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# The Martens Affair:

## Report of CEC Representative Gurin to the 5th Regular Convention of the Federation of Russian Branches, Communist Party of America: Detroit, MI — Aug. 22, 1919.

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The speaker began with an exposition of conditions which were responsible for the fact that only Martens and not anybody else was appointed Ambassador of Soviet Russia. He pointed out that at the end of last year [1918] a bureau was organized in New York so as to establish connections with Russia. The members of this bureau were [Alexander] Trachtenberg, [Santeri] Nuorteva, Lomonosov, Dubrevsky, [Gregory] Weinstein, Blankstein, [Ludwig] Martens, and sometimes [Nicholas] Hourwich was also invited. At one of the meetings of the bureau at which Com. Hourwich was also present, a certain comrade just arrived from Russia was delivering an address. Every means possible was used to force this comrade to admit that the Soviet government had commissioned one of the men present at that meeting to act as its local representative. But this comrade insisted that the Russian comrades commissioned him to announce to comrades in America that every organization working in favor of Soviet Russia may consider itself as its local representative.

In spite of this a resolution was drawn up demanding of the Soviet government that it appoint Weinstein as its local representative. A letter to this effect was written and sent to Russia.

The Central [Executive] Committee [of the RF], having learned of Weinstein's unworthy procedure,

who as an editor of *Novyi Mir* had tried to use his position for personal benefit, presented him with the following ultimatum: Within 2 weeks, Weinstein must either sever his relations with the bureau or leave *Novyi Mir*.

When the 2 week period had expired, Weinstein came to a meeting of the Central Committee and informed us that a communication had been received from Russia — that Comrade Martens was appointed the local representative of Soviet Russia. We must suppose that comrades in Russia have not forgotten the recent past during which Weinstein was the town crier for the "Ingerman Combination" in *Novyi Mir*; and the "Ingermans" have pushed Weinstein's candidacy against Bukharin, the candidate of the Left Wing. On this basis the Soviet government rejected Weinstein's candidacy. Com. Martens, however, had many friends and followers in Russia and was therefore appointed.

The Central Committee decided to arrange a special meeting to which Martens was invited. All members of the Central Committee declared that Martens is the most suitable person that could have been appointed to this post. Being a steady and well educated man, he appeals to the petty bourgeois intellectuals, and staying away from party clashes, Com. Martens never made any enemies in party circles. On the strength of this, his candidacy is most suitable.

Disagreements started over the question of controlling Martens' work. Russia, on account of her being torn away and isolated, can not control Martens.† In order to communicate with Russia, couriers must be used, which takes months to accomplish. The Central Committee supposed that intelligent workers through their centralized committees should control Martens. This sort of control develops the hope that others can do the work which has fallen to the lot of the workers. This sort of control is necessary also for the following reasons: on account of insufficient education which the workers possess, high government positions are held by the intelligentsia, the shifters from other classes of the community. These elements in a critical moment are liable to make mistakes. Workers' control will save them from such a step, the consequences of which will again have to be suffered by the workers.

Com. Martens agreed with the Central Committee that this sort of control is necessary. But he declared the Soviet government at the same time had also appointed a committee which would control him. Com. Martens, referring to instructions from Russia, refused to mention the names of the members of this committee. No matter who these members were, the same complaint could have been brought against them. The Central Committee finds that workers' control does not mean that this control is in the hands of people who are accountable to nobody, but in the hands of people who are accountable before their organizations. The Central Committee favored the necessity of control over Martens by local revolutionary socialist organizations. In Russia, Bolshevik organizations determine the plan of conducting the government by Peoples' Commissariats at periodic conventions of the Soviets of Workers', Peasants', and Red Guard Deputies. The program and tactics of the local Bolshevik organizations are the same as the program of the Russian Bol-

sheviki — on what grounds then should the American Bolsheviks be denied this?

Comrade Martens, relying on his instructions, refused to hand control over to the local Bolshevik organizations. At the same time he began to arouse all the Federations against the Russians, pointing out that the Russian Federation aimed to deny all the others of the right to take part in control over them. In order to put an end to these intrigues, the Central Committee took upon itself the initiative of calling a conference of all the Russian Federations.‡ This conference was attended by the following delegates: Russian — 4 delegates; Polish — 2; Estonian — 1; New York Left Wing [presumably English] — 1. Martens was also present.

