
Speech to the American Commission of ECCI: Moscow — May 6, 1924

by William Z. Foster [“Dorsey”]

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There are some remarks made by Comrade [John] Pepper which I think require an answer. I think it is a very important question as to what is the character of the present majority of the Workers Party.¹ If it is, as has been pointed out here, that the Party is in the hands of the rankest kinds of opportunists, I think that the Comintern could not permit the Party to make this maneuver, and, in spite of the statement of Comrade [Alexander] Lozovsky, I will have to ask permission to make some statement as to our policy on the various important matters that have come before our [Central Executive] Committee recently.

[Industrial Work Underemphasized.]

Now, on the question of industrial work, Comrade Pepper stated that the Party overstressed the industrial work. The contrary is the case. Let me give you an illustration. Just before our convention [3rd: Chicago: Dec. 30, 1923 to Jan. 2, 1924] I submitted a document requesting all the branches to get their members into the trade unions

¹ The 3rd Convention of the Workers Party of America, held in Chicago from Dec. 30, 1923 through Jan. 2, 1924, saw the victory of an alliance of the trade union-oriented Chicago-based faction headed by William Z. Foster, a small faction based in New York headed by Ludwig Lore, and the powerful Finnish Federation over the former-and-future ruling faction of John Pepper, C.E. Ruthenberg, and Jay Lovestone. “Majority” thus relates to the Foster group and “Minority” to the Pepper-Ruthenberg group in this document.

and to become active in trade union work. It took six weeks to get that sent out to the membership of the Workers Party — the most important document that has been written on the trade union question in the history of the Workers Party. At the same time, the Party was able to send out such trivial matters as reviews of the current magazines. It does not look very much as though the trade union work is being overstressed by our Party. On the contrary, I think our Party neglected the trade union work, and I am sorry to say, the minority are even sabotaging it.

[Charge of Syndicalism False.]

There are two questions that I want to bring before the Commission: one is, the question of the Third Party; and the other the question of the internal situation of our Party. These questions will be more or less coming into all our discussions. Pepper also made a statement which will be a very disastrous thing for our Party, if true, that our majority, and especially myself, look upon the trade union work as a thing apart from the political work. In other words, that I am a syndicalist, that the majority of the Party are following a syndicalist policy. I want to read a few sentences from my report to the last convention of the Workers Party:

“In carrying on the industrial work it must never be forgotten that its final aim is the building and strengthening of the Workers Party. The movements for amalgamation, the Labor Party, organization of the unorganized, etc., among the unions create favorable spheres of influence for us and win the sympathy of great numbers of workers who recognized the practical leadership of the Communists in the everyday struggle. It is the duty of all units of the Party to follow up closely the industrial work carried on by the party and its members, and to absorb those workers brought under our ideological leadership through this work, into actual membership in the Party. Unless this is done our work is largely in vain. The conscious goal of the work on the industrial field must be ever and always the building of the Workers Party into a mass Communist Party.”

In that statement is the essence of the trade union work of the Trade Union Educational League, and I resent the implication that we are carry on trade union work for itself alone. Our work has been directed entirely to the building of the Workers Party. Pepper is a very

clever man, and he knows that there are two gold charges to place against a majority in Moscow. One is to call them syndicalist, the other is to call them opportunist. I am here to refute any such charges made by Pepper.

[Other Charges Denied.]

He said that our trade union policy was to create an alliance with the labor bureaucracy of the American Federation of Labor. I want to say that this is a ridiculous charge. I would not take the trouble to repudiate such a charge before this Commission. Our movement in America has got every trade union official against us. There is no Communist movement in the world that has to face the opposition of the trade union bureaucracy as we have to face. What has produced that opposition except our policy? And then to state that we are carrying out a policy of alliance with these trade union bureaucrats is ridiculous.

