
Letter to Oakley C. Johnson in NYC from Alfred Wagenknecht in Chicago, March 18, 1940

Typewritten letter in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society,
Box 10, Folder 1, Microfilm reel 5.

Chicago, March 18, 1940.

Dear Johnson:—

To get right down to cases — I have no files of any kind that relate to Ruthenberg and his activity in the movement. Whatever files I had were turned over to the Party during the last months of the Lovestone regime [early 1929], by request, and knowing that others did the same, these records probably rest with this renegade.

As to Ruthenberg's personal archive — he gathered, very conscientiously, both newspaper clippings and other matter, and I have already advised a number of comrades who desired Ruthenberg's background to ascertain where this material is. I suggested they interrogate Ruthenberg's son, who lives in Cleveland and is a Party member, I understand....

Then also, it would be profitable to have a talk with Miss [Rachel] Ragozin. She was a close friend of Ruthenberg in the early period of the CP. And am I correct in saying Anna Damon should be interviewed. Ragozin now lives in New York City, or Brooklyn, and I am sure she can be found if inquiry is made.

I first met him in 1915, after returning to Cleveland, my home town, from 15 years activity in the SP of Washington state. I was then a member of the National Executive Committee of the SP, as I remember, and our first conversation related itself to the organization plus political down-at-the-heel state of the SP of Ohio.¹ Out of this conversation came the agreement that I should run for State Secretary

¹ Wagenknecht was only elected a member of the Socialist Party's governing National Executive Committee in 1918.

of the SP of Ohio. Ruthenberg was at the time Secretary of the Cleveland SP. I was elected State Secretary and during the next two years the SP in Ohio was built from a membership of about 2,000 to more than 5,000.

He was a tireless worker. He held a job as bookkeeper and office manager in one of Cleveland's clothing manufacturing companies, and after his day's work he appeared each evening, without fail, at SP headquarters, where he would work into the night (voluntarily, without compensation) at the tasks of the SP.

Even then, he understood clearly the role of work among the masses, especially of the trade unions, as it is related to the revolutionary movement. He had made and was constantly broadening his influence within the AFL unions, many of which called upon him for lectures. It was this which made the May Day celebrations in Cleveland outstanding as compared those of other cities, and it is this growing influence among the trade unions which brought on the Cleveland May Day "riot"... — large corporations in Cleveland arming their backward workers with clubs to smash the May Day parade.²

He and I were both on the SP delegation which went to the St. Louis National Convention in 1917. As to the anti-war resolution there adopted, during the entire discussions and negotiations participated in by three groupings: (1) Hillquit; (2) Boudin; (3) Ruthenberg. His stand against war sounded the clearest note, most uncompromising against the war and United States participation in it...³

Subsequent to the entry into the war by the USA (1917) Ruthenberg's activity concentrated itself around methods of opposing the war. And opposition to the war took form in the first instance in opposing the draft. Printed calls and material advising all concerned to refuse to answer the draft call, recommending "stay at home" opposition to the draft was issued. It was circulated in Cleveland and throughout the state by an organized grapevine route. Then came the mass meeting at Market Square and Public Square (downtown), attended by thousands. These meetings were addressed by Ruthenberg, Tom Clifford, Charles Baker, myself. Carrying into life opposition to

² The anti-Socialist mob was actually largely spontaneous.

³ Actually, Morris Hillquit, together with Algernon Lee, was one of the authors together with Ruthenberg of the Majority Resolution adopted by the convention's Committee on War and Militarism. The third resolution was authored by John Spargo, not Hillquit.

the imperialist war together with an interpretation of the St. Louis anti-war resolution to mean just this placed Cleveland at the forefront of the anti-war movement. Resulting from an anti-war meeting at which Ruthenberg, Wagenknecht, and Baker spoke (also Max Hayes, however his formulations were carefully-made with the result that he was not arrested) the three of us were eventually sentenced to one year in prison. This sentence was served during 1918.

This sentence was served at the Canton workhouse, Canton, Ohio. After several days in separate cells, we were assigned to work — Baker to the kitchen, Ruthenberg and I to the laundry. I arrived at the laundry about 30 seconds behind Ruthenberg, and found him in open rebellion against this assignment. Ruthenberg's rebellious spirit against the war and his conviction coupled with his sensitivity (the laundry was located in the cellar, a steam-laden, stinky room, all work performed by hand) led to his refusal to go to work and he told the workhouse captain so. I stood by when they asked whether I would go to work, with the result that Ruthenberg was taken to the "dark hole" where he was strung up by the wrists for the day, whereas I was similarly chained to a cell gate. Asked next morning whether we would go to work and receiving replies in the negative, I was taken to the "dark hole" for the day and Ruthenberg was handcuffed to a cell. The third day Ruthenberg was again taken to the "dark hole" (isolation, without light, water, or food) but before the day had passed our attorneys and leading SP members arrived at the prison (word was gotten to them via a prisoner whose sentence had expired) and after negotiations with the prison warden it was agreed we should work in the laundry for a day, after which we would receive other assignments. The armistice was signed a few weeks before we were released.