At this conference, after a detailed discussion, the position of the Central Committee was approved of. Resolutions proposed by Martens did not receive a single vote.

At the meeting the following agreement was worked out with Comrade Martens. Martens agreed not to take any important steps without a preliminary consultation with this committee. In the future Martens would not appear at any public meetings. He would discharge any employee if the committee would recommend to him a more suitable one.

Martens, however, did not keep his word. Without a preliminary consultation with this committee he decided to call a technical [aid] convention and his aid Weinstein immediately announced it in the *Novyi Mir*.

In spite of the promise which he gave us, he agreed to appear at meetings of the Right Wing [of the Socialist Party] in Brooklyn and Chicago. When the committee came to him protesting, Martens at first was willing to concede. But having learned that [Ludwig] Lore, the editor of the German *Volkszeitung*, intended to address the same meeting, Martens absolutely refused to keep his promise not to appear at

†- This is presumably based on the Russian word *kontrol'*, which connotes supervision and inspection and ratification rather than active direction. Although the Russian *kontrol'* and the English "control" are cognates, there is a significant difference in meaning, particularly in the context in which the word is used here.

‡- The reader should be aware of two organizations bearing similar names: (1) The *Russian Federation* proper, that is the Federation of Russian Branches of the Socialist [later Communist] Party of America — which consisted of Russian language speakers, although including a substantial, perhaps even majority, complement of ethnic Jews and Ukrainians; and (2) The *Russian Federations*, being the alliance of language groups which were former nationalities of the old Russian Empire — consisting of the Russian Federation in the first place, but including also the Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Polish, and Latvian Federations. Neither the Yiddish Language "Jewish Federation" nor the Finnish Federation seem to have been participants in this All-Russian umbrella group, even though their members likewise hailed in full or in part from the old Russian empire.

meetings. When the committee advised him that it would complain to the Federation, Martens chased the committee out of his office. Thus the committee representing 35,000 organized workers, upholding Bolshevik principles, was chased by the Bolshevik Ambassador out of the Bolshevik mission!

From the very beginning Martens' activity was not free from mistakes. Around the Soviet mission there nestles everything that was impartial in the Russian colony. [Julius] Hammer, Weinstein, and Finkelberg were the advisors and even the controllers. Hammer was recently tried and is out under \$5,000 bail for having killed a woman after causing a miscarriage. As for Weinstein, the ex-follower of Ingermans. I have already mentioned Finkelberg would have been all right had the possession of power not turned his head. Finkelberg, in conjunction with Hourwich, 2 months prior to this had written a letter to Russia to the effect that the local Russian Federation should have control over the local representative, and now he throws mud at those who are in favor of control.

For every office Martens has appointed either a Right Wing Socialist or an impartial person. You will find there an anti-Bolshevist Nuorteva, Lomonosov, and Mensheviki — old man [Isaac] Hourwich, who sheds tears at the thought of the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly, and the well known [Morris] Hillquit.

We are not against the inviting of bourgeois experts to these jobs. But at the very moment when any blind man could see that any day there might be a break in the Socialist Party, filling vacancies in the local Soviet mission by Right Wing Socialists would mean that the sympathy of the Soviet Bureau was with the Right Wing Socialists in their struggle with the Left. Just think! The representatives of Revolutionary Socialism in the US supports the Right Socialists in their struggle with the Revolutionary Socialists! On these grounds we have fought against Martens appearing on the same platform with [Adolph] Germer, [Seymour] Stedman, and [Louis] Waldman. You will note that when Martens went to Chicago to attend the meeting of the National [Executive] Committee of the Socialist Party, this NEC had already thrown the 1st New York Branch out of the Party. That was a shame.

In order to smooth things out with the committee, Martens appealed to the Executive Committee of the New York Left Wing. But both the Executive Committee and the City Committee approved of the position taken by the [RF] Central Committee. They went further: they informed Martens that if he went to the Chicago meeting, all the employees of Martens who are Left Wingers would be compelled either to leave Martens or sever relations with the Left Wing. And still Martens went to Chicago.

