
Letter to Sen Katayama from Charles Dirba, Sept. 6-9, 1921.†

A document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 128, ll. 29-31.

Copy of letter from D. [Dirba].

Note [*by Sen Katayama*]: Hearing through a trusted comrade in NY that [Dirba] has resigned his position we thought it best to call him so I wrote to the said Comrade to inquire whether he is willing to come to us‡ or not. The following is his answer and he kindly reported to us the present party situation in the most frank and candid manner. We are very thankful to him for his report, because we shall never know the real situation without his report! The letter follows:

Sept. 6, 1921.

Yavki [Sen Katayama] & Co.

Dear Comrades:—

In reply to your inquiry I am sorry to say that your apprehensions as to the crisis in our company [party] are quite correct; in fact, that the crisis is much greater than you can have imagined upon the basis of the meager information you have received. The things which have brought us to the sorry state of affairs are

so many and diverse that it would be impossible for me to mention all of them in this letter, but I'll try to give you very briefly the main facts contributing to it.

First of all, as to my resignation. Upon an inquiry from District 2 [New York] I drew up and submitted to [the party press] the following statement of my reasons. They refused to give out this statement, and they censured me for sending out to DOs [District Organizers] and Federation Secretaries practically the same statement just before the official notice was sent out as to the new Executive Secretary [Will Weinstein].

“Statement of Reasons for My Resignation.”

There are two main reasons for my resignation as the Execsec:

(1) I found it impossible to act as the official spokesman and executive officer of the [Central Executive Committee] now that it has a well defined majority with which I disagree on important tactical questions.

(2) As a protest against certain acts of the [CEC] on the Federated Press, National Language Confer-

†- This document contains several parts: a cover note by Sen Katayama to the Executive Committee of the Communist International, to whom the document was sent; a brief note from Dirba to Katayama dated Sept. 6, 1921; a postscript by Dirba to Katayama of Sept. 9, 1921; and the meat of the document, an extensive “Statement of Reasons for My Resignation” which was originally authored by Dirba on August 9, 1921, and sent to District Organizers of the unified CPA. In the original document, Dirba used abbreviations and blank spaces to provide a bit of ambiguity if a copy of the document should fall into the hands of the Department of Justice. These slightly obscured references are editorially “expanded” here.

‡- Reference is to the “American Agency” consisting of Sen Katayama (non-factional representative), Louis Fraina (ex-old CPA), and Karlis Jansons [“Scott”] (ex-UCP) — a group designated by the Comintern to help resolve factional conflicts and to achieve unity between the old CPA and the UCP, among other tasks. A unity agreement between these two organizations was brokered at a “Unity Convention” held May 15-28 at Woodstock, NY. The unified organization proved short-lived when the 5-5 deadlock on the governing Central Executive Committee was broken. Former members of the old CPA and member of the Russian Federation J. Wilenkin began voting with the former UCP members of the CEC as a bloc. This prompted the events which Dirba describes here.

ences, Federation Executive Committees and Organizers, and the removal of DO2 Henry [New York District Organizer George Ashkenudzie].

When the [CEC] passed the plans and methods for legal activities, I stood with the minority of four, who were opposed to the creation of a national legal organization of a political character, the constitution and composition of the Party very doubtful, if not impossible. The minority of the [CEC] never denied, however, the necessity of engaging in legal activities and creating a legal machinery for that purpose. Latest developments indicate that what the majority wanted as not a “ways and means” for carrying on [legal activities], but “a legal political expression” of the Party. Many other decisions of the [CEC] (in making up a list of speakers, on Party press, etc.) indicate a readiness to put quantity and volume in our propaganda above quality and content, a policy which appears wrong to me.

The division of the [CEC] into a well defined and quite consistent majority and minority has been a fact ever since its first definite formation on the question of legal activities.

In the last meeting of the [CEC] (this was written on August 9) this majority proceeded to assert itself in such a manner that it became impossible for me to continue to act for it as the Execsec.

