
Impressions of the Convention.

by “R. Newman”

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The following article, reprinted from the official Jewish organ of the United Centrist Party in answer to Y.F.’s [I.E. Ferguson’s] article, “A Convention of Revolutionists,” is highly important as shedding more light on the vicious Centrist character and tendencies of the leaders of the UCP, and the lack of communist understanding among the great majority of the delegates at the so-called “unity convention.”

It is no surprise to find that Damon [C.E. Ruthenberg], Caxton [Ferguson], Fisher [Belsky] & Co., of the former “minority” of the Communist Party, and the leaders of the CLP, Brown [Max Bedacht], Klein [L.E. Katterfeld], Dubner [Abraham Jakira] & Co., framed a program and constitution which completely evaded the fundamental question — how are the workers to assume power and establish the proletarian dictatorship? The Communist Party had already branded and exposed those leaders and Centrist whose chief object was to split the Communist Party and effect a mechanical amalgamation between the splitting-off faction, the CLP, and the “left elements” of the SP, and force this heterogeneous mixture back to the Left Wingism of 1919.

The reader need merely refer to the statements issued by Damon [Ruthenberg], Caxton [Ferguson], Fisher [Belsky] & Co. in the recent split to verify the truth of this.

Nor is it surprising to learn that “naturally the authors of this program, Comrades Damon [Ruthenberg], Caxton [Ferguson], Fisher [Belsky], were also its chief defenders.” This was very evident from the tone of the articles which Damon [Ruthenberg] and Caxton [Ferguson], editor and associate editor respectively of the national official organ of the UCP pub-

lished in the convention number of their paper.

The following article also explains why these two political adventurers attempted to evade any discussion of fundamental principles and tactics in their paper since the convention. The first issue contained an article “Away with Controversy.” The second issue contained an editorial “Shall We Argue with Liars?”

Both articles were cowardly attempts to run away from any discussion which would compel them to express their real position on fundamental questions. The first article seemed more like the lamentations of one haunted by unpleasant memories, trying to drive them out of his mind. The second attempted to evade discussion by taking a dishonest advantage of a typographical error which in no way affected the tenor of the argument made by the present writer in criticizing the “unity convention” as reported by Damon [Ruthenberg] and Caxton [Ferguson]. Had Damon [Ruthenberg] printed what immediately followed the quotation in question, instead of the typographical error itself, he would have immediately exposed his false accusation.

We cite these two instances as further proof of the studied attitude of evasion which the chief theoreticians of the UCP have adopted as their policy, in order to continue humbugging their own membership. It is also interesting to note that Fisher [Belsky], the former notorious Chicago organizer and lieutenant of Damon [Ruthenberg] in the recent split, also helped to frame and support this Menshevik program. This was the one man whom Damon [Ruthenberg] used to point to with pride as the “greatest Bolshevik of them all.” As for the Chicago delegates (most of them former members of the Chicago District Com-

mittee who staged the abortive "revolt" in the Communist Party), only two out of the seven could be counted among the left delegates, the other five were on the "right" or vacillating. A more sweeping vindication of the position of the Communist Party before, during, and after the split, could not come from the testimony of one who sided against us during the split.

Moreover, the following article, aside from the laughable "close-up" it gives of the Centrist leaders in

action and scrambling for jobs, is mainly interesting for the reason that it proves the impossibility of effecting real organic unity between the Communist Party and the UCP in this country so long as the latter organization is dominated and controlled by vicious and unprincipled Centrists of the sort of Damon [Ruthenberg], Caxton [Ferguson], Fisher [Belsky], Meyer [Alfred Wagenknecht] & Co. —*Editor's note* [by Maximilian Cohen].

There appeared in the English issue of the Communist an article by Y.F. [Ferguson] in which the writer gives his impressions of the convention. These impressions are one-sided, exhibiting everything from one angle only, and therefore we found it necessary to throw light on these occurrences, to present all the facts in their true order, even if it is to a certain extent far from pleasant, because we believe that "the bitter truth is far better than the sweet untruth." This is not being done to hamper the work. On the contrary, it is done with the purpose of correcting our errors and to avoid such mistakes as have been committed to the past.

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It seems that God is with the Communists, as the weather was splendid during all the sessions of the convention. From time to time the sky grew cloudy, but it never rained. The place of the convention † was very suitable for such an undertaking, and everything was arranged beforehand in the best manner. Delegates were present representing every part of the United States, in spite of all obstacles and the persecution of government agents. We succeeded in holding a convention of a United Communist Party with all the features of a convention, even with caucuses, but without "political machines".... Nevertheless there operated at times the shadow of "machines," but they could not function, evidently out of order.... The assertion of Y.F. [Ferguson] that among the names of the delegates are not found any known in 1919 is somewhat

exaggerated.‡ Many of the delegates were well known to the membership of our party as valuable workers in the movement.