Another important matter that I want to touch on is the effort that is being made by Pepper to identify Comrade Lore with our majority. Pepper is capable of wonderful sleight of hand tricks. How he can identify Lore with our majority is something I cannot understand. Lore is the minority member of our [Central Executive] Committee. Pepper knows that Lore is in the right wing of our Party, but he identifies him with us for the purpose of discrediting our majority in Moscow.

[Pepper Group the Real Opportunists.]

I want to crowd into my thirty minutes something about our stand on the important policies with which our Party was lately confronted. If the tendency of our Party has been from a correct Communist policy to a policy of opportunism, I agree that this is a dangerous situation and has to be corrected. In the letters that have been sent to you there is a statement to the effect that Pepper has spent much of his time in building me up as the leader in the Communist Party, and now he is attacking me as the rankest kind of opportunist. If I am such an opportunist — and Pepper and his crowd have been very busy building me up as such — then Pepper should be censured for encouraging such an opportunist as I am.

Now what happened at our last convention? There was an upheaval and a new majority came into control. Pepper says that it is an opportunist majority, that the Party is in danger, that there is a crisis in the Party. Let us see what the old majority stood for. In the first place, the old majority, in our estimation, followed an opportunist policy with regard to the farmers. We combatted that policy. We say that the former majority entirely overestimated the importance of the farmers, that they spent too much energy in trying to organize the farmers, and too little energy in trying to organize the workers.

It is quite characteristic that in the November theses of the old majority, the first paragraph in the theses deals with the farmers, and that is because the direct policy of our Party under the regime of the previous majority was to organize the farmers first, the industrial workers second. And because we attempted to reverse that process, we were subjected to the severest kind of criticism. In the November theses we said this about it:

“Important as the revolt of the bankrupt farmers is in the present political situation, and necessary as it is that a close alliance be cemented between the exploited farmers and the industrial workers, there is a great danger in the tendency, displayed by the CEC majority, to base their LP [Labor Party] policy upon the farmers’ revolt, and to relegate the role of the workers to second place.”

I maintain that the attitude of the old Central Executive Committee towards the farmers’ movement was opportunism pure and simple, the most dangerous kind of opportunism which would upset the entire basis of our Party. I assure you that the present majority of the CEC is not going to operate any such policy.

[Federated Farmer-Labor Party Defective.]

There is another question, in connection with the formation of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. When this Party was formed [1923] some theses were written. These theses are what are known as the August theses. The basis of these theses was that we should turn the Federated Farmer-Labor Party into the new Communist Party. The group that forms the present majority of the Workers Party fought that conception to a standstill. We looked upon it as madness, as no less than gambling with our Party, and we defeated it. We said

that our goal was to build a mass communist party out of the Workers Party. We do not want two mass communist parties in America, but one mass communist party.

(Com Radek: "One is enough.")

I agree, one is enough.

The conception here was that we were going to reach out and grab a great big section of the labor movement and turn it into a mass communist party. We have heard something about opportunism — but is it possible to follow a more dangerous opportunist policy than that? This thesis was wrong theoretically and practically it is ridiculous. This Federated Farmer-Labor Party is such a loose organization that it cannot even follow the set purpose for which it was intended. Neither the old majority nor the present majority could turn this body into a mass communist party. We laughed the August theses to death at the convention.

[In Defense of the Chicago United Front.]

We have heard about the Chicago united front, that that was a quite serious indication of the opportunist tendencies of the present majority. I want to say a few words about the united front in Chicago. The united front in Chicago existed on a number of fronts, so to speak. We had a united front for the defense of political prisoners. We had a united front on the industrial field, and with the Farmer-Labor Party on the question of organizing a Labor Party. That continued for more than a year, and I can safely say that as a result of the contact that we gained in that combined action, the Workers Party profited enormously. This united front lasted about a year. It was the most important activity that the Party carried on in that course of time, and the entire charge of the united front was under the CEC of the Workers Party, when Pepper was the leader of the majority. Everything that was done in Chicago was under the supervision of the CEC. The CEC knew absolutely everything that was going on in Chicago, and they are fully responsible for what was done there. I was in Chicago along with others, and I for one took this position on the matter. I was rather inexperienced in Communist tactics, but Pepper, whom everyone supposed represented the Comintern in America, was so pleased that he voted 100% in favor of everything done in Chi-

chicago, and those of us who have no such international reputations were inclined to accept that as good Communist tactics, when Pepper put his OK to it.