Without apparent reason or necessity the election provisions were changed and rechanged for the Jewish and Russian National Conferences, and a motion was passed, six to three (one being absent), to appoint five former UCP comrades to the Executive Committees of the Jewish, Lettish [Latvian], and Russian Federations. Then I presented my resignation, the action on which was postponed to the next meeting of the [CEC]. Then two votes [Kornfeder and Weinstein] on the motion were changed from “yes” to “present.” (Later the absent member [Ballam] voted “no,” and the motion...lost.)

A little later in the meeting† a motion was passed to instruct the Federation ECs to submit lists of their organizers to the [CEC] for approval, no organizers to be officially recognized until so approved; the last clause officially cutting off at once all connections between the Federation ECs and their branches until their organizers are approved by the [CEC]. Both motions, this and the preceding one in reference to the Jewish, Lettish [Latvian], and Russian ECs were directly contrary to the liquidation provisions adopted at the Unity Convention.

Further, a motion was passed which, though apparently of a general nature and application, had one and only one specific result, that of removing DO2 Henry [Ashkenudzie], who had incurred the dislike of the majority, but whom, for one reason or another, they did not want to remove openly and directly.‡

At this point I demanded immediate acceptance of my resignation, and the motion to accept my resignation was put and carried.

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The Russian editor [J. Wilenkin] was the man who went over completely to the former [United Communist Party], formed with them the present majority, and is now pushing this majority from one extreme to the other against the Federations and against the other side (former [Communist Party] side).

Marshall [Max Bedacht] has come back and brought instructions on legal activity organization, upon the basis of which it has been decided to change the legal activity organization [American Labor Alliance for Trade with Soviet Russia] into LPP [a Legal Political Party] (a full fledged [party] parallel to our present). We consider this decision absolutely untimely, and we claim that the [CEC] has no authority to make such a decision, that it would be necessary to call and emergency convention to decide upon such a radical

†- This actually took place on the next day, the fourth day of the CEC plenum, July 28, 1921.

‡- George Ashkenudzie served a dual role as member of the Central Executive Committee and District Organizer for the New York district of the party. A motion by J. Wilenkin “that no CEC member shall act in the capacity of a District Organizer” was passed by the CEC by a 6-4 vote — an action which drew the ire of Dirba and his co-thinkers, who perceived it as a factional attempt by the former members of the UCP to take control of this most important party district. Upon losing this vote, Dirba demanded that his resignation be immediately accepted. The CEC majority group of 6, now with the addition of the Lithuanian Federationist “Ray”/“Riley,” who soon became a 7th member of the bloc, then elected Ludwig Katterfeld as the new Executive Secretary of the unified CPA. [Comintern Archive f. 515, op. 1, d. 51, ll. 38-40.]

departure from our policies determined at Unity Convention.

We made a motion to call an emergency convention, but it was defeated.

We recognize that the Comintern stands for legal activities on the broadest possible scale, but we maintain that it cannot have given direct and specific instructions as to the time and conditions and form in which they should be carried out (that would be contrary to the established general policies of Comintern), and we maintain that the time and conditions are not favorable (in fact, that they make it impossible) to carry on the policies of the Comintern in the form and according to the plans proposed by the [CEC]. Comintern has emphasized that all legal activity must be based upon a strong understructure [illegal party], and must be completely controlled by it. And our understructure [illegal party], at the present moment is certainly absolutely unprepared and not in a condition for a [Legal Political Party]. The reorganization has not yet been completed. The [CEC] itself has brought about great disorganization instead: (1) through a real “crushing policy,” (2) through federation baiting and manipulations, and (3) through financial mismanagement.

