
Conflict in the Central Executive Committee of the Workers Party [April 17, 1924]

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German translation of this document appears as d. 261, ll. 21-37.

French translation of this document appears as d. 261, ll. 38-56.

Subheadings and text in square brackets added editorially here.

The conflict in the CEC of the Workers Party arises out of a variance of conception on tactics. It antedates the formation of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party on July 3 [1923], but found militant expression after that date.

Negotiations for the formation of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party were conducted by the Political Committee of the CEC. Being in New York and too far away from Chicago to conduct them personally except at stated intervals, the Foster Group claimed that the former CEC was unable to follow the changes of attitude and the process of backing out on the part of [John] Fitzpatrick and [Edward] Nockels of the old Farmer-Labor Party, who called the conference at which the Federated Party was formed. The Chicago Federation of Labor, of which Fitzpatrick is President, was threatened with expulsion from the AF of L if it continued its activity against the decisions of the AF of L, which is against an independent labor party, against Soviet Russia and similar militant measures. The Chicago comrades declared that the manner in which the negotiations were being conducted was endangering the whole affair and threatened to defeat the formation of the Federated Party. The PolCom of the Party allowed the Chicago comrades to procure information, but take no action. The Chicago comrades complained that the CEC did not appoint a single Chicago comrade to the negotiation committee, although they were the only ones really competent to appraise the situation.

Despite this controversy, the whole former CEC and the membership of the Workers Party generally acclaimed the formation of the Federated Party as a first-rate achievement. A week later, according to a letter from Foster, he realized that a fearful blunder had been made, since propagation of the Federated Party meant, in his opinion, the splitting of the whole labor movement. The issue of a general labor party had been transferred into a Federated Party issue. As the Federated Party was stamped by its enemies as a disguised Communist Party, the issue became one of for or against the communists. Against the opposition of Foster and others the former majority of the CEC — [C.E.] Ruthenberg and [John] Pepper — insisted that affiliations to the new party be sought in all trade unions, irrespective of whether they were affiliated to the old Farmer-Labor Party led by Fitzpatrick and others or not. The CEC issued a thesis on the Labor Party (written by Pepper), which announced the formation of the Federated Party a victory for the Workers Party.

Two of these groups are the former Leftists, who object to the Labor Party on principle, and other group (not styled but apparently the group that united with the communists in forming the Workers Party) which feared the responsibility entailed in directing the new party. The third group was the “trade union” group, which feared the loss of support to the work of TUEL from the progressive trade union leaders, who hitherto had stood by the communists in all their campaigns. This trade union group was concentrated in Chicago, hence it was a conflict with the Foster group. The CEC thesis accuses the Chicago comrades of not raising the issue of the Federated Party in unions affiliated to Fitzpatrick’s old Farmer-Labor Party; of holding no meetings after the July 3 Convention; of introducing a resolution at the convention of the Illinois Federation of Labor for independent political action, but not for a Labor Party. The CEC accused the Chicago comrades of placing too much confidences in such leaders as [Sidney] Hillman, Fitzpatrick, etc. It charged them with holding up decisions of the CEC for weeks, during which negotiations had to be conducted with them in order to obtain action.

[Fundamental Positions of the Two Main Factions.]

The opposition of the Foster-Cannon group, which was later expressed in a letter to [Solomon] Lozovsky and a length statement had the following main points: 1. Raising the issue of the Federated Party

is to split the labor movement. 2. The Federated Party has obtained only a fraction of the affiliations expected — 145,000 members. 3. The Labor Party issue is much broader than the Federated Party, which represents only the Left Wing. 4. The Federated Party is a dual union movement in the political field. 5. The Federated Party must not be organized as a separate party but as a propaganda organization for the formation of a comprehensive farmer-labor party, serving in the same capacity as the Trade Union Educational League on the industrial field. 6. That the argument made by the [Pepper] majority group to the effect that the Federated Party must be transformed into a communist mass party is fallacious, since that is the function and aim of the Workers Party.

