
Letter to Theodore Draper in New York City from Max Bedacht in Frenchtown, NJ, Dec. 13, 1954

Document in the Theodore Draper Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 30.

Frenchtown, NJ, Dec. 13, 1954.

Dear Mr. Draper:

Just received your letter of Dec. 11. The weather makes outdoor work impossible. So I can tackle an answer at once.

In order to unravel the seeming confusion about our "Unity" and other conventions I ransacked my memory and what in an, I hope, excusable exaggeration I call my library. So you can accept the information and chronology I give in this letter as accurate.

The birth of our CP produced twins. The reason for this biological surprise was that the Left Wing movement in the SP was united only in its opposition to the Hillquit and Berger leadership, but not in understanding of principles and tactics. The formation of the Left Wing Council in February 1919 was actually precipitated by the expulsion from the SP of the Ohio and Michigan state organizations and the Slavic Federations.† The lack of unity within the Left Wing organization manifested itself in a split in the National Council in June [1919] on the question of whether the work within the SP should be continued. The majority decided for it. The minority contented that all worthwhile elements had been expelled from the SP. Those still in it were not expelled merely because

they were not genuine Left Wingers. Therefore, why bother about them. In August, however, both groups agreed to issue a joint call for the formation of a Communist Party in America. The "no account Left Wingers," of which I was one, together with the Left Wing Council group which had decided to continue work within the SP unitedly carried on efforts to win the convention of the SP [Aug. 30-Sept. 5, 1919]. I came to that convention as a member of a unanimous Left Wing delegation from California. The Hillquit-Berger machine did not admit the delegates from Ohio — Ruthenberg, Wagenknecht, etc. — at all.‡ Other Left Wing delegates, undoubtedly bona fide elected by SP organizations, found their credentials challenged and turned over for investigation to a Credentials Committee of which Jacob Panken of NY was chairman. We, that is these challenged delegates, therefore, could not participate in the proceedings of the SP convention. So with the Ohio delegates we met in the Machinists' Hall and formed a Communist Party.§

Since a convention for the organization of such a party had already been called and the delegates to it had already assembled in the "Smolny Institute," the hall of the Russian Federation in Chicago, we addressed ourselves to them with a request to let us join them in the founding and building of the CP. The convention at Smolny was dominated by those who had already

†- The Left Wing National Council was actually formed by the National Left Wing Conference (NY: June 21-24, 1919). Michigan was expelled and 7 of the SP's Slavic and Baltic Federations were suspended by the May 24-30, 1919, session of the NEC in Chicago, the former on May 24 and the latter on May 28. The Socialist Party of Ohio was expelled only on Aug. 20, 1919, following the formal announcement on Aug. 13 of a motion by mail by NEC member Fred Krafft.

‡- Reference to the "Hillquit-Berger" machine is interesting for having been retrospectively chosen as a label but is not descriptive of the reality of the 1919 Convention, the only SP conclave in his lifetime which Hillquit did not attend. Nor did Berger play a decisive role. The actual SP national factional leadership of 1919 should be more accurately described as the "Germer-Oneal-Gerber-Panken machine."

§- That is, the Communist Labor Party. Machinists' Hall on Ashland Avenue in Chicago was the site of the regular Socialist Party convention. The CLP was formed downstairs before moving their gathering after a couple days to IWW Hall on Throop Street.

classified us as no account Left Wingers. They refused to admit us as delegates. They suggested that instead we attend as “observers” and then have our constituents vote on whether or not to join the CP. After all, they said, you were not delegated to the CP but to the SP Convention.

We considered this arrangement unacceptable and proceeded to organize the CLP. When on one of the last days of the SP Convention the Credentials Committee reported favorably on our California credentials, we declared from the floor of the SP Convention that by its decisions it had itself removed itself from the class of a revolutionary proletarian party and that we and our constituents did not want to be attached to any other party. We then left the hall.†

Ruthenberg, who with the Ohio delegation was with us till then, at that point left for the CP Convention, of which he was one of the people who had signed the call.