In reality two conventions met on the first day: a convention of the Communist Party, in which participated 32 delegates, and a convention of the CLP, represented by 25 delegates and one fraternal delegate; in all 58 delegates. If to this sum be added the representative of the Third International [Samuel Agursky] — the total reaches 59. The two conventions opened in different places, not far apart. Occasionally a delegate of the CLP would pay us a visit to see whether we were ready for the fusion.

It was already noticeable during the first session that the convention of the Communist Party was not a unified body, but was composed of different elements, who differed not only in tactics, but also in fundamental questions of principle. It was easy to foresee that it would be difficult to present "a solid front" against the CLP. This became the more evident when the program and constitution submitted by the "Unity Committee" was read. This program was prepared by a committee composed of three members of the CP (Damon [Ruthenberg], Caxton [Ferguson], and Fisher [Belsky]) and three of the CLP (Brown [Max Bedacht], Klein [Ludwig Katterfeld], and Dubner [Abraham Jakira]). It was read before both conventions as a basis of unity and it called forth great dissatisfaction among several Eastern delegates and a few Western, because of its (the program's) weakness and its failure to express a definite revolutionary attitude, especially in

†- The Wolfskeel Resort, about 1 mile outside of Bridgman, Michigan, on the sandy shore of Lake Michigan.

‡- Ferguson was trying to be clever; his comment was a sly jab at the ineffectual nature of the Department of Justice's persecution, which had been countered by Communists using pseudonyms — thus causing the "old" Communist names to disappear from the record.

regard to mass action.

The parts of the program dealing with mass action did not mention a word about armed insurrection as the only method for the conquest of political power by the working class. It dealt only with the general strike, which is transformed into a general political strike. But it did not state the manner in which political power can be seized.

It is remarkable that those who always criticized the old program of the Communist Party, which said so much about mass action without defining it, have copied the very same program, in particular the part about mass action, and thought that they would easily get away with it. Naturally the authors of this program, comrades Damon [Ruthenberg], Caxton [Ferguson], and Fisher [Belsky], were also its chief defenders. Ford [Israel Amter], a New York comrade, reads another program, which is more revolutionary and contains a clear definition of mass action. But the trouble was that in other respects it was far from satisfactory. Taken as a whole, it is not a document, but only a weak attempt on the part of a young author, who knew what he wanted but could not enunciate it on paper in a systematic way. On the other hand the program of the "Unity Committee" was well written, but lacked "one insignificant detail" — the revolutionary thought. Heated debates began. A few Eastern delegates are speaking in favor of the "New York Program" — that is, the program brought in by the New York delegate [Amter]. They are demanding that this program should be taken as a basis. They are speaking with heat and vigor. Besides the author of the program (NY), also a delegate from Philadelphia, a delegate from Baltimore, and another one from New York are defending this program. Comrade Newman [=??] takes the honor and criticizes that part of the program ("Unity Committee") where it speaks about mass action, touches the New York program and speaks about the good and bad sides. He points out that the New York program touches very important questions, which must have a place in our program, as for example, the agrarian question, the "American Legion" as a counterrevolutionary power, the role that the church plays in the struggle against Communism, etc. He proposes that the program of the "Unity Committee" shall be taken as a basis on the condition that the part of the program dealing with mass action shall be changed in

the spirit of the New York program and all other above mentioned points shall be included in this program. At last the authors submit and promise to revise the program. It was late in the evening when this session ended. Some delegates were still discussing the question of mass action with a few delegates of the CLP convention, who came to our convention to tell us that their convention accepted the program of the "Unity Committee" as a basis. The accumulated energy of the delegates sought an outlet.

The first session of the United Communist Party began with disputes about elections for the various committees. The left element of the convention demanded that the program should be taken up first, and the elections afterwards. Their motives were as follows:

"That we came to a Communist convention in order to formulate a real Communist program and therefore it is the most important point, which ought to be immediately attended to, as the union through committees is only of secondary importance; that a complete union can not take place unless we stand on the same ground in regard to principles; that we cannot find a common ground before formulating a program; that the delegates of the CLP are entirely unknown to us and in order to vote intelligently we must discuss the program first, if only to get acquainted with the viewpoints of the delegates." These were in general the arguments of the left delegates, who, however, were numerically weak. It is not superfluous to mention that there were in all only five delegates who, discussing the various problems on the floor of the convention, have influenced it to the left. Among them were two delegates from New York, one from Philadelphia, one from Baltimore, and one from Chicago. These five delegates obtained the cooperation of five others, who although participating but little in the debates, have nevertheless helped to move the convention to the left. This is mentioned here in order to throw some light on the subsequent events.