These apparently were the arguments made by the Foster-Cannon group in the heated discussions in the CEC, which were answered in the August thesis of the majority group, Ruthenberg-Pepper. The latter maintained that it was utopian to expect that the whole labor movement could be embraced in a labor party in its initial stages and that it was contrary to historical experience in all countries. That it was a mistake to transfer the idea of dual unionism to the political field, since that would prohibit splits in social democratic parties and the formation of communist parties. That to refuse to seek the growth of the Federated Party and to wait for the time when the big masses would be ready to form a labor party would threaten the Workers Party with being outside the mass movement. On the contrary the communists must increase the size of the Federated Party and use it for creating a mass party, employing varied tactics — seeking affiliations to the national party, forming local parties, seeking endorsements of the Federated Party, etc.

At this point it must be stated that the Young Workers League, which had delegates at the convention of the Federated Party, was not allowed to affiliate (this was later withdrawn). It was also charged with taking part in the factional fight by lining up with the Foster-Cannon group against the majority of the CEC of the Workers Party. The National Executive Committee of the CEC of the League declared that as the matter was under discussion, they, as Party members, had the right to take a position.

Discussions on the question continued from August till November [1923], when the CEC prepared new theses on the Farmer-Labor Party to present to the Party convention in December.

[The Third Party Movement.]

In the meantime the political situation was changing. A big movement for the formation of a “third” petty bourgeois party under the leadership of Senator LaFollette got under way. The “revolt of the farmers” against the ruin that was staring them in the face, against which the Coolidge regime was doing nothing, was one of the main-springs of the movement. In the state of Minnesota, in particular, the farmer-labor party movement not of our Federated Farmer-Labor Party was very strong. US Senator [Henrik] Shipstead had been elected by the farmer-labor element there, and in November of 1923 that farmer-labor element succeeded in electing a second US Senator, Magnus Johnson.¹ The Republican Party, through its unskillful leadership and bad politics, lost 7 million votes as compared with the elections of 1920, a good part of which went over to the farmer-laborites. The Progressive Bloc in Congress, composed of the so-called radicals, farmer representatives, etc., held the balance of power both in the Senate and the House of Representatives, with LaFollette as the accepted leader.

The composition of the third party movement is as follows: The backbone of the movement are the middle class and petty bourgeoisie, oppressed by the trusts and the financial kings of Wall Street. Since the overwhelming majority of the population in the US are wage-earners and rapidly pauperized farmers, the leaders of this proposed third party, like those of other bourgeois parties, seek to secure and to receive the support of a considerable part of the un-class conscious bulk of the industrial and agricultural toilers of the USA. Along with these they are supported by middling and well-to-do farmers (the latter having their general complaints against the Republican regime). There are also tradesmen, liberals, intelligentsia, small country bankers, etc. in the party. The leadership is completely petty bourgeois.

At the same time a boom for [Henry] Ford for President arose and seemed destined to threaten the leadership of Senator LaFollette. This boom burst when Ford took a stand for Coolidge, so that the

¹ **Henrik Shipstead** (1881-1960) was a former Republican politician elected to the US Senate under the banner of the Farmer-Labor Party in the general election of November 1922. **Magnus Johnson** (1871-1936) was not elected in November 1923 as indicated here, but rather at a special election held earlier in 1923 to fill the remaining term of the late Sen. Knute Nelson, who died April 28.

whole leadership of the third party movement concentrated upon LaFollette.

[The November Thesis.]

The November thesis of the [Pepper] majority group is a modification of the August thesis. It no longer argues for the transformation of the Federated Party into a communist mass party. It points out the successes that the class farmer-labor party movement has attained in the organization of two branches — one in New York City with 60,000 members, another in a Pennsylvania county. It mentions the South Dakota Farmer-Labor Party as being willing to cooperate with the Federated Party. It emphasizes the argument made in the August thesis, that the whole labor movement will not participate at first in the formation of a labor party, and that the left wing, as embodied in the Federated Party, must be strengthened. To effect this end, diverse tactics are recommended.