After this had continued for a while, a split developed in our Committee, and it was necessary to find some issues wherewith to discredit the minority — this Chicago group that happened to get into opposition with the Party on the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. So Pepper and the previous majority undertook to hold them responsible for some mistakes that we made in the course of the Chicago united front. They said that we did not criticize Fitzpatrick enough. that is true. We admit that that was a mistake. But we were not responsible for it. Our policy was OKed by the CEC of the Communist Party, and the thing we objected to in our convention, and the thing we object to here, is to have the responsibility pushed upon our shoulders. I tell Pepper that if there was no criticism in Chicago, your majority was responsible for not instructing those in Chicago to carry on this criticism. Because it is not a local affair, it was a national affair, and the most vital interests of the Workers Party were involved in it.

With regard to this split that took place in Chicago [of the Farmer-Labor Party], I must say that I was against it. I thought it was unnecessary. I said that the split was largely a manufactured split. We split with one group of so-called progressive trade unionists to go into another group just as bad, if not worse. With this difference: When we split with the Chicago group we lost contact with the trade unionists, and when we went into the Minnesota group, we established contact with the farmers. Our Minnesota united front is with the farmers; our Chicago united front was with the industrial workers. At our convention, when an effort was made by Pepper to hold the Chicago group responsible for what happened in Chicago, the convention said, "No, the CEC must take the blame." That was one of the principal issues upon which the old majority went down to defeat. But Chicago was not a defeat for our Party. It represented the greatest advance that our Party has made in its history. This Chicago united front was OKed by our Committee. When reports of our activities there were submitted to the CEC, they were supported and OKed. Because we were doing good work and the Committee agreed that it was good work, but when the split took place, then we were blamed.

[Isolating the CPPA.]

There is another matter which illustrates the opportunist policy of the previous majority. That is, the split of the Fitzpatrick group from the Conference for Progressive Political Action. Pepper has pointed out in his speech what a hopeless group are the trade union bureaucracy in the United States, and yet, when the Farmer-Labor Party group split from the Conference for Progressive Political Action, his majority, the previous majority, objected to it and fought against it. Whereas our group were in favor of that split. We said that this Farmer-Labor group, which represented the rank-and-file sentiment for a Labor Party in America, was the basis for the formation of a Labor Party movement in the United States. But Pepper, following out his opportunist policy, which he describes as opposition to opportunism, was anxious to get this organization affiliated with the reactionary trade union leaders. But we stood for the split as furnishing the basis for a left wing movement in the United States.

[Opportunist Machinations in Minnesota.]

Pepper stated that he stood for the split in the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. Let me tell you something about that split. This is a good illustration of the factionalism that is crippling our Party at the present time. The question arose on the matter of the postponement of the May 30th Convention. An effort was being made to cancel our convention on May 30th, and turn all the forces into the July 4th Convention, and we fought that bitterly, because we said it would merge everything into the Third Party movement. We were holding a [conference] at St. Paul on March 12, and they wanted to swing this [May 30th] convention to July 4th, to split this conference; [but we believed that] when we split this conference, we split the whole farmer-labor movement. Pepper moved that we split the [March 12] conference if we got a substantial minority in Minnesota. Our policy was not to split the conference unless we had a majority in Minnesota. We claimed that we had to have the trade union elements with us in establishing the Labor Party.