After a prolonged discussion the resolution to proceed with the elections was adopted. The ten delegates refused to vote and began to retire in order to hold a caucus. That had an effect on the convention. Comrade Klein [Katterfeld] (CLP) moved that the elections be suspended and that a discussion of the program be taken up. The motion passed. As so the "left"

delegates celebrated their first victory. The program was read and discussed, every word being carefully weighed. In this manner two hours were consumed in debating about one word, whether capitalism collapsed because it cannot "produce" the necessities of life or because it cannot "provide" the necessary means of existence. It seemed as if party distinction disappeared, all trying to exhibit their accomplishments in political economy.

A storm began. The part of the program about the "seizure of state power" was read. This part that should indicate the means and ways through which the proletariat can seize political power, [the program] does not mention a word. It avoids even mentioning the words mass action. It is in general very weak and colorless, endeavoring to dismiss it all with a few phrases about the class struggle.

The first to speak is Comrade Newman [=???]. He points out all defects and that the program is even inferior to the previous program of the CP. "The other," says he, "at least speaks about mass action, even though it failed to define what mass action is. And we try not even to mention the word. You give us a whole chapter about the conquest of political power and you don't tell us how, through what ways and means it can be accomplished. You avoid the words 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' 'mass action,' and 'armed insurrection.' You must either throw the whole thing out or else talk in clear language."

The convention is thrown into an uproar. Tens of hands are stretched towards the chairman — all want to speak. Various opinions are expressed. The debate is prolonged until 1 a.m. Against this part of the program speak also the comrades Delion [Hendin], Zlank [=???], Ford [Amter], and Parker [=???] of the Communist Party and Comrade Brown [Bedacht] of the CLP. The comrades Delion [Hendin] and Zlank [=???] speak heatedly. It is evident that for them everything depends on the outcome of the discussion, that it is a case of "to be or not to be," to be a Communist Party or a party of phrases. They demand that this paragraph must speak of dictatorship and an armed insurrection. For this paragraph in its original form speak many delegates.

The most noteworthy speech is made by a comrade of the CLP, who says that "the left' delegates don't know what they want. They demand that the words

'dictatorship of the proletariat' and 'armed insurrection' shall be openly repeated several times. I am against it. For me the word 'dictatorship' is repulsive. It is only because it is a necessary evil that we include it in our program. Therefore let it remain under the paragraph about dictatorship. But why repeatedly mention it?"

It is noteworthy that the so-called "left" delegation of the Chicago district [of the CPA] was not what it pretended to be. Of the seven delegates only two were left. The rest were either of the right, or they vacillated so much that it was a strain on one's eyes merely to watch them. The session is adjourned, leaving dissatisfaction in the hearts of the left delegates. They immediately summoned a caucus of left delegates, to which only those are invited who are reliable and balanced in question of principle.

They debate the question: what is to be done? They decide not to compromise. Several delegates express the opinion that the "morning is wiser than the evening" and that tomorrow all will be well. The leaders of the Communist Party are smarting under the pain of defeat. They thought that all are already united into one party and they could, therefore, afford to slightly disregard vital principles and here they met with such opposition. They come to us in order to make a compromise. The "left" delegates are disappointed, especially so about the Chicago organizer, Comrade Fisher [Belsky], who has suddenly as if by some miracle found himself among the "vacillating."

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The morning proved to be wiser than the preceding evening and that was because our "leaders," the authors of the program, became wiser over night. The left delegates passed everything they wanted. The committee brings the paragraph in revised form. It is designated now "the nature of the state," and the paragraph about mass action speaks explicitly about armed insurrection as the only means for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is a great victory for the ten left delegates, who have led the convention toward the right road. It is to them that the Communist movement of America is indebted for the clearly expressed revolutionary program.

An interesting debate occurred about the question of participating in political elections. The pro-

gram speaks about participating in elections for legislative bodies only, such as Congress, City Councils, and State Legislatures. Here appeared conflicting opinions. Several delegates took a stand condemning parliamentary action altogether. Brown [Bedacht] of the CLP argued against participation in parliamentary actions. He was supported by several from the Communist Party. Other delegates demanded that the elections shall not be limited for legislative bodies only, but shall include executive offices as well, such as President, Governor, and Mayor. Both sides attempted to prove their points of view.