It also points out the significance of the third party movement under Senator LaFollette. The Conference for Progressive Political Action, now composed chiefly of the leaders of the railway and machinists' unions and the Hillquit socialists, have held a conference with LaFollette and have decided to support him and the third party movement.

What shall be the attitude of the communists to a Farmer-Labor Party and a bourgeois third party? The November theses answer: The communists must use all means in order to strengthen the class party. It shall enter into no organizational unity with the third party, but shall conduct joint campaigns with it on distinct issues, such as maintenance of civil liberties, recognition of Soviet Russia, nationalization of the railroads, etc. It shall enter into alliances with it during election campaigns, varying according to the local and state conditions. At all times, the third party must be mercilessly criticized for its half-measures and illusions that the class struggle can be won through democratic measures.

Foster-Cannon declared that the policies outlined in the thesis were a repudiation of those elaborated in the August thesis. Foster, in a letter to Lozovsky, declared that the change in tactics — in making them more flexible and not insisting upon raising the issue of the Federated Party but of the labor party in general, was due to his criticism. After a *declaration* was made by *Pepper* as to the interpretation

of the theses, Foster withdrew his thesis (the statement) and the majority thesis was adopted by a vote of 21 to 3, the latter being the Leftists in the old CEC who were against any and every labor party.

[Discussion and Decision.]

The thesis was then submitted to the Party membership for discussion prior to the Party convention [3rd: Chicago: Dec. 30, 1923 to Jan. 2, 1924]. Within a short time, the section of the thesis calling for support or alliances with the third party aroused the antagonism of a few members of the CEC who had voted for the thesis. Comrade [Ludwig] Lore, editor of the *Volkszeitung*, was a leader of this group. During the party discussion, in the press and at the district convention in New York, he endeavored to defend his position by referring to the tactics of the Bolsheviki, who supported bourgeois parties only in revolutionary situations. Such a situation was entirely absent in the US and therefore the Communists could not consider such alliances. The Finnish Federation, a section of the Jewish [Yiddish-language] Federation, and some of the English comrades of the Workers' Council group who joined with the communists in forming the Workers Party in 1921, as well as a few Leftists, took the same stand. The opposition to the thesis was concentrated in New York. At the district convention in New York, the thesis passed only by a vote of 62 to 60. Chicago adopted it unanimously.

The section of the thesis which applied to support or alliances with the third party — concretely LaFollette — was not discussed at the Party convention Foster wrote that Lore tried to win him over to rejecting the clause, but he refused since he was in favor of it. Foster insisted upon the matter being discussed and then being referred to the Comintern for decision. When the clause came up for discussion, Pepper suddenly moved that it be not discussed, but be referred to the Comintern without further ado — which was adopted. This antagonized the Lore group, who, although they sympathized more with the Pepper-Ruthenberg group, turned their votes from them to the Foster-Cannon group. Although no vote was taken on the clause, Lore admitted in the *Volkszeitung* that two-thirds of the delegates favored it.

[Minnesota Forces a New Turn.]

After the Workers Party convention, the class farmer-labor party and the third party movement took another turn. The CEC learned that the the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party intended to call a national convention for the formation of a National Farmer-Labor Party. No party is better fit for such a task, owing to the strength it has and the prestige that it enjoys. The CEC got into touch with the leaders of the Minnesota party, which agreed to call a conference of all state farmer-labor parties and other national groups interested. Among the latter is the "Committee of 48," which represents only itself organizationally, but has considerable influence among the liberals in the country. Among these is Oswald Villiard, editor of the New York *Nation*. Agreement was arrived at at the conference between representatives of the CEC and the leaders of the Minnesota party. The Minnesotans, however, stated definitely that our Workers Party could not be admitted to the conference, but they agreed to our Federated Farmer-Labor Party participating. At the conference between all the interested groups, a call for a national convention was drafted and issued and a committee appointed to approach the convention of the old Farmer-labor Party and of the Progressive Party of Nebraska, of which [W.H.] Green, delegate to the congress of the Peasants' International, is the vice-president. It was decided to convene the convention at St. Paul on May 30 [1924]. The old Farmer-Labor Party refused but the Nebraska party consented to participate.

