
Letter to C.E. Ruthenberg in New York from I.E. Ferguson in Chicago, April 11, 1920

Document in the Jay Lovestone Papers, Hoover Institution, Box 195, folder 10.

Sunday, April 11, 1920.

Dear C.E.:—

I have just heard over the telephone about the summons to New York of 3 of our local men. On Friday night I sat in at the committee meeting (as employee of national organization was made ex-officio member without vote) and I sat through a discussion as to whether F. ["Fisher" = Leonid Belsky] should give up his Western trip on account of your intimation that he had better not leave the city.† I said 2 or 3 times that I could not see how the committee could decide the question until they knew exactly why you asked him to stay in Chicago. Nevertheless, with only a few really determined upon settling the question arbitrarily, the vote was that F. [Belsky] should proceed on his organization trip regardless of any call to New York.

Saturday morning [April 10, 1920] I received your letter; at noon I was with F. [Belsky], and at that time he received your letter to him and statement to be read to Council. All of this, so far as Raphael [Alex Bittelman] coming here was concerned, rather justified the committee vote that F. [Belsky] should go on his trip, since he was to be back for the next meeting (Friday) [April 16, 1920]. Now F. [Belsky] asks me for advice as to this morning's call to New York. He can make part of the trip, returning Tuesday [April 13,

1920], then night train to New York. He asks me to communicate with the other 2 men, which can be done tomorrow, and this will be attended to. But a conference is to be held Tuesday — there cannot be a regular meeting — as to whether they shall go.

Frankly, C.E., I am stumped. What is it exactly which makes you feel that it is of any importance to placate those 4 ridiculous people [the CEC majority] who could never possibly be anything but barriers to Communist organization in this country?‡ Do you not first make an assumption that these persons stand in some important relation to the members; in other words, that the CEC is still really the same body that it was in October 1919? I cannot fathom your patience. You think that I have lacked perseverance, but I am convinced that my staying on the CEC 4 months beyond the time when I was absolutely convinced of the folly of my position as a member of this body was rank stupidity and inertia. It was always the illusion that next time something different might happen, and always next time was just a little worse. Now it is preposterous — I mean these persons as the "leading body" of a fighting organization in the class struggle. Have we not, you and I, yielded already far too much to an empty standard of party regularity — when there is neither party nor regularity to take into account?

Tell me, C.E., why should one dollar have gone out of Chicago to New York since January 1st?§ You

†- Apparently a reference to a meeting of the insurgent Chicago District Executive Committee, which was at odds with the majority of the Central Executive Committee of the CPA, located in New York.

‡- The "4 ridiculous people" to whom Ferguson is referring would seem to be CEC members Max Cohen, Charles Dirba, Alex Bittelman, and the as-yet unidentified "Leopold Brown." The full body consisted of 7, including Ruthenberg, Ferguson, and their factional ally, Jay Lovestone.

§- CPA headquarters moved from Chicago to New York on about Jan. 1, 1920. This fact was not insignificant in the Chicago v. New York aspect of the 1920 split of the Ruthenberg group, which has been overly generalized in the literature as a reflection of fundamental differences in attitude towards merger with the rival Communist Labor Party. The split was rather more complex.

know mighty well that the money went to you, as the personalization of a national organization, not to the CEC. Why should these 3 men now go to New York, spend \$300 and their time, to be scolded by the majority of the [Executive] Council? What good can come of it? *What is the use of trying to keep peace in the family?* Don't you think these people need to be ousted? Don't you want to function under different auspices?

Your patience is causing you to take lots of abuse which your logic cannot really defend, if you will face the truth. You have been an active propagandist and party for a dozen years. Where is there anything in your past experience to warrant your present desire to placate these Russian-Jewish politicians? You certainly have not fallen for their 4-flush of Bolshevism; in that respect you never were as much entrapped as I was. You certainly cannot be under an illusion that these people will help pull together the pieces of the smashed CP.

