
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by J.J. Ballam:

Excerpt from an Interview

Conducted by Oakley C. Johnson

and Ann Rivington, June 3, 1940

Handwritten notes in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Box 9, Folder 1, Microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

I first worked with C.E. Ruthenberg at the Left Wing Convention [New York: June 21-24, 1919]. William Bross Lloyd, the chairman, referred to C.E. as an authority on parliamentary law. Then I was on the National Committee of the Left Wight Conference with Ruthenberg...

I worked with Louis Fraina on *The Revolutionary Age* in Boston, where it was published for Lettish [Latvian] Branch #1. Lenin sent his "Letter to American Workers" to Lettish Branch #1 and I personally received this Lenin letter, although it was addressed to the Socialist Propaganda League. The letter was first translated and published in the Latvian paper, then turned over and translated into English. A couple of pages were lost.

The first American paper influenced by Bolshevik propaganda was *The Internationalist* [edited by Fraina and precursor to *The Revolutionary Age*], a monthly published in Boston. It bore the influence of Latvian revolutionaries from the 1905 Revolution. They knew of the Bolsheviks, had known Lenin and been under his influence, and translated Lenin's articles from the underground press. First they published them in the Lettish press, then in the English press there.

Scott [Karlis Janson], Sen Katayama, and Fraina were the Communist International's Pan-American Bureau in America after the CP and CLP were formed. Janson was one of the early Latvian comrades in this country and he associated with English-speaking comrades. He had a brother who was killed in the 1905 Revolution. Janson returned to Moscow when the American Bureau broke up in December

1921, when the legal party was formed. He himself had — it is rumored — troubles in the purge.¹

C.E. Ruthenberg wrote in *The Internationalist*, *The Revolutionary Age*, and *The Class Struggle* during the period of development of the program of the Left Wing. Ruthenberg was a nationally known Left Wing figure already in 1914.

In fact, Ruthenberg was at the 1912 Socialist Party Convention [Indianapolis: May 12-18, 1912] and was then prominent in an anti-parliamentarism wing, led by William D. Haywood, Debs, Charles Edward Russell, Fank Bohn. This was a period of rising by the IWW and at this time Haywood debated with Morris Hillquit at Cooper Union in New York City and was beaten by Hillquit.

The Socialist Propaganda League followed the leadership of Pannekoek, a Dutch leader (a Centrist, but the League here did not know) and Rosa Luxemburg. The influenced the line of the International Socialist Review also... I was an organizer of the Left Wing in New England. I also met Tom Mooney in California just previously, when I was in the IWW. C.E. Ruthenberg never had any IWW orientation at all, even in those days. In fact, he was opposed to the IWW.

* * *

Lenin, in a talk with me in 1922, thought the American workers were premature — they should not have come out as a Communist Party [when they did] but remained in the Socialist Party, nominated Debs, and claimed to be the legal SP, etc. Ruthenberg never met Lenin. He never went abroad until 1926.²

Ruthenberg did not want segregated language federations in the Party — he stood for a centralized Party. This is why he went, along with Jay Lovestone, from the CPA to the CLP to found the United Communist Party. Charles Dirba became secretary of the [rival] CPA in this interval, with Wagenknecht as secretary of the CLP. When Ruthenberg was in jail [Nov. 1920 to April 1922], Will Weinstone, for a time, and L.E. Katterfeld were acting secretaries.

Jay Lovestone practically turned *state's evidence* in the trial of Harry Winitsky, Ben Gitlow, and C.E. Ruthenberg.... Lovestone was

¹ Karlis Ernestovich Janson (Scott) was born on Jan. 12, 1882 and is believed to have died in 1939 in the mass secret police terror in the Soviet Union. His Comintern personnel file is at RGASPI as fond 495, opis 65a, delo 7512.

