
Report on CPA District #9 [Pacific Northwest]. [circa March 1923]

by "Ex-DO Gilbert"

A document in the Comntern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 187, ll. 68-70.

Introduction.

It is almost impossible for me to give a thorough outline of the affairs of a district as large in area, and with such a small and scattered membership as we possess there, particularly in view of the fact that I had merely 10 weeks' time to spend there; being totally unfamiliar with the territory or the membership prior to going there; having no means whereby I could go from place to place to investigate conditions at first hand; having practically no connections; and being in bad health upon my arrival, which was accentuated by the change of climate.

However, this report will possibly help to make more clear to our members of the CEC the status of our organization there; the prospects for the future; and may in some small way explain to them why it was impossible to accomplish more tangible results.

Nature of District.

Territorially speaking, it covers more square miles than any other, and at the same time has the smallest population. The total population of the district is somewhat over two millions. There are but four cities of considerable importance: Seattle (350,000 population); Tacoma (130,000 pop. and 45 miles from Seattle); Spokane (200,000 pop. and 400 miles from Seattle); Portland (225,000 pop. and 300 miles from Seattle and 400 miles from Spokane). Besides these there are possibly a dozen towns with populations varying from ten to thirty thousand.

Seattle and Tacoma form the central point from around which the labor movement of the district moves. Spokane is entirely isolated from the rest; the labor movement there is weak; we have next to no

contact with them; and there is a reactionary city administration which blocks all attempts by the radicals to do any real work.

Portland represents a section of the country by itself, having very little contact with Seattle. It is, in an indirect way, connected with the towns of Astoria [OR] and Aberdeen [WA], about 125 miles away.

Economically the situation is far from good in any of these places. Shipbuilding is at a complete standstill, thus affecting thousands, for this was one of the main industries of the coast cities. Shipping too has decreased largely, adding to the problem of unemployment, and causing large numbers of stevedores (who were militants) to seek employment elsewhere. (The dockmen's strike of this winter revealed to what an extent the employers were going in the use of coolie labor to supplant the white workers who were organized.)

Lumbering is still being carried on as extensively as ever, but the workers are in the small lumber camps or milling towns all winter. They come to the cities for a few months during the summer. Many are transitory workers. No attempt has ever been made to reach these workers by our party. The IWW ideology still clings to many of them.

Fishing is also important. Outside of the Finns, no attempt has ever been made to reach or organize them.

The metal trades are no longer important, most of the factories running part-time or with greatly reduced forces. (This does not apply to the Railroads as strongly as to the others, although even there, especially in Tacoma, which is a large center for RR shops, the forces have been reduced considerably.)

Mining (coal) is done in the state of Washington. The men there are organized and radical, but we

lack contact with them.

Little is being done in the Building Trades in any of these centers, for there is no growth anywhere.

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Portland has a fairly well organized labor movement (unions), but this is still entirely in the hands of conservatives. They conduct a "Labor College" at which English, Public Speaking, History, Psychology, Economics, Business Administration, History of the Labor Movement in the US, etc. are taught. The teachers are largely high school and college professors. Our comrades have been attempting to do some work within this Labor College, but to date little success has been achieved.

Although the Central Labor Council has upon one or two occasions taken progressive steps, still, on the whole it is bitter in its opposition to our members or to progressive or revolutionary ideas. (For example, consider their refusal to help with LDC [Labor Defense Council] meeting for Driscoll in November [1922].)

Many of the men who were formerly active in the unions or labor movement generally, and who were revolutionists, are now doing nothing.

In Tacoma the unions are quite progressive (although two or three of the very largest are extremely reactionary.) They publish a weekly paper that is favorable to our viewpoint, but this, unfortunately, is supported by but a fraction of the labor movement there and consequently doesn't have the influence it should have. Syndicalist ideology influences many of those who are supposed to be directly lined up with us.

Many of the very best fighters who made the labor movement of Seattle famous are now doing nothing. Others have become reactionary. Seattle is still fairly well organized, but not in comparison with former years. More than that, the old fighting spirit has gone — gone with the old leaders, and because of the cautious and vacillating policy of those who now run it.

The officialdom split on the FLP matter last year, although Duncan was FLP candidate for the Senate, the [Seattle] *Union Record* practically supported the Democratic candidate, as did Short, the President of

the Washington Federation of Labor.

Political and Economic History of District.