Incidentally the Michigan delegates, under the leadership of [John] Keracher, also remained outside and formed later the Proletarian Party.‡

The CP elected Ruthenberg, the CLP Wagenknecht, as National Secretaries.

We in the CLP were clear all through these developments that we needed a united party. So we met privately with the non-Federation leaders of the CP, like Ruthenberg, [I.E.] Ferguson, etc., to discuss unity.

I had a number of talks with Ruthenberg. At last matters had reached a point when we could turn these unofficial efforts into official ones. Out of them came the call to the first Bridgman Convention [May 26-31, 1920], issued by both executives to their respective party organizations. It was held in May 1920 and gave birth to the United Communist Party. However, part of the Slavic Federations boycotted this unity and continued to function as the CP of the USA.§ It was at this Bridgman Convention that the motion on “by force and violence” was made and bitterly fought.

In the fall of the year [Oct. 1920], John Reed, who had been given credentials to represent the UCP at the Comintern, died. I was then elected to take his place in Moscow. The Federation group [CPA] was represented then by Nick Hourwich. I protested against this arrangement to the Executive Committee [of the Comintern] and the result of the matter was that Hourwich was instructed to inform his constituents that they were welcome as Communists, but not as a Communist Party. The rules of the CI allowed only one CP in a country and that CP was the UCP in the US. I high-pressured the UCP with cables to use that to get final unity. And all this led to the unity convention in Woodstock.Δ Your mentioning it refreshed my memory. I had been told the place.

As you know even that “unity” created a new splitter group — the United Toilers.β The founding

†- The California delegation announced their decision not to take their seats at the Socialist Party Convention with a statement delivered Sept. 1, 1919.

‡- The Michiganders and their allies were one of the three primary factions taking part in the founding convention of the Communist Party of America at Smolny. The split leading to the formation of the Proletarian Party of America did not take place until January 1920.

§- Actually, the Chicago-based Ruthenberg-Ferguson-Belsky faction split from the CPA (absconding with its treasury!) in April 1920. A 3-way unity dance followed, with Ruthenberg & Co. determining to cast their lot with the CLP rather than reuniting with the remaining New York-based CPA faction or attempting to hoe an independent row.

Δ- The process leading to the May 1921 Woodstock Unity Convention was protracted and complex and ultimately had little to do with Bedacht’s cables to the UCP from Moscow.

β- This terminology is an anachronism. After the May 1921 shotgun wedding of the UCP and the CPA at Woodstock to form the unified CPA, factional antipathy persisted. In Sept. 1921 the fissure between the ex-UCP and the ex-CPA reemerged over issues of personnel and a decision to mechanically move the underground movement “overground.” The bulk of the ex-CPA formalized itself by organizing a “Central Caucus,” which met weekly through the fall and winter of 1921 as a sort of shadow Central Committee. In Jan. 1922, this Central Caucus called and held an “Emergency Conference,” which ultimately declared itself a regular convention of the Communist Party of America. The regular adherents of the CPA (the ex-UCP and a section of the ex-CPA) was ruled outside of the organization. Parallel groups — each calling themselves the “Communist Party of America,” with an official organ called *The Communist*, and using the same logo — functioned throughout the first half of 1922. Towards April 1922 — that is, *many months* after the establishment of its formal Central Caucus — the dissident CPA Opposition formed a subsidiary “legal political organization” of its own, called the United Toilers of America. The UTA, approximately half the size of the Central Caucus-CPA Opposition, continued to function throughout the summer of 1922, playing an active role in agitation around the miners’ and railway shopmen’s strikes. All but an irreconcilable fringe of the UTA was absorbed into the “legal political party” of the unified CPA in Sept. 1922.

UCP Convention (first) in Bridgman made Ruthenberg Secretary. But he was shortly after tried and jailed for criminal anarchy in NY. That is how Wagenknecht got into the executive group to arrange the [May 1921] Woodstock convention. † Jakira was for a time Secretary. ‡ After his release from Joliet [Illinois], Katterfeld took over the job. § By that time the geese were a going cru-cren and Baer was one of the ganders. Δ We had given them the name of geese because they had only a few talking leaders. And when one of them flapped his wings and quacked, they all flopped and all quacked in exact imitation.