² I do not believe this to be accurate.

later tried in Moscow by the Comintern's International Control Commission under Bukharin and acquitted. It was on the willing testimony of Lovestone as a witness for the state, however, that Ruthenberg was convicted.³

Ruthenberg was elected at the 1922 Bridgman Convention, unanimously, as Secretary of the legal Party, and remained so until his death.⁴ Ruthenberg was never a factionalist, he always sought unity — organizationally and programatically.

Ruthenberg's 1920 "United Communist Party" effort was such an effort to achieve unity. He admired the system in Dirba — he was very straight, very reliable, absolutely honest, and had a system of checking on people and keeping accounts. He admired him very much.

While Ruthenberg was in jail, the CI ordered and secured this unity of groups.

His relationship with Foster also shows his unity desire. Ruthenberg accepted Foster from the beginning as a co-worker and trade union leader. The two of them were very closely associated in the move for a Farmer-Labor Party. It was Ruthenberg's motion that established *The Labor Herald* and his motion, too, that Earl Browder work with Foster on the *Labor Herald* and in the Trade Union Educational League and be the liaison officer between the Party and TUEL.

Ruthenberg was careful and didn't want to get arrested unnecessarily. However, at Bridgman in 1922, when we were surrounded and there was only one avenue of escape and I was to take out the leaders one by one. C.E. declined to leave. "What makes you think I want to leave the grounds?" he said with a strange little smile. He stayed. He was very brave and never became panicky. Under any circumstances

³ Johnny Ballam was a bitter factional foe of Jay Lovestone. His representation here of Lovestone's testimony as a subpoenaed witness in the Witnitsky trial — permission to appear having been granted by the Central Executive Committee and Lovestone having stringently limited himself to offering no more information than what the state already possessed, walking on the edge of a contempt citation — is greatly distorted by decades of personal loathing.

⁴ Ruthenberg was tapped as Executive Secretary of the Workers Party of America, a "legal" entity theoretically subordinate to the underground Communist Party of America — with Abram Jakira elected as Secretary of that organization on August 21, 1922 at Bridgman. Israel Amter intimated in a 1940 interview with Oakley Johnson that both of these positions were filled by the separately-meeting "Liquidationist" and "Goose" caucuses and approved without debate. In the next months the WPA grew dramatically in size and influence under Ruthenberg's tutelage while the parallel CPA withered and died, formally terminated at a small convention held in New York City on April 7, 1923.

one felt he would keep his head. [Armed detectives] were all around and were moving in. There was only a half hour to decide. Gitlow was very willing to go. Five were taken out.

Foster was not on the grounds. He had come down, delivered an address on the Trade Union Educational League, and had left.

C.E. Ruthenberg was the foremost spokesman against romanticism regarding the illegal party, and he fought against it. The underground Party was not originally a matter of choice though. The Palmer Red Raids arrested 5,000 to 6,000 Socialist Party members. Although many aliens were targeted in the raids, it affected the others. The raids took place early in January 1920, just three months after the organization of the Party. Later, Ruthenberg wished to come out and be legal — but Russian aliens liked the underground organization *in principle*.

In committees, C.E. did not give long reports, he listened more than he spoke. He usually made the political reports, which generally emphasized the organizational side of the Party, especially the lower branches. At dinners and lunches, Ruthenberg would both tell stories and listen to them. He was not a warm personality, he was reserved, much like Earl Browder. Such a reserve gives the impression of power.

Browder learned much from Ruthenberg's methods.

Not like Gitlow, who was silent because he because he never had anything to say!

Ruthenberg was very dignified and tolerated no gossip, no profane language. It was impossible to gossip with him about anyone. He was very reserved, perhaps a little stiff. He always carried personal dignity to the platform and compelled respect for the Party because of this. All, even when they disagreed, respected him. There was a certain obstinacy about Ruthenberg though and until he was convinced of something you always wanted to cuss him out. He was never facetious, although he could laugh at jokes — as long as they had political content.