Prior to and during the World War the revolutionary movement was a considerably important factor here. The Socialist Party at the height of its power had about 5000 members in the state of Washington; about 2000 in Oregon. The IWW became a real power, and was the only movement that was able to organize the lumber workers and the longshoremen. They also made heavy inroads upon other lines of work. The AFL felt the Wobbly influence, and it too became far more aggressive than is the case now.

In one election the SP polled 17,000 votes in Washington alone; and thought we cannot gauge the strength of the movement there altogether on that, still it is an indication that the SP was to be reckoned with.

The formation of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council in Portland marked the high point of the movement there, and its sudden collapse paralyzed activities, and to this date no successful comeback has been launched.

The general strike in Seattle became the high water mark there.

The government policy in dealing with the IWW has broken their movement. The affairs at Everett and Centralia, together with stringent Criminal Syndicalist Laws, frightened many, driving them away from all radical activities.

The CP, since its illegality, has consisted of a few scattered groups with little or no influence among the radical workers of the states (except for the Finns; there may have been one or two exceptions in the English movement also). The only real work they have accomplished was that of developing the B [Friends of Soviet Russia], but even in the case of that, in Seattle for example, they have allowed others to predominate in many ways, the result being that few of the supporters of the B [FSR] will support the LPP [WPA] and are often quite hostile to it, though many of our comrades do the most work in the B [FSR] and keep it going.

The X [TUEL?] is doing good work, but it too has been fast passing out of control. The LPP has

picked up a few individuals here and there; but as yet cuts no figure there. This is due largely to the fact that no approach has been made to the many men who are revolutionists and who have a considerable influence in the labor movement, but who do not want to be controlled by men whom they look upon more or less as jokes. Then, too, the almost complete isolation of the Northwest from the rest of the movement has put our own comrades in a frame of mind where they do not know just what to do nor how to do it. Speakers or organizers from headquarters are as rare as hen's teeth; and what with the many new developments that have occurred in our movement during the past 12 or 15 months, it is not to be wondered at that they are bewildered.

The first convention of the LPP was held in a solitary farmhouse, several miles from any city, last July [1922]. While entirely legal, still by the fact that such an out-of-the-way place was picked, the D of J and state officials followed them, raided the convention. No one was arrested, but some papers were taken (#1) [*The Communist*?] as well as the names and addresses of all attending. The DO proceeded east at once. The others, in a panic, rushed back to their respective cities not knowing what to do. The ones left in charge of the District headquarters tore up, burned, or hid anything and everything they could lay their hands on — material that was legal as well as otherwise. They did not know what had been destroyed — and to this day that remains a mystery.

From then until November [1922] when I arrived the CP did not function (except in Portland to a limited extent). No news was received by them. No need to argue about liquidation there, for the CP as such had already dissolved. The LPP continued to hold its meetings after a fashion, with the ordinary routine business, and the few standbys attending. (This, it must be understood, applies to the English branches. The others, with the exception of the Finns, were in about the same condition.)

In Tacoma the comrades could hardly understand the need for the LPP at all. No attempt was ever made to get in a new member; they considered work in the unions as the one and only thing needed. In Seattle there were two members of the LPP who though

that *it* was an illegal party. The comrade who had been the first DO in the district, and who still considered himself the guardian of the party (and who, worst of all, was looked upon by outsiders as the leader of it) boasted of the fact that he had never read a book on Communism. He was a practical (!) man.†

The FLP had a capable man in charge there — [John C.] Kennedy — who was and is far more of a Communist than an FLPer and who worked along with us to a considerable extent, but who, like many others, could not bring themselves to line up in our party when individuals like the above-mentioned [Charles Greenhalgh] were considered its leaders; or when one had really explained to them at length the WHYS and WHEREFORES of our organization.

This, in brief, is a picture of the situation as I found it. The CP practically no more than a name; no one knowing who belonged and who did not; some wanting to cling to it like an old woman clings to religion out of pure faith but not knowing what it existed for, how it should function, etc.; others objecting to it or seeing in it a mere money collecting agency.

All papers and accounts for both organizations had largely disappeared. No account had been kept of receipts or expenditure for the three months previous [August-October 1922] and those for the time prior to that could be found only in part. The district had a headquarters that cost \$40 per month, but no attempt had been made to get outside organizations to meet in the hall so that the rent might be covered. The movement was not merely in a state of status quo, it was going backwards. The district as such was virtually nonexistent.

An Outline of the Work Done or Attempted.

Arriving in Portland first I made an exhaustive verbal report to the SDO and Foreign Language DOs on the convention decisions.‡ Also looked over territory as well as I could and discussed with them ways and means of carrying out our work more effectively. Then went to Seattle. After two or three days in making all connections finally managed to get together what had once comprised the resident members of the

†- Apparently a reference to Charles Greenhalgh, the first DO of the Workers Party of America for Washington and Oregon.

