
Address to the Convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers, Wednesday, May 3, 1922.†

by C.E. Ruthenberg

A document in the Comntern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 146, ll. 95-98.

Comrades:—

I am glad to be able to add to what your president has said in regard to my outside appearance, that the inside is as good as the outside; that the spirit with which I fight in the working class movement has not been affected by the experience I have been through even as the outside has not been affected.‡

In opening this address I cannot help but add to what Comrade Lowe has said in her appeal for political prisoners. While the man in prison may not be broken physically, while they may keep up their spirit and not be broken so far as the workers' struggle is concerned, they are suffering for the cause of the whole working class and the entire working class should unite in a class demand for their release.

Within the last two years in the United States, we have gone through a period of crisis in the workers' struggle as great as any that the working class has faced in this country. During the war period, when the capitalists needed the labor of the workers to fight their war, some concessions were made to the workers. There was some gain in wages, some gains for the unions in building up their organizations, but these concessions which the capitalists were obliged to make during the war period were made with gnashing of teeth and with

the determination that as soon as the opportunity presented itself, the gains would be taken from the workers. This opportunity came with the close of the period of prosperity about a year and a half after the signing of the Armistice, when industry in this country slowed down in response to the breakdown of the financial structure of the capitalist system in Europe and the closing of the European market. When millions of unemployed were thrown upon the streets, the capitalists found their opportunity to begin a drive against organized labor. You know the history of the last year and half as well as I do. You know that wages have been slashed everywhere, that hours of work have been increased, that there has been an organized drive to destroy the unions, the fighting organizations of the workers. You know, too, that this drive against the working class, this capitalist offensive, has been in part successful. Wages have been reduced, hours of labor have been increased, and the unions have been weakened.

The success which the capitalists have gained in their offensive to make worse the working conditions of the workers has been due to the fact that the workers have gone into the struggle disunited. Each section of the working class which has been attacked has fought

†- C.E. Ruthenberg, formerly Executive Secretary of the unified Communist Party of America, was charged with being a member of the National Left Wing Council, publisher of the newspaper *The Revolutionary Age* in 1919. For this "offense" he was tried along with I.E. Ferguson for violation of the New York "Criminal Anarchy Law." The two were convicted and sentenced to five years in prison on October 29, 1920. Rather than being freed on bail pending appeal, the two were sent straight to the state penitentiary by the judge presiding at trial. On April 17, 1922, came a ruling by Judge Cardoza of the NY Court of Appeals ruling that there was "reasonable doubt whether the statute has been properly construed" in the case of the two and opening up the possibility of bail pending final resolution of the appeal. On Monday, April 24, 1922, both Ruthenberg and Ferguson were released on \$5,000 bond each. Their convictions were ultimately reversed in April 1922. This speech by Ruthenberg to the convention of the ILGWU was made a mere 10 days after his release from Sing Sing Prison.

‡-ILGWU President Schlesinger had introduced Ruthenberg saying that he had "expected to see a skeleton, but he looks very well indeed."

alone and been beaten in this struggle because fighting alone. In place of the whole organization of workers in the United States fighting together, supporting each other at every point and winning their struggle, each union has met the brunt of the attack separately and has been weakened and lost ground as a consequence.

What are we going to do to stop this capitalist aggression? Are we going to continue to fight separately — disunited, weak — because of our failure to show solidarity in this struggle? Or are we going to unite the forces of the working class to meet and beat this capitalist offensive?

I wish to say to you here that I speak to you as a Communist, as one who follows the leadership of the Communist International. There has been a great deal said in this convention in regard to the left element, they have been called “disruptionists” — “wreckers” of the unions — and all the attacks upon them have been such as to give the impression that they were working to destroy rather than to strengthen and build up your organization. The left element in this convention so far as it is guided by the program of the Workers Party and of the Communist International has an entirely different purpose. This left element does not come to you with fraternal greetings.† The left element of the Workers Party is in your unions, part of your unions, fighting with the very members of your unions. They are to be at the place of the greatest danger to assume the greatest burdens, out in the forefront of every fight that your organization enters and to fight for those things which your organization decides to fight for in the immediate benefit of the work-

ers. They have a program — but it is not a program of disruption. Their purpose is to build a stronger organization of the workers in your industry. To strengthen your present organization, to make it part of the greater organization of the industrial unions of the Needle Trades, which will embrace all the workers of the industry. A union which will fit itself for the time when the workers will take over and administer industry. Their purpose is to make this industrial union of the needle trades part of a great militant unified organization covering the entire country, fighting together for the workers in their struggle. Their purpose is to make this great industrial organization of this country part of the great international organization of the workers which will fight together on the international field.

The men and women of the left in this convention are those who are most earnest and most ready to make sacrifices for your cause. Their program is constructive, not destructive. They come to you with the program of the United Front in your industry — the United Front on the national field and the United Front on the international. With that program your organization will go forward, the working class can win their struggles, both nationally and internationally.

The left element calls for that development of the working class movement in this country which will build up a powerful organization not only to win the struggles of the present, but to win the struggle against the capitalists and to bring the time when the workers will control and administer industry.

†- Executive Secretary Otto Branstetter of the Socialist Party of America had expressed such fraternal greetings to the convention immediately prior to Ruthenberg’s address.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.
Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2005. • Free reproduction permitted.