Then came the consolidation of left wing forces in the SP, the expulsion from the SP of the language federations, the states of Michigan and Ohio, and there followed the conventions of those who held a CP essential, Chicago 1919.⁴

As you know, there were two communist conventions. The CP convention on Blue Island Ave., with delegates from the language federations (main base) and some representation from American SP locals. This convention had as its objective the immediate organization of a Communist Party without consideration of the SP convention taking place in Chicago at the same time. The other communist

⁴ Technically members of the 7 Left Wing foreign language federations were only suspended by the Socialist Party, not expelled.

convention in Machinists Hall, Ashland Blvd., in a hall below the convention of the SP. the aim here was to invade the SP convention, to even capture it if possible, to withdraw delegates away from the SP if not possible. I need not go into this, because plenty of material exists which relates how John Reed and others were attacked by the police and thrown down the stairs. Our CLP convention proceeded with its deliberations, and I refer to this because it is important to note that Ruthenberg headed a committee from the CP convention to our convention (Communist Labor Party) inviting us to join the CP convention, and made a speech on the floor of the CLP convention for unity. The CLP declined to accept this invitation to join the CP convention, because the delegates at the CLP convention would not agree to the conditions, which were that the CP convention would decide which of the CLP delegates should be given full rights as delegates (discussion and vote) and which were to be designated as fraternal delegates.

BAKER was an organizer in the SP, closely attached to Marguerite Prevey of Akron, Ohio, the latter a revolutionary figure in the state (Akron rubber strike, etc.). Charles Baker was a young man when I learned to know him, was favorable to left wing tactics, but he did not master the need for splitting with the SP and organizing the communist parties. He never joined, either the CP or CLP, though his closest comrades were in the latter party.⁵ He became inactive in the movement [and] became an agent for union made cigarettes, visiting AFL local unions throughout the USA. When Prevey died [March 14, 1925] she willed her money to him, and he disappeared from the scene. Is out in California now.

KATTERFELD: Still lives in New York City or Brooklyn. This man has a marvelous memory and in these early days of the communist parties worked closely, in fact, was in the first rank leadership of the CLP. He was expelled from the CP during the Lovestone days (factional days) and never rejoined. He should be interviewed. Of course, his data needs to be checked.

⁵ Wagenknecht's memory is faulty here, Charles Baker attended the founding convention of the CLP and was a member of the CLP's labor committee. Following Hoover's raids in January 1920 he withdrew from the communist movement, only rejoining in December 1921 with the formation of the above ground Workers Party of America. Baker was briefly appointed Cleveland District Organizer for the WPA in 1922 but left after a short time due to antagonism over the continued existence of the underground CPA.

During the latter months of existence of both the CP and CLP, before the unity convention took place (Mount Lookout, NY, 1921 or 1922)⁶ and due to a developing difference of opinion as between the leaders of the language federations in the CP ... a theoretical discussion in the Political Committee of the CP over the question of “mass action” resulted in Ruthenberg and Lovestone leaving the CP.⁷ I remember a meeting held in Central Park (at the Needle) between Ruthenberg, Lovestone, Katterfeld, and myself, at which a long discussion occurred around the inability of the CP, constituted of language federation leaders, becoming a party with mass influence, influencing the masses. Here it was decided to unite the Ruthenberg-Lovestone wing of the CP with the CLP and constituted the United Communist Party. (Here Bittelman should be interviewed to weave in the role played by the Communist Unity Committee, of which he took leadership, a committee which attempted to bring unity and composed [secretly] of members of the CP and CLP and some who did not belong to either Party). A convention was held and at it the United Communist Party was organized. The unity convention therefore occurred with participation of the Communist Party and the United Communist Party and not between the CP and CLP, as some have thought.⁸

You ask whether Ruthenberg was ever in the CLP? Or did he go directly from the SP convention from which he was expelled to the CP? And who went with him? Do I remember how Ruthenberg and Foster first came together? Ditto Browder?

⁶ Wagenknecht's memory is again in error. The Ruthenberg faction of the CPA and CLP merged at the first Bridgman Convention (May 26-31, 1920), forming the United Communist Party. The New York unity convention united the United Communist Party with the remaining majority section of the CPA, dominated by the language federations. This was held at the Overlook Mountain House hotel, located on Overlook Mountain, near Woodstock, New York, May 15-28, 1921.

