
The Question of Unity of the Communist Labor Party and the Communist Party

[events of Dec. 16, 1919 to Feb. 14, 1920]

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About December 16, 1919 a communication was received by the Executive Secretary of the Communist Labor Party [Alfred Wagenknecht], signed by Fritz Friedman, who was at that time the organizer for the German branches who had joined the CP. This communication asked for an unofficial and non-binding conference upon the question of unity, between the National Executive Committee of the CLP and “influential members” of the CP.

To those communications...the Executive Secretary of the CLP gave answer, i.e., that such a conference would be greatly expedited if the names of the influential members of the CP who desired this conference were made known to the NEC of the CLP. No answer to this inquiry was ever received from Friedman.

The communication from Friedman came before the NEC of the CLP in an official manner on January 3, 1920. It was decided at this meeting to elect a committee of two, consisting of Edward Lindgren and A. Wagenknecht, to interview the Executive Secretary of the CP [C.E. Ruthenberg]; to carry this invitation for an informal conference issued by Friedman, an official of the CP, officially to the CP, the desire being to have an official conference, if the CP now desired unity.

The following week the CLP subcommittee interviewed I.E. Ferguson, of the NEC [CEC] of the CP. Ferguson was told of he Friedman letter and also informed that if the CP desired unity, the steps toward that end should be considered officially by the NEC of both parties. Ferguson and the subcommittee of the CLP subsequently arranged for a meeting between this subcommittee and C.E. Ruthenberg and himself.

This meeting took place January 17th [1920]. Ferguson could not be present. The secretary of the CP Lettish [Latvian] Federation [=???] and C.E. Ruthenberg were present for the CP; and L.E. Katterfeld, Edward Lindgren, and A. Wagenknecht were present for the CLP. Ruthenberg suggested that unity might be arrived at if the CLP would agree to adopt the CP manifesto, program, and constitution, and a merging of the two National Executive Committees. The CLP sub-committee suggested as a counter-proposal that the CLP platform be the platform of both parties, as well as the CP manifesto and program; that new government rules were necessary to meet the new situation; that a resolution be adopted which admitted that unity was being effected between two parties, the same in principle. It was understood, mutually, that this meeting was not unofficial. Upon adjournment of this conference, the CLP subcommittee was given to understand that word would be sent as soon as the NEC [CEC] of the CP considered the question of unity officially at its meeting.

Word was received from the NEC [CEC] of the CP about January 22 that a committee had been elected to confer with the CLP subcommittee and that the CP subcommittee had a definite proposition to make regarding unity. A meeting between the two committees was arranged for January 24th.

At this meeting there were present three committeemen representing the CP. Ferguson and Ruthenberg were also present in an unofficial capacity. The CLP was represented by [Alexander] Bilan, [L.E.] Katterfeld, and Lindgren. Wagenknecht was present unofficially.

The CP subcommittee placed the following proposition before the CLP representatives:

That in response to the request from the NEC of the CLP we inform this committee that if it is ready to accept our manifesto, program and constitution and form of organization as the basis for a call for joint convention, we agree to hold a joint convention, and for this purpose, upon receipt of its agreement, we are prepared to elect a joint convention committee (our manifesto, program, and constitution to be effective for the CLP only as a basis for a joint call, the form of organization, insofar as it means new methods to meet new circumstances, and the basis for admitting members to go into effect at once).

Debate proceeded upon this proposition. It was shown by the CLP representatives that even consideration of a convention at this time was useless; that it was criminal to postpone unity in face of the present reaction;¹ that the CLP was in favor of immediate unity and that it fully believed that the membership in both parties favored immediate unity.

The CLP subcommittee then proposed the following counter-proposition:

1. We recognize that there is no fundamental difference of principle between the Communist Labor Party and the Communist Party and we agree to send out a call for a joint convention on the basis of the Communist Party manifesto and program and to elect a convention committee for this purpose.

2. We realize that the constitutions of both parties are impossible of application under present conditions and agree to new organization forms adapted to the circumstances.

[3.] **We favor immediate working unity** as far as this can be effected pending the convention. For this purpose the two National Executive Committees and the two National Offices shall be merged, and propaganda and organization work, as well as defense activities, shall be conducted in common, but the language federations shall be allowed to continue upon their old basis until the convention.

The CP subcommittee agreed to report this counter-proposition to the NEC [CEC] of the CP, which was to take place soon, it was claimed.

Upon February 14th the NEC of the CLP held a meeting. In view of the fact that no answer had been received from the NEC [CEC] of the CP a motion was passed to request an answer by March 1st. The NEC [CEC] of the CP was written to this effect.

Subsequently a copy of the CP official paper [*The Communist*] reached us. Through this we were informed that the NEC [CEC] of the CP had considered the counter-proposal of the CLP. The action taken by the NEC [CEC] of the CP follows:

¹ The so-called "Palmer Raids" — actually orchestrated and managed by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's young assistant, J. Edgar Hoover — took place on the night of January 2/3, 1920. This was a mere three weeks before the date of this meeting. Both parties were disrupted by the coordinated mass raids launched against them and forced to immediately move to a regime of secrecy to survive.

A motion to accept the counter-proposal of the CLP as to point 3 was lost and following motion adopted: That we reaffirm our previous position with instructions to our committee to make such modifications in regard to the constitution as were indicated in the discussion.

What the modifications referred to are, we do not know. We do know, and we restate firmly, that the CLP stands for immediate unity. We know that a large minority of the NEC [CEC] of the CP are for immediate unity. But it so happens that those who opposed unity at the convention and since that time, have a majority upon the NEC [CEC] of the CP. This majority, consisting of five or six officials, members of the NEC [CEC] of the CP, is the only barrier to *immediate unity*.

LET THE COMMUNIST PARTY MEMBERS SPEAK!

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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