‡- Apparently a reference to the Second National Convention of the CPA, held in Bridgman, Michigan from August 17-22, 1922.

DC [District Committee] and reported to them in similar fashion. A like report was also made in Astoria.

I could get no information from the comrade who had been left in charge of the work as to who was who and what was what and, under the circumstances that I had to live at that time, it was no easy matter to pick up the threads. Furthermore, I was handicapped for want of funds from the day I reached there, having just \$4 on hand. It required literally weeks to straighten out matters in some sort of fashion in the district office and to wade through tons of rubbish of every description in trying to find necessary papers, receipts, etc., etc. There was no way of telling what monies had been received, what paid out, whether letters had or had not been answered.

All in all it meant building up the CP anew — and to do that demanded some knowledge of the individuals who made up the party as well as those who were communistic and active in the labor movement but not lined up in our party.

Little by little I became aware of these facts, and as I did so I determined that if the movement was to be rebuilt it demanded *personal* contact with those men and women who had an influence in the labor movement, who were revolutionary, but who had not come in with us, and who felt they couldn't while our local and district leaders consisted of an ex-newsboy, a petty lawyer, and a few others who had never amounted to anything.

Personally I am of the opinion that these comrades of ours are sincere and conscientious, and that in their own way they are doing the best they can for the movement, but in the eyes of these others they look small and ridiculous. Then, too, antagonism of former years have not been wiped away in their entirety. Consequently I determined upon the tactic of becoming personally acquainted with some of those who might be won over — and I launched into this without telling the others about it. To be sure, wonders cannot be accomplished in two months' time, especially when one is sick in body and in mind, and when financial worries are always at hand.

An organizational tour was planned for the district, but a few of the smaller branches wrote in that they could guarantee nothing to defray expenses — and with no money to start out on, it had to be aban-

doned.

I did go to Everett and to Tacoma and believe some good came from the meetings, at least insofar as giving the members we had an idea of the work that we are attempting to do and the tactics the Party is pursuing. The Labor Party policy, for example, while endorsed by some and opposed by others (especially Tacoma) was misunderstood by its supporters as well as its opponents.

A study class in the elements of Communism was also organized which I took charge of, but could not continue.

The fact that my letters to the NO [National Office] of the CP either went astray or were picked up prevented us from knowing what was being done in the East. To be sure, I could and possibly should have written more often, but I dislike to write when there is no favorable news to give. All I could do was show how completely disorganized the district was; how we must begin the work anew; how speakers and organizers were needed; and money for the DO if the work was to be done — and I realized that none of these things could be given at once, and so I tried to go on, as best I could, hoping that conditions would become better. Then at last, seeing that my health was rapidly failing, and not being able to lend [borrow] any more money from friends and comrades, not wanting to sink deeper and deeper into debt, I sent in my resignation (#1) [CPA] and then about 10 or 12 days afterwards that for the LPP [WPA]. I managed to get a few dollars so as to travel steerage to California and had bought my ticket and had all material ready to turn over to the former SDO and acting DO when I received Miller's [Ruthenberg's] letter.

Conclusion.

I am of the firm opinion that the district can in time be made one of the very best in the country, but to do so requires:

(1) Subdividing the district, letting Portland be the center for one part and Seattle for the other.

(2) Giving to each of these divisions a FIELD ORGANIZER. The whole district must be reorganized and rebuilt from bottom to top. These organizers must be furnished the wherewithal to exist and to travel from town to town. They must do PERSONAL propaganda,

visiting former rebels and militants (of whom there are many) and in this way build the nucleus for a new movement there.

(3) Speakers from other party of the country should be routed through there (and for that matter along the entire coast) every four or six weeks.

(4) The organizer who will succeed there must be an American type and one who has been in the unions and can talk from personal experience.

(5) A big attempt must be made to win over the elements that still cling to the One Big Union idea. The IWW cannot be ignored, nor should we merely attack it. Thousands who do not belong to the IWW but who support it because of its former militancy can and must be won over to our side.

(6) Educational courses must be given to our membership as to the need, purpose, and function of a political party of the workers.

(7) A systematic campaign must be made to win over those who went with the [Washington state] FLP.

(8) Special "western editions" of our LPP paper [*The Worker*] should be printed now and then.

(9) The NO [National Office] must be prepared to spend a considerable sum of money before it can reap any returns, and it must retain the closest relationship with the district.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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