⁷ The Ruthenberg-Lovestone split actually sprung up at the Central Executive Committee of the CPA on April 18, 1920. Cause of the split had nothing to do with theoretical wrangling over “mass action,” but rather dealt with the perception by Ruthenberg and his co-thinkers that the CPA majority was stifling the drive for unity ordered by the Comintern, along with issues of party jobs, failure to discipline key members of the majority faction, and general personal animosity among the CPA's leadership.

⁸ See footnote 5 above for a concise recap of unity events. Katterfeld does add fresh information here on the April 1920 unity negotiations

As to the last two questions, here you had better interview Foster and Browder. Foster's first connection, as I remember, was with the CLP, which arranged for him to go to the Soviet Union **before** he joined. As for Browder, his coming east, subsequent to his release from Leavenworth was planned in Cleveland by the CLP and I remember his arriving at a flat at some address in New York City and at once taking up his tasks and cooperating with the leadership.⁹ Just when they first collaborated with Ruthenberg I do not know.

As to whether CER was ever in the CLP, the answer is no. This is explained above where I refer to is coming to the CLP and the organization of the United Communist Party. CER was a leading initiator and organizer of the CP. He was not expelled at the SP convention held in Chicago, but long before that, as were we all (noted above I think that long before the 1919 SP convention was held the language federations, 60,000 members, the states of Michigan and Ohio, had been expelled from the CP).¹⁰ The CP policy was to turn a full back upon the SP, labeling it counter-revolutionary; whereas the policy of the CLP was to work within it and to use the SP convention to win as large a section of the SP as possible for the CI. I remember the CLP even going so far as to sent a committee to the SP headquarters (South Ashland Blvd., Chicago) after the SP and CLP conventions, both held in Machinists Hall, Chicago, to demand that the SP headquarters be turned over to the CLP under the claim that the majority of delegates to the CLP and SP convention had a right to the SP property exactly because the left wing delegates in the SP convention, and the left wing delegates attending but who were not seated, plus those attending the CLP convention represented a majority of

⁹ Browder was first convicted of failure to register for the draft, for which he served one year in county jail in Missouri from December 1917 to November 1918. Following his release a second trial was held, at which Browder was sentenced to 2 years in prison for conspiracy to interfere with the draft. He was imprisoned at Leavenworth from July 1919 through November 1920.

¹⁰ The Socialist Party of Ohio endorsed the Left Wing Manifesto at its 1919 state convention, held in Cincinnati from June 27-28. On July 29, Frederick Krafft, a member of the SP's National Executive Committee (whose term of office was incidentally to have ended under the party constitution on June 30), moved the charter of the Socialist Party of Ohio be revoked. Approval quickly followed, thereby leaving Ruthenberg and Socialist Party of Ohio outside the party and unable to participate in the Aug. 30, 1919 Emergency National Convention.

the Party membership.¹¹ Ruthenberg was not involved in this, nor the CP.

Of course you know that it was after Debs visited us in jail in Canton, Ohio, where he came to speak, that he was indicted for this speech made in Canton and was imprisoned. He was (Debs) very provoked at our imprisonment, and he spoke at Nimisilla Park, a block from where we were incarcerated. It was a Sunday and we were in our cells, but from the window of the cell block we could see Nimisilla Park, although the spot where the meeting was going on was not in view. I refer to this because it might be well to mention in relation to our imprisonment that Ruthenberg wrote a pamphlet while in prison which was called (if I remember) *Growing Into Socialism*.¹² The pamphlet, as I remember, was predicated upon the then existing state control as related to production and industry due to war measures of the government and theorized the question of growing into Socialism through state capitalism. The pamphlet should be secured

¹¹ This appears to be another faulty recollection two decades after the fact. The 1919 Socialist Party elections, held shortly after the first of the year, resulted in a substantial victory for the candidates of the organized Left Wing faction. Facing loss of the party to the proto-Communist radicals, Executive Secretary Germer and the sitting NEC claimed vote fraud and refused to certify or acknowledge the results. Wagenknecht, the Left Wing Section counted state-by-state tallies as best it was able, showing their math and making a compelling case. With the results clear, the Left Wing declared themselves victorious. On July 26-27, 1919 this "new" NEC held a meeting in Chicago, attended by a bare quorum of 8 of the 15 members, with "Executive Secretary Pro Tempore" Wagenknecht in the chair. It was this body which presented demands to Germer to vacate the premises and to turn over party assets to the "new" NEC. This effort was summarily rebuffed. A month later the outgoing NEC's coup was legitimized by the National Convention which it had effectively stacked. There is no evidence in the literature, published or unpublished, that the CLP ever repeated the "new" NEC's stunt.