[C.E.] Ruthenberg made a very bitter attack on our policy, but shortly afterwards he joined us in our policy, and was one of the most active figures in carrying out this policy at the March 12th Conference, which decided this question. We took the position that, if we

were compelled to, in order to avoid isolation in Minnesota, we would accept June 20th as the date of our convention. Pepper said, no, we must split first. Ruthenberg went with our committee to Minnesota, and there we were confronted with the situation of a split, exactly the way we said it would occur. Our committee voted to accept June 17th and not to split the labor movement, because we knew that it would be a big mistake if we split. We came back to Chicago and reported that we did not split, and Pepper agreed that we had done right. Pepper voted along with all the committee that we had done right in refusing to split. Then he comes here and says that he voted to split the Farmer-Labor Party, when he voted in favor of our not splitting the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota.

(Com. Pepper: "Not splitting the Farmer-Labor Federation; that is a big difference, you know.")

That question never came before our Party. The question was to split the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota.

Now in all these questions the previous majority carried out a policy which, in every case, as related to our [situation] was purely an opportunistic policy. Even in the present question, the question of a Third Party, the attitude of the Pepper group is different from ours. Which is the most right of our positions? The November theses says we shall go along with the Third Party, and that is all there is to it. [Our] theses at least make some reservations. We say that under certain conditions we shall not go along with the Third Party. There is a readiness on the part of the old majority to go along with this party which does not exist in the present majority, and if we can get the right situation in that convention, we shall not go along with the Third Party.

[Political Strategy of the Majority Group.]

I now want to say a few words about our thesis. In my judgment we have got to follow the principles outlined in that thesis, which are that, first of all, we shall put up our Communist candidate. We all agree upon that. If we cannot succeed with that, we shall try to get some candidate who can control the trade union section of the convention. We did hope that we could get Debs to be the candidate of the proposed Federated Farmer-Labor Party. If we do get Debs to be

our candidate, we can get such a split at the June 17 Convention as to enable us to carry out from that convention a sufficient volume to make a Farmer-Labor Party.

I doubt whether it can be done. I am convinced that whomever we put up there, we will be defeated so heavily that we will be compelled to take their candidate, or be confronted with such a split as to involve the loss of the majority of the trade union element at the convention, and there will be just a small group of Communists and Communist sympathizers left. I say that if we want to maintain the Party in a healthy state in America, we must instruct them to accept that alternative based on the terms of our thesis. Otherwise, we isolate our movement — not only politically, but industrially as well. It will be discredited throughout the trade union movement of the United States. We have been the champions of the Labor Party idea. We split the Farmer-Labor Convention in Chicago [July 3-5, 1923]. This split, in my judgment, injured our Party. Now, if we carry out this second split, it will injure our Party still more, because this is a much more important convention than the Chicago convention, and with a much greater field of influence.

[Using the Farmer-Labor Movement Against Gompers.]

Here is another important matter which I think you should consider. We are carrying on a warfare against the Gompers bureaucracy, as one of our enemies that we have to fight in America. The Pepper group criticize us for fighting the Gompers bureaucracy. They seem to consider that that is wrong. To me the Gompers bureaucracy is one of the principal obstacles to any kind of progress, political or industrial, in the United States. Our majority stands absolutely for the bitterest fight to destroy the Gompers bureaucracy. We say that if we are compelled to bring about a left split at the June 17th Convention, which we will be if Olgin's thesis is carried into effect, it means that we will lose a splendid point of vantage to fight the Gompers machine. Gompers has no political organization. If we are participating in a Labor Party, it means that we can utilize it to fight Gompers, not only on the political field, but on the industrial field as well, because this Farmer-Labor Party movement will be hostile to Gompers. We must not alienate ourselves from such an organization. We could very readily direct a good deal of its force against the Gompers machine.

I say in conclusion that you must be very careful before you give us a program of splitting the June 17th Convention with a left split. If you do, the Communist Party of America is going to be thrown back, is going to be detached from the masses, and its work is going to be greatly hampered, not for a few months, as Olgin says, but for a long time to come.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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