The opponents of executive elections argued that the election of Communists as Governor, Mayor, and Sheriff will corrupt them and will be detrimental to the movement; that we have no right to take upon ourselves the responsibility for the bourgeois state; that a Communist as mayor would have to carry out the orders of the City Council, in which will be the representatives of capitalist parties; that he will either have to disregard his Communism or else for even one day; that our participation in elections is only for propaganda purposes and he will have no opportunity to keep his job; that were our representatives even to enter Congress it would be only for purposes of obstruction, in order to destroy the parliament as their slogan there would be: "Down with parliaments. Long live the Soviets and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." These were the arguments of those who opposed executive elections. The defenders of executive elections, Raphaeloff [=??] (CLP) and Caxton [Ferguson] (CP) were not left behind in arguments. It was understood by both sides that we would not participate in elections this year. And as everything must come to an end, so these debates were also ended. Not because the delegates grew tired of it, no, they could have argued *ad infinitum*, but some wise fellow made a motion to put the question to a vote and it passed. We felt relieved. And, when the vote was taken, the anti-parliamentarians and supporters of executive elections were defeated.

The question of Industrial Unionism called forth a great deal of dissention. This was a question that divided even the "left wing" of the convention, which was its directing influence in matters of principle. The left delegates from the East [e.g. Amter] were firmly opposed to any relations with the IWW. Their argu-

ment was that we can coordinate our activity only with such organizations which recognized the dictatorship of the proletariat, mass action, and stand on the same ground of principles as ourselves. The Chicago left delegation favored coordinating our activity with that of the IWW. These differences, however, pertained not to matters of principle, but only tactics. It was a very long debate. Two-thirds of the delegates were of the opinion that we can enter into relations with the IWW, because it is the only movement of American workers which is of a potentially revolutionary character. Comrade Dawson [James P. Cannon] expressed his opinion very forcefully. He argued that the AFL must be considered from the standpoint of the local unions and not as the official Gompers organization; that the IWW is not the only organization which advocates Industrial Unionism; that what we need is the creation of a new General Industrial Union, which would include all the others in "One Big Union." After long debates this was also terminated. The original form was adopted with a few improvements. "A stronger IWW must be created, etc." was stricken out. Further, [with regard to] the part reading "A Communist who belongs to the AFL because of the absolute necessity of a job shall utilize every opportunity to express his opposition to this organization, not to reform it, but to destroy it" — here the words were stricken out "because of the absolute necessity of a job."

The question of a name for the party called forth a brief debate. The delegates of the CP decided at their first session to insist on the original name of their party. They carried out this decision and voted for the name "Communist Party." On the other hand the delegates of the CLP demanded that the new party shall be known as "The United Communist Party." The vote resulted in 30 for the Communist Party. Uproar followed. Comrade Flynn [Lindgren] speaks heatedly. He threatens not to work in the organization of branches. He does not want to work for the "majority" of the former CP; he does not want to be responsible for their doings, their literature and pamphlets. He asks how it would be possible to tell the difference between a paper of the "majority" and our paper. It must be admitted that [these] arguments were sound and — after a second vote it was decided to name the new party "The United Communist Party."

A small "surprise" was sprung at this unity con-

vention. While the CLP opposed Federations last year and the CP favored them, at this convention the reverse was the case — the CP against Federations and the CLP for them. The reason of such a change lies in the fact that several branches which were expelled from the CP and joined the CLP carried there the spirit of the Federations, as fiery defenders of the Federations stepped forward. A few delegates from Russian Branches, who were expelled from the Russian Federation, ...were eager to show what they could do in such organizations. Two plans of organization were presented because the "Unity Committee" [Ruthenberg, Ferguson, Belsky; Bedacht, Katterfeld, and Jakira] could not agree to one plan. And we, therefore, had two currents. [One] current was for modified Federations and it was supported by the delegates Raphailoff [=??] and Dubner [Jakira] (CLP); a second current was for a complete abolition of Federations as a hindrance to a properly centralized party, and it was strongly defended by the delegates Newman [=??], Delion [Hendin], Zlank [=??], Ford [Amter], and Damon [Ruthenberg]. The result is already known to our comrades — the Federations were abolished.

Were it not for the election of party officials, the convention would have remained in the memory of many delegates, especially those of the "left," as a model convention, without any binding caucuses, only the usual, and without machines. But that would be expecting too much. Well, when it came to the "jobs" there started caucuses, big and small. The caucuses of the CP delegates were not binding.

