter view prevailed.

The seventeen language federations which constitute 90 percent of the WP membership makes the question a rather difficult one. However, they stand instructed by the Communist International to organize on the basis of shops and factories. How such a plan can work out successfully in view of their small, scattered, and overwhelmingly non-English speaking membership is difficult to understand.

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The Central Executive Committee was reduced from 28 to 13. This freezes out representation from several of the language federations. Many of these federations, groups of which have already left the WP, are far from being entirely satisfied with the party's policies.

The new CEC is divided into two general camps. The Foster-Cannon group with strong syndicalist tendencies and the Ruthenberg-Pepper group, which constitute a minority of 5, rank opportunists. Apart from the two main tendencies typified by the majority and minority groups there is still another whose representative is [Ludwig] Lore, editor of the *Volkszeitung*. Because of the latter's mild criticism of the WP's opportunism they are called the "impossibilists." Thus it will be seen that the WP presents itself as a bird with three wings which makes progress by flying backward.

The old policy of ignoring or belittling fundamental education will be continued. In fact this question was given no consideration at the convention. The resignation of James Fisher of California and Caleb Harrison of Chicago, along with the sidetracking of two or three other individuals, who whatever else may be said of them, at least realized the great importance of sound educational work, drives the question still further into the background.

The WP has always been hostile to and impatient of those who stressed the value of Marxian education and have never lost an opportunity to put the skids beneath them. Rather than growing better in this respect they have grown worse.

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Joseph Manley, National Secretary of the FFLP (the rural nom-de-plum of the WP) brought in the report of the agrarian question. His report, part of which follows, is interesting in that it shows wither the WP has drifted or, more correctly, where it was headed from the beginning:

The economic ruin and bankruptcy of the farmers is rapidly bringing about a condition comparable only with that of the European peasant.

As illustrating this deplorable condition the following facts are worth quoting: In 1923 an apple raiser in the state of Washington shipped 9,000 boxes of the finest quality apples to a commission merchant. For the shipment of 9,000 boxes he received \$5.47. In 1923 in the famous Yakima Valley, in the same state, a man sold ten acres of Winesap and Jonathan apples, totaling 10,000 boxes. He received \$10.00 and figured he got off lucky.

A wheat raiser grew 19,000 bushels in 1923, and after selling the wheat he had to borrow \$1,500 to pay deficit and taxes.

A stock raiser sold three 4-year old farm horses. In Kansas City he received \$2.40 for each of them. Becoming

disgusted with stock raising he shot seven horses and used them for bait to poison coyotes and made \$7.00 from each horse by selling the coyote pelts, on which there is a bounty.

Not a word was said by this “Communist” about the wage-workers on the farm, their low wages, long hours, conditions under which they labor, or anything of the sort. (Manley, to whom “prices are set by Wall Street,” might learn much from the IWW about the agrarian question from a proletarian viewpoint.)

To perpetuate the farmer as a landowner and exploiter of labor is Manley’s conception of the way to emancipate the working class. He does not recognize and cannot understand that the plight of the farmer is merely the result of production without plan — one of the inherent defects of the capitalist system. The small farmer is being crushed by the large landowning farmers in the competition for markets and by production on a more extensive scale.

The struggle of the petty bourgeois who wishes to protect himself in his “right” of private property and the exploitation of wage labor is not the concern of the working class. All that interested Manley was the petty bourgeois. Nevertheless, his report was accepted without a dissenting vote.

J.E. Snyder, “a real dirt farmer,” also reported on the rural situation. He advocated capturing the rural schools and school boards. What was to be done with them after they were “captured” he failed to make clear. Somehow or other he seemed to be laboring under the delusion that the WP was interested in education. Practically all he has learned since he was a right wing member of the SP and editor of the *Oakland (Cal.) World*, is that the WP version of Communism is to “capture” something.

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The career of these adventurers from the time when they formed part of the Berger-Hillquit machine in the SP to their present plight is an interesting object lesson. They have in the course of their hectic existence advocated almost everything on the “revolutionary” calendar — anti-parliamentarism, mass action, minority action, syndicalism, etc., and finally the cheapest kind of opportunism. Once it was “out of the AF of L and into the IWW” and now it is “all into the AF of L.” They broadcasted over the land “close the books, the time is ripe for action” and “the revolution is around the corner!” And now it is a “large mass party” on the most opportunistic basis. And once again the foundations of American Imperialism is threatened with their slogan, “The freedom of the Philippines.”

They refuse to learn from the past and to profit thereby. To them such an idea is absurd. “The past is dead. Let the dead past bury its dead. We have come together to face the future. Let us judge each other upon the activities of the future and not upon the activities that lie behind us.”

We do not blame them. Who, with their record of rottenness, would not do all possible to obliterate the memory of it?

The Proletarian Party is the only Communist organization in this country. Its task is clear. The road ahead lies along the lines of sound education and Communist activity based not upon the quicksands of opportunism but upon Marxism. The Proletarian Party draws attention to these facts and welcomes into its ranks all those willing and ready to work along these lines.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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