A second conference of representatives of Russian Federations and the Left Wing was called. It had the same representation as at the first conference. This conference worked out the following ultimatum, which was presented to Martens:

1. Martens was to discharge all employees who are members of the Right Wing of the Socialist Party.
2. Employees who are not Socialists are not to appear at public meetings.
3. Martens is not to speak at any meeting.
4. Organization of a technical convention should be entrusted to the Russian Federations.
5. In the case of Martens agreeing to these demands, the conference will appoint a committee to which Martens will have to refer with every important issue.

Martens agreed to grant the first two demands and the rest he rejected. The 3rd conference, however, decided to select a committee to confer with Martens. At this time Martens at a meeting of 6 branches of New York publicly announced that owing to changed conditions he was ready to give up control, but only to the Left Wing.† At that time the Left Wing was in the process of organization. Everything was not running smoothly and Martens thought that he would be able to come to an understanding sooner with the Left Wing.

At the meeting of the Central Committees of all Russian Federations held on June 20 [1919], it was decided to recall their delegates as it was clear that Martens did not wish to work with the Russian Federations.

What did we do in order to establish connections with Russia? We have sent a letter to Russia through Martens in which we presented all the facts.

†- That is, the Anglophonic-oriented Left Wing Section of Local New York, Socialist Party.

Recently we sent a special man there.† We could not do any more.

To summarize, I will say that the absence of organizational control has resulted in Martens, through his activity, bringing a great deal of harm to the local revolutionary movement. His appointments and public addresses have added strength to the shaky organism of the Right Socialists. Now Martens tries to destroy our Federation. I do not know whether Pravda is supported by Martens or not, but the fact that Martens tolerates in his employ persons who publish Pravda with the idea of bringing disorganization to our midst and breaking up our Federation, is sufficient to prove how sincere Martens is when he declares that he came here so as to work with our Federation hand in hand.‡

A general discussion of the question of control over Martens followed the conclusion of the report.

43 orators spoke.

The speeches of all the orators, with the exception of the representative of the 1st Chicago Branch, lead to the following:

1. Control and account are the fundamental principles of the communist program, the best example of which is the Communist Party of Russia, which directly controls all the executive organs of authority.

2. The request of control over Comrade Martens, which has been set out by the Russian Federations, is absolutely right, because the workmen who compose these federations here are an undivided part of the proletariat in Russia, and they are therefore right in demanding the execution of the lawful right of workmen to control their representative.

3. Control in this case is indispensable in order to assist Comrade Martens in solving the problems before him without making too many mistakes. Control is also necessary so that the activity of Comrade Martens may be harmonized with the work of the revo-

lutionary organizations here, the aim of which is the creation of a strong revolutionary movement in the United States, which, to quote Comrade Lenin, will be the best help to the work of Soviet Russia.

4. The invitation of bourgeois experts to work in the bureau of Comrade Martens confirms all the more the factual necessity of the strict control of the local revolutionary movement over its activity.

5. The activity of Comrade Martens until the present time has proven that the lack of proper control resulted in the making of mistakes, which are unpardonable for a representative of Revolutionary Russia.

Many orators pointed out that many of the mistakes were made by Comrade Martens under the influence of some disorganizational Menshevik elements who occupy responsible positions in the Soviet Bureau.

All delegates called upon Comrade Martens to satisfy the demands of the Russian Federations and to begin joint revolutionary work. The speeches of many of the orators who insisted upon control were met by loud applause.

After the debates the concluding word was given to Comrade Martens. A proposal not to limit his time was accepted.

Comrade Martens in his reply continued to state that he could not fulfill the demands of control over his activity for the same reasons as those for which he refused the Central Executive Committee of the Federation. His opinion was that he as a representative of Soviet Russia had a right to present any demands to the Federation and the Federation must execute them.

“I cannot satisfy your demand for control and I beg you to renounce it; that would give us a possibility to work jointly and fruitfully.”

The next speaker was Comrade Gurin.§

“There is nothing left for me to say properly.