C.E., the CP was mostly a fake organization, that is the rock-bottom truth. Very few of its members knew what it was about at all. It was not the outcome of agitation about Socialism, not the outcome of education, not the outcome of class fighting in the US. These things it was only in slight degree. Essentially the CP was a hip-hip-hurrah society for celebration of good news from Russia. Now there was nothing wicked about this, nor was it useless, even though it served so much the purposes of Russian-Jewish Federation politics. But it was not the building of a Communist organization in the US. *That is yet — approximately 100% — yet to be done.* The dead CP was a nucleus for the building of a Communist Party, that is why you and I stuck to it. And even in my behalf, knowing my early disillusionment and disappointment, you will give me credit for plenty of tenacity. But have you not gone beyond patience to a tired acceptance of a lot of expensive nonsense and mischief as inevitable? Well, it isn't inevitable. One of the most insidiously destructive things to be charged against Hourwich and Stoklitsky is the creation of an ideology that this sort of thing is inevitable and useful. They have transposed factional controversy based on conflicting philosophies

in the SP to factional controversy as necessary and beneficial in itself. Tell our very good friend J. [Jay Lovestone], when you talk this over with him, which I hope you will, that I point to him as one who has surrendered to all this sort of "bunk" as the quintessence of party development. But I think he is just about ready for a cold bandage around his head for the jag of the small stuff of small men which has worried him and endangered him this past year.

Where do you get it, C.E., out of your experience as a propagandist? Didn't you achieve immeasurably more as Secretary of Local Cleveland [Local Cuyahoga County] in any 6 months than you have been able to accomplish as Secretary of the CP? And is this all a matter of accident and external circumstances? I guess not. Cleveland had more persecution during your secretaryship than the CP has had altogether, if one gets down to real personal risks. We are all living off that [1919] May Day celebration in Cleveland more than upon the sum total of the whole Communist performance ever since.

I have had the patience never before to suggest to you that I think you should act or should have acted more decisively at any point of these CEC bickerings. But now I am intruding my judgment against your own. I have had the advantage of home relaxation, in spite of any work, for enough days to feel a healthfulness of mind which I have not felt since last November. I haven't a speck of animosity toward anybody. I haven't the least desire to take part in the party controversies ever again, especially since circumstances have given me the special allocation of lawyer in our cases and this keeps me in service to the general movement without participation in the internal party squabbles. On the whole I feel rather more warmly toward the IWW as an organization than I do to the CP. So that from every aspect my opinion is aloof and impersonal. And I am firmly convinced that you are doing yourself a great injustice without really furthering a Communist movement by sticking to the CEC — the dead "leading body" of a dead organization.

What was this old CP membership? Mostly Slavs, thousands roused to momentary enthusiasm by the

†- On May 1, 1919, a peaceful march of thousands of Socialists in Cleveland flying red flags was set upon by mounted police and vehicles. Vigilante violence was unleashed, with fighting in the streets and the mob destruction of Socialist Party headquarters in Cleveland. One protester died in the melee. C.E. Ruthenberg, a speaker at the demonstration in the central square, was arrested for his role in organizing the procession and charged with criminal culpability in the killing. He was later acquitted.

eloquence of a Stoklitsky, and most of them having only the aim of rejoining their families on the other side. Some of them really want to fight on the Red battle lines, some of them have grasped the cardinal idea of the class struggle, some of them are the most intelligent among tens of thousands of workers in this country. All of them might have been usable in building a party, given fair weather and no tests of Communist understanding. But very few of them can stand by themselves; they are not the makings of a conspiratorial organization where the intelligence of each unit is so important. Most of them are out, to stay out. Some of them, under other oratorical inspiration, may yet carry guns against the revolutionary proletariat, so superficial is their promptings, but this refers only to some out of the new Stoklitsky membership of 1919, not to the Slavic groups as they have existed in the SP and come over to the CP.

The Federation members have never paid much attention to the CEC of the party, except to shell out money in a vague sort of way. The CEC means nothing to them now. Outside the Federations there is hardly anything left of the CP. Now what is there in this situation for you to save?

Unity just about to be achieved with the CLP? Another hollow pretense, the National Committee of the CLP. It is too late; this "leading body" is dead though unburied. What kind of convention would it be which these two committees would somehow get together? For whom would it speak?