Upon my return from the 4th Congress [of the Comintern: Nov. 5-Dec. 5, 1922] a national conference was called, not a convention, to receive the report of the delegates to that Congress. β I do not remember Jim Cannon to have been one of the delegates to that Congress. If he was he did not speak because I cannot find him or anyone that could have been him, on the speakers list of the Congress minutes. And it is not likely that he would not have spoken. ◇ So you see

[William Z.] Foster is right about a Unity Convention having been held at Bridgman. ∞

As to [Jacob] Hartmann, I do not remember who told me about his lecturing at a Catholic University. So perhaps it was only a rumor. Anyhow his name should not be mentioned unless he is dead — which is probable. If he were still teaching his name in connection with the formation of a CP in this country would make him the victim of crucifixion. #

I cannot remember when Lovestone began functioning as Secretary. Anyhow, it was only up to the release of [C.E.] Ruthenberg from Sing Sing. ∂ After that, and up to C.E.'s death in 1927, Ruthenberg acted in that capacity.

Now I hope this clears up the maze and, as I said, this time I made sure from printed materials that I am right.

Yours,

Max Bedacht.

†- Bedacht is mistaken. Ruthenberg was named editor of the official organ at the 1920 Bridgman Convention, Wagenknecht was named Secretary.

‡- Abram Jakira was actually the Secretary of the CPA elected after the ill-fated August 1922 Bridgman Convention. He continued in this role until the dissolution of the underground CPA on April 7, 1923.

§- While this question is not completely settled, it appears that Katterfeld and Wagenknecht were functionally “co-Secretaries” of the UCP in the run up to the May 1921 Woodstock Convention, with Katterfeld delivering the official report of the organization to that gathering. Katterfeld was apparently not jailed at Joliet until the tail end of 1923 and the first part of 1924.

Δ- The reference to “Baer” is unclear. The “Geese” were the faction of the unified CPA which favored the continuation of an hegemonic underground party apparatus.

β- There is no indication of any such conference in the archival records or the historical literature. It is likely that Bedacht is misremembering a session of the Central Executive Committee as such.

◇- Whether he was on the speakers’ list or not, there is photographic and archival evidence that Jim Cannon was a delegate at the 1922 Congress of the Communist International.

∞- This is a tricky esoteric point that was probably confusing Draper: whether the 1922 Bridgman Convention was a “Unity” convention or not. There was, in fact, every effort made in the run-up for this to have been the event marking the reunification of the regular unified CPA with the Central Caucus-CPA Opposition. Only a minority of the latter joined in time to participate in the election of convention delegates, however, and for all intents and purposes unity was actually brokered *after* Bridgman, in September 1922. The convention was marked by a deep split that gave it every semblance of a fractious Unity Convention, however — the split between dissident “Geese” and “Independents” over the role of the underground party. The Goose Caucus actually won a hard-fought victory at Bridgman over the sitting CEC, which resulted in the replacement of Lovestone by Jakira as Executive Secretary. Thereafter, the “Independents” poured their efforts into the “legal political party,” the Workers Party of America headed by C.E. Ruthenberg, an organization which ultimately dwarfed and supplanted the underground apparatus which ostensibly controlled it.

#- Jacob Hartmann was the non-factional chairman of the 1921 Woodstock Unity Convention.

∂- Lovestone was elected Secretary by the CEC of the unified CPA on Feb. 22, 1922 and continued to serve in that role until the Bridgman Convention of August 1922. During June and July 1922, Lovestone was in Europe on a party mission and the role of head of the party was fulfilled by Bedacht himself, who was elected as “Assistant Secretary” for just that purpose at the CEC meeting of May 29, 1922. Ruthenberg was released from Sing Sing on \$5,000 bail pending appeal on April 24, 1924.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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