†- John Anderson, née Kristap Beika, a member of the Latvian Federation who would later come to a unity understanding with Communist Labor Party representative to Moscow John Reed and who would try and fail to smuggle gemstones to America for the financing of the CPA.

‡- No listing is included for Pravda in the 3 volume standard edited by Dirk Hoerder, *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s-1970s: An Annotated Bibliography* (Greenwood Press: 1987). *Pravda* was published in New York and is associated with the names of Gregory Weinstein and Abram Jakira, both employees of Martens' Russian Soviet Government Bureau. Later in 1919 *Pravda* became the official organ of the Russian Federation of the Communist Labor Party. It seems likely to have survived into 1920 as an underground publication; no copies are known to have survived.

§- The Russian procedural system was for a report to be delivered, extended debate to follow, and then finally for the reporter to reply to the debate before ultimate action was taken by the body. (Compare and contrast to Anglo-American parliamentary procedure,

The fact that all who came out on this question spoke of the necessity for control proves that we have taken the right position.

“Comrade Martens accuses us that we have not notified the Federation of the frictions which took place between us. But, Comrade Martens, did you not drive us out of your office because we stated to you that we would bring everything to the knowledge of the Federation?”

“When we worked out an appeal to the Federations and sent it out to the Central Committees of the other Federations for approval, because we desired that all Federations come out unanimously on this question, a copy of this appeal found its way to you in some way. Did you not, Mr. Martens, state that for such appeals our names would be put on the blacklist of Russia?”†

(Comrade Martens: “I have not said it, but I am ready to second the motion.”)

“Very well. Then why fall on us when all the time, referring to a conspiracy, you closed your mouth? You went further. When a committee was chosen at the conference, and we insisted that this committee should render accounts to regularly assembled similar conferences, you threatened that this <garbled: was a conspiracy?> and you would refuse completely to consult with the committee. You did not even trust the representatives of the Central Executive Committee, let alone private members.

“Mr. Martens threw me out from the office of the Soviet mission. But seeing the animation which reigns here, listening to the words of the orators, who one after another got up after me and said they cannot

understand how a representative of a worker-peasant government cannot be under the control of a revolutionary workers’ organization, I am rewarded. At times I was in doubt as to whether or not I was a counter-revolutionist, as Mr. Martens and his <garbled> asserts. You, comrades, have dispersed my doubts, and for that I am ready not only to be thrown down the stairs, but to be thrown out the window.”

After conclusion of the debate the following resolution is put to a vote (by Comrade Onocki):

Taking into consideration:

(1) The distance and isolation of Russia from the United States and the impossibility of regular connections with her;

(2) That the Russian Government of Peoples’ Commissars itself receives its instructions from periodically convened assemblies of the All-Russian workmen, peasants, and Red Army deputies, in which the line of conduct is determined by the Communist Party (Bolsheviks);

(3) That the local revolutionary Communist organizations in their program and tactics do not differ from the Russian Communists (Bolsheviks);

(4) That in his activity the local representative of the Russian Soviet government committed many mistakes, which harmed the local revolutionary movement.

Taking all this into consideration, the 5th Convention of the Federation of Russian Branches of the Communist Party of America, after listening to the reports of Comrade Martens and the Central Committee of the Russian Socialist Federation, after a detailed deliberation on this question, comes to the conclusion that all the activities of Comrade Martens as a local representative of the Russian worker-peasant government, as well as the activity of the Bureau and its clerks, must be under the complete control of the local Bolshevik (Communist) organizations, who are given effect by the central organs of these organizations.

A vote is taken with the following results: Names follow of 127 delegates who voted for; 8 against; and 15 who abstained.

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in which debate would be abruptly terminated by motion and vote from the floor, followed by immediate action on the pending motion.) Martens was allowed the “last word” in the debate, but his words were followed by the formal reply of the reporter, CEC member Gurin, as would have been expected.

†- Use of the appellation “Mr.” among party comrades was a great insult, indicating that one person thought the other to be bourgeois and a non-socialist — veritable fighting words. Even bitter factional opponents did not use this term.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.*

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