As the CEC had to exist of nine members, the "leaders" of the CP expected to elect five of their number and four would represent the CLP. Five delegates for the CEC were nominated, but during the nomination of alternates there arose a dispute. Comrade Newman asked wherein consisted the difference between electing five from the CP or five from the CLP. He asked, "Why should we be so interested in electing five delegates instead of four? What will it matter, who has one member more, we or the former CLP? We are now one party. Are there then differences and divisions left according to parties? When we left delegates began our struggle about the question of mass

action, we have found supporters among the CLP. On the other hand there stood members of the CP in opposition to us. In many other questions the same thing happened."

"The left elements of the CP and of the CLP have joined forces. Why should we be interested in electing a comrade who does not agree with us on fundamental questions of principle? The left comrades of the CLP are a great deal nearer to us than some of our own delegates. We have not now two parties, but only one."

The last words strongly appealed to Comrade Damon's [Ruthenberg's] emotions and he vigorously applauded. He also expressed the thought that it is one party and advised the comrades to use their own judgment when voting.

The delegates of the CLP were also caucusing a great deal. They also decided to nominate five delegates. And when the election took place, the result indicated that the caucus of the CP was no caucus at all — five of the CLP and four of the CP were elected. Comrade Brown [Bedacht] of the CLP was elected as International Secretary with 30 votes as against Caxton [Ferguson] with 23.† The defeat was due to the fact that one of the CP nominees was not a fit person, and as several nominees of the CLP appeared to be better fit for the office, they succeeded in swinging some CP delegates.

Damon [Ruthenberg] immediately resigned and after him Scott [=??] and Reinhart [=??]. It must be noted here that the delegates of the CLP behaved with tact and honesty. [In contrast], several delegates from the CP talked about a split. And all on account of the jobs, as no questions of principle were involved. The delegates separated. Once more separate caucuses. The "leaders" seemed to prefer to split the movement rather than to allow such a CEC. The delegates of the CLP were very obstinate. They argued that it was not their fault that delegates of the CP have voted for them. It was up to the left delegates to show once more that the movement was dear to them and that they will not permit a split after so much wasted time and energy. They were disappointed with the leaders of the party, with their conduct. They were indignant about Damon [Ruthenberg], who used his position to force his

†- In other words, members of the CP "left" caucus defied party lines and either supported CLP candidates or did not vote.

demands on the convention. The party is dearer to them [the left caucus] than such trifles and they moved that the CP caucus be binding. Nominations were resumed. The evening passed and the morning following. A CEC of ten members is now under consideration. The delegates of the CLP are still caucusing. A group of delegates from the CP went over to the caucus of the CLP singing the International. That was effective. The other went to meet them. They greeted each other warmly and in this manner a split was avoided. The elections went off quickly. As International Secretary was Caxton [Ferguson] elected instead of Brown [Bedacht]. † Damon [Ruthenberg] and Meyer [Wagenknecht] remain International Delegates; Scott [=???] is an alternate for Damon [Ruthenberg] and Berry [=???] for Meyer [Wagenknecht]. The CEC consists of Damon [Ruthenberg], Scott [=???], Reinhart [=???], Delion [Hendin], Caxton [Ferguson]; Brown [Bedacht], Dawson [Cannon], Klein [Katterfeld], Flynn [Lindgren], and Meyer [Wagenknecht]. The alternates are Zamlin [=“Zemlin”=S.M. Krunislav] (CP), Dubner [Jakira] (CLP), Stone [=???] (CP), Jones [Edgar Owens] (CLP), Kerger [=“Korker”=???] (CP), Hill [=???] (CLP), Ford [Amter] (CP), Molkalb

[=???] (CLP), Kazbeck [Schwartz] (CP), Layon [=“Logan”=???] (CLP).

And so everything is well that ends well. Nevertheless, it is difficult to forget the only stain on the unity convention. Perhaps we shall forget in the future, if our leaders will mend their ways and will be willing to repress their individual whims. And still we had one of the finest conventions that ever took place. The convention as a whole was enthusiastic, a whole world of enthusiasm, a whole world of self-sacrifice and idealism.

I sit in the train. Opposite to me sits an American delegate. I recollect how he attacked the left delegates on the question of mass action. I asked him what he thinks in general about the gathering. “We have a model of a program. A real definitely revolutionary program,” says he. I see in these words the influence of our delegates on the American [Anglophonic] comrades. I see that the latter are gradually developing a truly revolutionary spirit.

And all this during a period of one week!

It is to be regretted that we could not stay together a little longer!

†- That is, Ferguson won on a party-line ballot on a revote. According Ferguson’s own account (“A Convention of Revolutionists”) “The CLP offered to substitute Caxton [Ferguson] for Brown [Bedacht] as International Secretary.”

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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