¹² C.E. Ruthenberg, *Are We Growing Toward Socialism?* (Cleveland: Local Cleveland, Socialist Party, 1917). Wagenknecht is adamant that this was a prison writing by Ruthenberg, telling Oakley Johnson in a later 1940 interview that CER wrote it in the prison office where he worked and debated its thesis in his cell with Wagenknecht. However, note that Wagenknecht, Ruthenberg, and Baker's sentence was confirmed only on Jan. 15, 1918 and that they were released from jail on Dec. 8, 1918, with Debs' famed Canton Speech taking place on June 16 of that year. In other words, for Ruthenberg to have written *Are We Growing Toward Socialism?* in prison, it must have been a 1918 production — not 1917, as appears on the title page. Work remains to be done to confirm the earlier date. Unfortunately, issues from 1917 of Local Cleveland's weekly newspaper, *Socialist News*, have not survived to allow confirmation of this publication date. While there is no doubt that Wagenknecht and Ruthenberg must have debated the content of this tract in their cell, it is unlikely that this pamphlet was actually written in Canton and smuggled out of jail.

to enhance accuracy, however. And I mention this to lead up to the difficult existence Ruthenberg had within the CP. He was not altogether accepted by the language federation leaders, who thought him politically immature because of his background and because he did not subscribe to the sectarianism of the language federation leaders.

These federation leaders responded much more quickly and thoroughly to the 1917 revolution in Russia, exactly because they came from Russia and neighboring countries (the Russian federation, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Lettish [Latvian], etc. federations) while on the other hand, as I judge the matter, they attempted to transplant the experiences of the Russian revolution to American soil mechanically, without application in relation to the situation in this country. It was this which led to the splitting-away of Ruthenberg from the CP over the question of what is "mass action."¹³ (Also without taking sufficiently into consideration the development of the working class forces in this country and the winning of American workers for the revolution and the CI).

Ruthenberg subsequent to this release from prison aligned himself with the growing Left Wing in the SP which was then clarifying its understanding of the implications of the Russian revolution and became a leading and most ardent supporter of the forces in this country who recognized the colossal lessons of the revolution.

The reasons why I was in the CLP and Ruthenberg in the CP are clear from all that has been stated above.¹⁴ Ruthenberg and I contested the Cleveland SP membership, as to whether it should join the CP or CLP, and Ruthenberg won by a great majority. The basis for this contest has been cleared up by what I have so far here written. I remember that at a conference of the Left Wing forces in New York City, I and others held that the sharp split away from the SP was an erroneous policy, that a drive should be made within the SP to reinstate the expelled membership and leaders in order to win a larger section of the SP membership away from Social Democracy and its

¹³ The April 1920 split had nothing to do with the question of "mass action." See footnote 6 above.

¹⁴ And the things unstated, that Wagenknecht had been elected Executive Secretary of the Socialist Party in the abrogated election of 1919 and had a direct personal interest in fighting to the last ditch for the control of the SP apparatus. Moreover, Wagenknecht was 15 years a part of the feisty radical movement of the Socialist Party of Washington, comprised to a great extent of native-born Anglo-phonous Americans, while Ruthenberg retained deep roots to the immigrant-dominated Cleveland movement.

anti-Soviet Russia position,¹⁵ while others, the language federation leaders, held that they wanted nothing more to do with the SP, that a CP should be organized at once to make it possible to more adequately expose the SP.

I have mentioned some of the persons who should be talked to by you, namely Anna Damon, Miss Ragozin, Katterfeld, Ruthenberg's son [Daniel] in Cleveland, and his former wife, Mrs. [Rose] Ruthenberg, also in Cleveland, and in Cleveland you will learn of others who knew him personally for many years.

Ruthenberg was a very amiable and social character. He had a hankering for poetry and good literature and in the Cleveland SP days he would relax of a Sunday by going with groups of comrades into the fields and woods near the city, taking advantage of such occasions to expound on the grandeur of nature and the enjoyment people could get out of life if we only did not have capitalism. He knew his wild flowers and was fond of carrying immense bouquets of them back home. His comradely attitude made him an efficient organizer, exactly because he drew comrades into cooperation for the tasks ahead and instilled into the comrades a pleasure and enjoyment of the work. He was a tireless student of revolutionary literature, inclusive of all the classics.

This will be all for now. If I think of other incidents I will write.

Fraternally,

Alfred Wagenknecht.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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¹⁵ Actually, the dominant Germer-Oneal-Hillquit Regular faction of the Socialist Party was staunchly pro-Soviet Russia at least through the Trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1922. The SP was virtually unanimous on this, with anti-Soviet Social Democrats, such as John Spargo and Henry Slobodin having left the party during the war.