The Republican Party selected June 10 as the date of its convention; the Democratic Party decided to call its convention on July 4. Senator LaFollette, who has remained in the Republican Party and refuses to resign from it, started a movement among the Minnesotans to postpone the convention of the proposed National Farmer-Labor Party till after the Republican and Democratic conventions. The reason was obvious, as stated recently in the *New York Times*. LaFollette is ready to assume the leadership of the third party only in case the Republicans nominate a *reactionary*. This will ensure a good showing for the third party. The nomination of a "liberal" by the Republicans, on the other hand, would ruin the third party's chances. A letter published in the *Farmer-Labor Voice*, organ of the Federated Party, from [Lynn J.] Frazier, member of the Non-Partisan League and a member of the progressive bloc in the Senate, to the chairman of the North Dakota Farmer-Labor Party, contains the following:

“I do not feel, however, that much advantage would be gained by postponing the National Convention at least until after the Republican Convention is held. I talked this matter over with Senator LaFollette a short time ago and he was of that opinion at that time. However, circumstances alter cases, and it is hard to tell just what will develop in the near future.”

It was soon discovered that the chairman of the Minnesota Party was consulting with LaFollette and was inclined to postpone the convention till July 4. The Conference for Progressive Political Action met on February 12, and after considerable ineffectual debating decided to call their convention on July 4. The question as to whether they would nominate their own candidate or endorse a candidate of one of the big capitalist parties was answered by Hillquit, the socialist, to the effect that they were committed to nothing. After the conference the representatives of the railway unions held a separate conference to consider the matter of endorsing McAdoo, the presumptive candidate of the Democratic Party.

[Impact of the Teapot Dome Scandal.]

The petroleum scandal, coming at a time of considerable political unrest, was having a most deleterious effect on the Republican and Democratic parties. The investigation of the Teapot Dome oil lease to Sinclair and Doheny, two prominent oil operators, was being conducted by LaFollette. Big graft and corruption was being unearthed. The details of this exposure are well known. Ex-Secretary of the Interior [Albert B.] Fall accepted a bribe to hand over the Teapot Dome oil fields to the oil speculators. Secretary of the Navy [Edwin] Denby, who was involved, was forced to resign. The Department of Justice was involved. [Harry] Daugherty, head of the department, has been forced to resign. Senators, Congressmen Wall Street brokers, newspaper men are all implicated. A huge scandal has been uncovered, which will ruin the reputation of many men. McAdoo was the attorney for the Doheny interests and accepted \$250,000 as a fee, with the possibility of his receiving \$1 million if the schemes that Doheny had in mind were realized. This involved a revolution in Mexico an American intervention. McAdoo resigned as Doheny's counsel as soon as his complicity was made public. As he was the prospective candidate of

the Democratic Party, the question before the railway unions was whether they could endorse him in view of the scandal.

At the subsequent conference, the railway union representatives issued a public statement exonerating McAdoo from all blame and supporting him for the nomination on the Democratic ticket. This means that the July 4 convention will not form a labor party, for which the Conference for Progressive Political Action ostensibly was originally formed, but will seek to mobilize large masses of workers to the support of the Democratic ticket. The November thesis of the Workers Party took it for granted that the CPPA would support LaFollette and the third party. The socialists have since announced that if a labor party is not formed on July 4, they will run an independent campaign and put up their own candidates. Undoubtedly the socialists are hardly likely to put up their own ticket, for they are too weak. The secretary of the party [Otto Branstetter] recently resigned, stating that he has been unable to hold the party together owing to the sickness of [Eugene] Debs. The socialists are afraid of the risk of making an exceedingly poor showing. They would like to join the Farmer-Labor convention, but their fear of the communists is so great and their possibility of assuming any leadership in the gathering so slim, that they are constrained to remain outside. The existing conditions, however, may force them to join the convention.