Ruthenberg spoke extemporaneously, as a rule — Browder was the first to speak from a manuscript. He was a resourceful and ready speaker and had an extensive vocabulary. He was a very moving speaker and despite the fact that he spoke in a monotone, he had a rich, pleasant voice. He used no oratorical tricks or gestures. His speeches tended to be formal, or rather orthodox, Marxist interpretations. He never failed to relate current events to the class struggle and always put class interest forward. During the period of the United

Front From Below, Ruthenberg placed emphasis on class interests, class divisions, and revealed the underlying interests of the Socialist Party.

He would accept assignments to speak on the same basis as any rank-and-filer. We once decided he should tour for the *Daily Worker* fundraising drive and he even postponed Central Control Commission meetings to speak. He always ready to speak on defense matters for the Labor Defense Committee and adjusted his other work for these dates. He never offered excuses but was always ready to do what was necessary in the judgment of his comrades. He was not bureaucratic except in the sense that he was stiff.

C.E. spoke German as well as English, although I doubt if he could read German theoretical works — he had to rely on works in English.... He worked 18 hours a day and was at his office until 11 pm or midnight. He was the first to introduce the use of a dictograph, to save the time of office workers. Staff found him easy to work for. He was very methodical and careful. It disturbed him if I went into his office and sat on the edge of the desk. He was business-like, his carriage was stiff, his emotions under control. He was extremely reserved.

Ruthenberg had no vices. He smoked cigarettes, no cigars, no drinking. He tried to break the cigarette habit from time to time, or at least to cut down on them. “Johnny, I haven’t smoked for 3 days now,” he might say. Just smoking cigarettes once in a while, he thought, sapped energy he needed for the Party.

Ruthenberg died before the Five Year Plan began, and the Agrarian Question, the kulaks, etc. arose. He lived through the New Economic Policy and Restoration Period in the USSR and in a period of effort to get rid of sectarianism. His speeches reflected this.

Our early Party nominated only people for legislative offices, none for executive offices, on the grounds that they would have to carry out the orders of the capitalist state. C.E. opposed this sectarianism. Ruthenberg also opposed the early Party idea — derived from the IWW — that *all* the American Federation of Labor was reactionary. ***In this he was one with Foster.***

Foster once told a story about Ruthenberg and John Pepper⁵: When Pepper came to America he notified both Ruthenberg and Foster, who he considered both equal leaders. He told them if his work became superfluous, he should tell them so. Later, during the Federated Farmer-Labor Party campaign of 1924, Foster and he both came to be opposed to Pepper. Foster went to Ruthenberg and said, "Charlie, I think the time has come for Pepper to go back to Moscow." Ruthenberg agreed.

Both decided to go and tell him. They saw Pepper at his own home and he opened a couple bottles of wine. Ruthenberg didn't drink. They talked a long time, but did not mention their wish for him to return to Moscow. When they finally left, Foster said to Ruthenberg, "Why didn't you speak up?"

Ruthenberg replied, "Well, why didn't you?"

It might have changed history and shows how close those two men were. Pepper was later shot with Bukharin as a Hungarian spy.⁶

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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⁵ Pseudonym of József Pogány (1886-1938), a leader in the Hungarian Revolution of 1919. Following the fall of the Soviet government in Hungary, Pogány was forced into emigration in the Soviet Union, where he went to work as a functionary of the Comintern. Pogány-Pepper was brought to the United States in 1922, ostensibly to aid the Hungarian-American radical movement. However, through a combination of personal magnetism, intellectual ability, and factional adroitness, Pepper soon emerged as a top leader of the American Communist Party. Pepper was a top leader of the intellectually-oriented New York-based political faction which stood in opposition to Foster's grittier Chicago-based group. Pepper was closely associated politically with C.E. Ruthenberg and Jay Lovestone.

⁶ József Pogány-Pepper was no such thing, of course, but was rather sucked into the whirlpool of official paranoia, anonymous denunciations, early morning arrests, and coercive interrogations remembered as the *Ezhovshchina*, or Great Purge of 1937-38.