Talking of “crushing policy,” the worst that was charged against the former opposition is now practiced without reserve by the present [CEC] majority. They removed DO1 [Boston District Organizer A.S. Edwards], DO2 [New York District Organizer George Ashkenudzie], and DO4 [Cleveland District Organizer pseudonym “Anders”] (all former CP comrades), and so also SDO2 in D2 [New Jersey Subdistrict Organizer pseudonym “Lidock”], and practically SDO1 in D5 [Chicago city Subdistrict Organizer pseudonym “A. Johnson”], SDO4 in D2 [Upstate New York Subdistrict Organizer pseudonym “Rittap”], SDO5 in D4 [Pittsburgh Subdistrict Organizer pseudonym “Shevtsov”], SDO3&4 in D5 [Milwaukee and Minneapolis Subdistrict Organizers pseudonyms “Rice” and “Linde,” respectively], the latter by creating new districts and putting their men in as DOs.† The minority member of the [CEC] have been prohibited

from participation in any local committees (in order to remove them from contact with the membership). In federation elections the opposition elements are not merely “crushed” by open direct decisions of the [CEC], but they are prevented from participation in the conferences through gross manipulations of their elections.

The majority of the [CEC] is against federations. In consequence: their [Executive Committees] were cut off from their branches until their organizers should be approved by the [CEC], and when the Russian Federation handed in their list for approval, it was turned over to an investigation committee, and they have not been approved yet. Lithuanian editor was removed, and the [CEC] recommended a certain comrade instead; they put in their man as assistant Russian editor (without constitutional authority for it); they ordered the Jewish Federation to use a certain name for their paper; election provisions for the Jewish and Russian Federations were changed and rechanged according to requests from former UCP members on their arrangements committee; for the Jewish Federation they were changes so that the representation to the District Conference should be directly from groups instead of from branches, but for the Russian Federation from combined sections instead of branches. In D11 [Pittsburgh] the combination was worked to the utmost to defeat the majority of members, but when this was not sufficient, the DO arbitrarily gave one section one more delegate to the District Conference than they were entitled, and took one off from a section that was entitled to it — in the first place they counted in members who had gone to Russia, who had gone to other districts, and even one member who had been expelled (even then they were one member short); in the other he refused to give three separate section election meetings one delegate each on the ground that the total membership of the Subdistrict was one member short of the number necessary for three delegates from the Subdistrict (although representation was from sections to district, not from subdistrict to district). Due to these manipulations 16 delegates walked out of the Russian National Conference, leaving 14 who pro-

†- By the action of the Central Executive Committee Upstate New York was made into “District 10,” with Morris Kushinsky named District Organizer; Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania were made into “District 11,” with pseudonym “James Curley” as DO; Minneapolis and sections of Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Michigan were made into “District 12,” with pseudonym “W.H. Ward” as DO.

ceeded to act for the whole membership. And the [CEC] sanctions these manipulations.

Financially we are bankrupt, we have not even enough funds for the current salaries. Instead of curtailing expenses, new districts were created. Well, not exactly “instead,” because some curtailing was done, but still there are too many people on the payroll. The majority seems to believe in gaining support through “patronage.” And there is no prospect for an early improvement, because the [CEC] has killed confidence and enthusiasm in the membership.

The Party, indeed, is in grave crisis, and I believe that only an emergency convention can bring us out of it. But the [CEC] defeated the motion for an emergency convention and it is almost impossible for the membership to get it from below.

I don't know the position of S. [“Scott,” pseudonym of Karlis Jansons of the American Agency]. He does not have anything to say about them anyway. I wonder whether or not the whole [American] Agency could do anything in the situation; I wish you could.

Fraternally yours,

(signed) [Charles Dirba]

P.S. Yesterday (Sept. 8 [1921]) they suspended 19 Russian comrades (delegates and fraternal delegates) for leaving the Russian Conference in protest against manipulations.

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[*End note by Sen Katayama:*] I wrote him thanking his kind answer and valuable information he gave and said as to the situation in the USA we can not do anything. Y [“Yavki” = Katayama]

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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