[The Convention Postponement.]

As already stated, the Minnesotans, at the insistence of LaFollette, tried to postpone the convention till July 4. The CEC of the Workers Party immediately got into touch with the Minnesotans and let them know that they would not consent to the postponement till after the Republican and Democratic conventions. The CEC had decided that, if forced, they would yield to a postponement to a time between the dates fixed for the two capitalist party conventions but not till after the conventions of both capitalist parties had taken place. The reasons as given by Ruthenberg were as follows:

1) If we insist on going through with the May 30 convention, it is very probable that a majority of the parties cooperating with us will be swept into the third party movement. (In an article in *The Liberator*, Ruthenberg writes that all of the state farmer-labor parties have more or less third party elements in them. He enumerated those that we most rely upon).

2) We may go through with the May 30 convention, but we will come out of it with the name and shell of a party and will be isolated from the masses. In a resolution Pepper insisted upon the May 30 convention being held provided we could procure the support of several state farmer-labor parties, such as those of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington, and the Buffalo Labor Party, even if the Minnesotans refused to participate. In the vote taken on the resolution, Pepper stood alone. Ruthenberg's resolution embodying tactics approaching those of Foster-Cannon and consenting to a postponement of the convention till June 17 was adopted by all votes against Pepper's. (*This indicates a first break between Pepper and Ruthenberg.* It is important to note this fact since, according to indications, the delegation coming to Comintern will consist of only three comrades, Foster, Pepper, and Olgin — the latter being the representative of the group rejecting all support to the third party. Pepper apparently represents a more extreme point of view than Ruthenberg.)

The Minnesotans also wished to combine the convention with that of the CPPA on July 4, but the CEC utterly rejected the idea. The stand taken by the railway unions revealed that the formation of a labor party was remote from their minds. As stated in the November theses the acceptance of such a plan would mean the probable exclusion of the communists altogether from the convention. The idea of postponing the convention till July 4, as proposed by the Minnesotans, even though dropped, shows the real intents of these people. They probably believed that they could swing the July 4 convention over to the nomination of LaFollette rather than McAdoo.

A subsequent conference with the Minnesotans and the representatives of the other farmer-labor parties was held on March 12, where it was unanimously decided to call the convention on June 17. The groups forming the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party during the following days at their conventions endorsed the call and put up a program demanding public ownership of public utilities, nationalization of natural reserves, governmental banking (to help the farmers), maintenance of civil liberties, etc.

[The Central Issue.]

The question that divides the membership of the Workers party is whether, in case the communists and the *Class* Farmer-Labor Partyites

are in the minority at the convention, they shall retain organizational unity with the third partyites or whether, in case they can secure sufficient support, they should split away, taking along those willing to cooperate with FFLP. This question as well as the question as to how the communists in [the] US are to enter the political arena and are to act in the coming election campaign is being laid before the Presidium [of ECCI] for decision.

The nomination of a liberal candidate by the Republican Party will completely change the situation at the June 17 convention. The middle class elements and the weak, vacillating class farmer-labor party elements will desert the convention and endorse the liberal candidate of the Republican Party. this will greatly simplify the matter. A Class Farmer-Labor Party will then be formed at St. Paul.

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A general statement of Party policy was drawn up by Foster-Cannon and Pepper-Ruthenberg. They differ very little, but owing to the factional situation in the CEC, the Foster-Cannon proposals were adopted by a vote of 8 to 3, two members of the CEC being absent in New York.

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Another matter, which heightened the factional conflict in the former CEC was a point of heated discussion at the party convention and has been carried over into the new CEC. It is as follows:

As already indicated, the August thesis of the Party pointed out that the trade union group (Foster-Cannon) did not take a militant stand against the old Farmer-Labor Party (Fitzpatrick and Nockels), who sabotaged and split away from the July 3 [1923] convention at which the Federated Party was formed, and denounced the communists and the Communist International. Among other things, Fitzpatrick declared that the [August 1922] Communist Convention was purposely held in Michigan so that the communists might stage a sensational stunt. This was a remarkable statement from Fitzpatrick, since he was one of the first to rush to the assistance of the comrades arrested and is a member of the Labor Defense Council, which was established by the CEC for the defense of the arrested comrades. He also procured the services of Frank Walsh as counsel for the defense.