The time has come to get down to modest realities. There are a few thousand members ready in the US for a Communist Party, perhaps 10,000 in the whole country, though this is likely too big a figure. There is the IWW, of real significance to a Communist movement in the US. I would only count the Federations in so far as they contain individuals who want to belong to a party, not to a social club of their own language — say about 10% of the Federation membership.

Here [in Chicago] is a district organization with a real membership of about 2,000, with a strategic advantage of central location, with strategic advantage of holding center of stage by virtue of the Chicago trials, and with geographic advantage of aloofness from New York. It is no great matter for you to unite with this district all the virile groups outside, treating New

York as a pesthouse for the time being. Why monkey with Central Committees, CP or CLP? Funds can be returned, so far as not spent or contracted, to the respective districts in proportion to contribution since first of year. There is no national organization now; that is irrefutably stated by your own proposal to deal individually with the districts, which you certainly can do successfully, proving that *you* are the national organization.

Why not wire these Chicago men to stay at home and tend to their knitting, not even pause to tell the defunct CEC to go to hell, ditto as to CLP committee; let the Chicago Committee call itself the Organization Committee of the new party, rid of all inheritances, joining with itself representatives of other districts as rapidly as you and F. [Belsky] can reach them? Call a convention, start a real propaganda organization? No Federations, except that there shall be foreign language locals whose special duty it shall be to handle propaganda in their own language; and the National Office shall provide foreign language propaganda and shall have clerks to correspond in all languages. Rid of unintelligible manifestos which have been a curse to us; a new slat upon which to write out American Communism, dynamic, understandable, keenly desirous of permeating the labor movement of this country; an organization of education for millions of workers, by serious consideration of literature preparation and distribution according to reading capacity of actual workers, with special intensive study for our own members, definitely organized by best talent available. An organization which is free from old debts of either party, except as inherent in work to be taken over; an organization which will be rid at one stroke of all the politics of Left Wing and Communists of the past year. An organization which can have some sort of open camouflage — which does not bury itself alive — but which protects itself thoroughly in its initial plans of organization. A party without pretense of universality and self-completeness, but which does a few things well. A party which thinks and talks a native language, a language of the melting pot, that is, an "Americanism" of all elements which live and work here, guided by the international experience and affiliations of all workers.

Now where is your patience with the CEC leading? Isn't it all a blind alley? Can't you see that there is

no road upon which you can go together with the 4 or even 6 others of the Council? And the rest of the CEC?

You have become the pivot of this whole situation. You must act, which means a kicking overboard of all this old rubbishy nonsense and irritation; or you do not act, which means simply a postponement of the day of reckoning. Now it is comparatively simple. The party is gone; the new party comes to life. What is lost by the death of the old party? A nightmare. What is missed in the starting of the new party? A bunch of members who have been the deadweight of the old party, a handful of pesky politicians. Absolutely nothing else.

Do you think I — or you — would remain in the CP today, with all we know of it, were it not for the governmental assault which alone gives significance to the CP? Well, you and I will have to take our full share of this assault anyhow, in Chicago and New York (perhaps?), so we are not running away from anything. Meanwhile don't we want to use our months of liberty to get something started that looks like a persistent propaganda organization? This cannot be achieved through the combination of two dead organizations,

both infested with the poison of self-seeking "leadership." A convention such as is now arranged will be nothing but a rehash of all this old intriguing, another Left Wing Conference and another Chicago Convention performance. There isn't the least doubt about it. I would not consider it worthwhile, in furtherance of Communism, even to attend such a convention.

At last, C.E., I urge you to act — against the crazy thing which assumes to spend the money and dissipate the energies of the Communist organization of this country, our crazy CEC. We have made our mistakes, but that is a good reason for not persisting in these mistakes; it is not a reason for tired acquiescence in a hopeless course. Let us see what we can do in 6 months of work in a non-Federation party which yields itself, in the very call for its inauguration, to a realistic coming to grips with actual problems in this country?

Earnestly,

Ed.

[Isaac Edward Ferguson].

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