
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by Charles Dirba:

Excerpt from an Interview

Conducted by Oakley C. Johnson

and Ann Rivington, 1940

Handwritten index cards in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society,
Box 9, Folder 2, Microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

I first met Ruthenberg in September 1919, although I had read of him before. I was kicked out of the Socialist Party convention at that time, but I don't think Ruthenberg was a delegate. We went to the convention, but they didn't even let us in. They left a bunch of us milling around the entrance. We went over to the Communist Party Convention, where John Ballam was in the chair. I have a faint recollection that it was at the convention that Ruthenberg and some others there were trying to get the two conventions together, but without success.¹

There were factional caucuses held at the Communist Convention, but Ruthenberg stayed out of them. The CP was very short of English speaking leadership material and while they were not completely satisfied with Ruthenberg, they considered him the best of the English speaking material.

I was initially the Assistant Secretary to Ruthenberg. I went to Chicago in about November 1919 and was there for two months, taking care of financial and organizational work. Then very soon came the Palmer Raids. I kept on — I was in charge of transferring

¹ There were three simultaneous conventions during the first week of September 1919 in Chicago — the regular Emergency National Convention of the Socialist Party, dominated by the moderates; the convention of the Communist Labor Party, mostly bolting Socialist delegates and their supporters; and the convention of the Communist Party of America, officially called ahead of time for September 1 by an organizing committee which included suspended or expelled language federations and state organizations of the Socialist Party. The drive for unity was between the latter two of these groups.

the office to New York. We went into headquarters even while it was closed by the police and got away with certain literature and so on.

Headquarters moved to New York City after the Palmer Raids. There Ruthenberg got away from detailed work, his new job consisting more of political leadership. CEC meetings were held in private homes. C.E. attended meetings, gave speeches, travelled around, organized the printing of publications and leaflets underground. He got help from the Federations, since the Federation groups had their own press. Ruthenberg organized places to meet District Organizers, codes of communications, addresses for receiving mail. John Schwartz — a Lettish fellow, dead now — was the technician in underground work, getting out literature, maintaining contacts, places, and people for conferences, etc.

From the very start the CP and the CLP fought over the question of who would be recognized by the Communist International. From the very start it was a question of who was at fault for the split and how to unite. The parties were organized separately and then they started playing around with the question of unity. Things finally started to stop at the time of the Palmer Raids [Jan. 2/3, 1920], when the groups both established headquarters in New York City. Once the organizations were going again in New York, the question of unity began again.

Within a very short period there developed serious differences between Ruthenberg and the other Russian-dominated members of the CP. Comrade Ruthenberg was in favor of unity while the majority of the Central Executive Committee of the CP was against. The CP, which had more members, wanted proportional delegation to a unity convention; the CLP wanted equal representation. Ruthenberg wanted immediate unity.

C.E. Ruthenberg broke with the Federation groups because he was more desirous of unity than anyone else — and the Russian Federation and other language groups were not. He left the CP — allegedly taking with him party funds — and issued a call for unity. The Federation groups refused. The Communist Labor Party went over as a whole but only a small part came over with him from the CP to form the United Communist Party in 1920.

Orders came from the Communist International to unite with Jacob Hartmann as chairman of a Joint Unity Convention in the middle of 1921. After the convention the question of legalizing the party erupted. The Federation group thought it couldn't be done.

Two Central Committees functioned, each claiming to be the Party — issuing two versions of *The Communist* with the same masthead, etc.

The Federation group didn't have much ground on which to stand. They sent Ballam and another comrade across to Moscow to appeal to the Comintern. Both were scolded and promised to adhere to party discipline, but only Ballam fulfilled the promise.

The Russian Federation continued until the fall of 1922 before entering the Party. The Federation group sent a representative to the C.I. but it was ruled they must submit to the decisions of the Party. The double Party business was finally cleared up in the fall of 1922.

I was in Minneapolis in the summer of 1922. I went back to the official Party in the fall. I had been paying dues to the Federation group during that summer. Up until January 1922 I was acting as Secretary for them. [In response to?] communication from the C.I., I said I would not act any longer in an official capacity for them.

I went to Buffalo for a year in 1925 then came back to New York. I was then considered in the Lovestone group, but I didn't attend any caucus meetings until 1928.

Ruthenberg never got excited, never was cranky, always was cool. He was slow speaking and very organized with office work — taking care with financial problems, taking care with how literature should be packaged and sent out. Although he never yelled at anybody at the same time he could be very firm. When working with “slipshod people” he was patient up to a certain point and then made a change.

Ruthenberg was very much of an organization man. He always pressed for unity and meeting the demands of the Communist International. When it was a question of interpreting instructions of the Communist International, which pressed for unity, he went against the CP for the UCP in carrying them out. Comrade Minor brought certain instructions from across about that time. The question was always on *interpreting* instructions of the C.I.

Ruthenberg was all the time working for the organization — day and night — and even in hotel rooms on the road he would already be taking up business. He would come in from another city early in the morning and already there were people taking up business with him. I don't have recollections of him being fond of shows or theater. I guess he did like to read books, I remember. He was a plain fellow

and it didn't make much difference what he ate. He was certainly not a drinking man — he may have taken a glass of wine once in a while.

I remember a conversation once in connection with the prospects of his returning to prison. I think Ed Ferguson started it. The discussion related to a question of balance between suffering and satisfaction — a little philosophical discussion. I don't think Ruthenberg accepted the idea of this *balance* or compensation.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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