The other charges against the Chicago comrades have already been enumerated. Foster had to be instructed to write an open letter against Fitzpatrick.

The charges against the Chicago District were embodied in a resolution presented to the Party convention. The Chicago District Committee drafted another resolution against the CEC which was adopted unanimously by the Chicago District Convention. Just before the Party convention, an article written by Pepper appeared in *The Worker* at a time when the election of delegates was taking place. The article was entitled "How Not To Make the United Front." The article was an elaboration of the CEC resolution and subjected to severe criticism the position taken by the Chicago comrades on the question of the united front.

The resolution of the Chicago District Committee enumerated the achievements of the United Front policy as practiced in Chicago. These details of the Chicago argument should not be given if details of Pepper's argument in the above article are not given.

The bitterness that existed in the former CEC was raised to a pitch by the CEC resolution. When the two resolutions were presented at the convention, Comrade Lore tried to negotiate with Foster for the rejection of the proposition affording support to the third party in exchange for support of the Chicago resolution. Comrade Lore and other anti-third partyites strongly disapproved of Pepper's motion to refer the matter to the Comintern without discussion and, as Foster claims, in resentment on the question of Chicago's way of practicing [the] united front, immediately went over to the Foster-Cannon group. The Chicago resolution was adopted by an overwhelming majority. A vigorous attack was made on Foster at the Party convention by Pepper and [Joseph] Manley. (Manley is Foster's son-in-law. He has assisted him in many organizing campaigns in the trade union movement and generally agreed with Foster except on the question of the Federated Party, of which Manley is secretary). Pepper and Manley accused Foster of having neglected the trade union work, of having no program for the needle industry, etc. Pepper declared that the question of organizing the unemployed should be a major one during the coming period and that amalgamation could not be propagated during a period of depression when the workers are hesitant about change in organization forms.

Foster defended his activities as industrial organizer of the Party. He declared that amalgamation would have to be one of the main

issues for several years to come, and that unemployment was not yet enough of an issue to be a major point in the trade union program. Foster's report and standpoint were endorsed by the convention. The attack on Foster in convention on this question was strange. His activities as industrial organizer were always under the supervision and control of the CEC. If any objection to his work were to be raised, it should have been done in the CEC and not suddenly be presented before the Party convention. For if there actually were any deficiencies in his activities, the whole CEC was responsible. Foster-Cannon received 7 out of 13 in the CEC, with a few in the minority vacillating from one side to the other. (Subsequent voting has been either unanimous, 8 to 5, or 9 to 4, when members were absent 8 to 3). A factional fight began in the new CEC based on the diversity of opinion as to tactics and to the removal of District Organizers in New York and Philadelphia.² The Philadelphia District Committee energetically protested against the action of the CEC. The District Organizer of New York [Benjamin Lifshitz] also protested that he was being removed without any charges of incompetency or inefficiency being preferred against him. There is no indication that his protest was supplanted by the New York District Committee.

Ruthenberg, although in the minority, was retained as Executive Secretary of the Party. Cannon resigned as Chairman and became the Assistant Secretary; Foster was elected Chairman in his stead. Pepper, formerly Political Secretary, is still in the Political Committee. Lately he has been elected editor of the "Lenin Library," an edition of 10 of Lenin's pamphlets most suited to the American workers, which the Party intends to publish.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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² In District 2 New York City Foster loyalist Charles Krumbein was installed as DO, replacing Benjamin Lifshitz of the Pepper-Ruthenberg faction. In Philadelphia Abram Jakira was installed as DO by the new CEC, replacing a certain Comrade Powell.