
Letter from C.E. Ruthenberg in Chicago to Osip Piatnitsky in Moscow, November 19, 1923.

A document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 201, ll. 237-240.

November 19, 1923
#20

J. Pjatnitsky
Moscow, Russia

Dear Comrade:

During the last two weeks there have been developments in regard to our Party situation with which we wish to familiarize the Executive Committee of the CI as we consider these developments of the utmost importance in connection with the growth of the influence of our Party among the masses of the workers of this country.

The major policy of our Party in putting into practice the united front in the United States has been the campaign for a labor party. Thus far there have been two great developments in relation to this campaign. The first was at the Conference for Progressive Political Action held in December 1922 to which the Party sent delegates. These delegates were excluded; however, our fight in that conference made our Party for the first time a political factor in this country. The second development was the July 3rd convention in which the labor party first took organizational form through the formation of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party.

During the four months which have elapsed since the July 3rd convention there have been some differences of opinion inside of the Party in regard to the correctness of our policy at that conference with which you have been familiarized through the various documents and reports which have been sent to you. Recently, however, there has been a new development in the struggle for a labor party which we believe will

make it possible for the whole Party to again unite upon a common policy. In fact, as is shown by the minutes of the CEC which have been sent to you, there is practically unanimous agreement upon the thesis adopted at the meeting of the CEC.

The new development consisted of a proposal by the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota to call a national convention for next year for the purpose of uniting all the existing farmer-labor party organizations behind a presidential candidate and to adopt a common platform.

Comrade Foster learned that such a proposal was being discussed in Minnesota while there on a speaking trip during the latter part of October. The CEC of the Party immediately dispatched Comrade Ruthenberg to Minnesota to confer with the representatives of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. In a two days' conference it was finally agreed that a conference to which all the existing groups could be invited should be held on November 15th [1923] and that the Federated Farmer Labor Party would be invited to participate in this conference through its chairman and secretary. The question of direct participation of the Workers Party was raised during this conference and the Minnesota group expressed the fear that such direct participation would immediately label the movement as a Communist movement and thus make it impossible for us to secure the support of the wide masses of farmers and workers. After a considerable struggle over this question Comrade Ruthenberg agreed that if the Federated Farmer-Labor [Party] were represented through its secretary, Joe Manley, who is also a member of the Workers Party and known as such, our Party would not insist upon direct representation in the preliminary conference but that it would insist upon such representation in the national con-

vention call. Comrade Ruthenberg also proposed to the Minnesota group that they send an invitation to the Socialist Party to send a representative to participate in this conference. While organizationally the Socialist Party is bankrupt at the present time it still has a wide ideological influence, as is shown in the fact that it was able to poll 97,000 votes for its candidates in the state of New York in the recent election and it is the policy of our Party to draw the SP into this united front movement. Up to the present time, the SP has been in the Conference for Progressive Political Action controlled by reactionary labor leaders but has not participated in the farmer-labor movement as it manifests itself in the organization of such parties in the various states and cities.

After considerable objection, the Minnesota group agreed to the proposal and sent an invitation to Morris Hillquit to attend the conference.

The conference was held on November 15th and 16th with representatives present of practically every existing Farmer-Labor Party organization in the country. At this conference a struggle immediately developed between the old Farmer-Labor Party, represented by John Fitzpatrick, who is President of the Chicago Federation of Labor, and the representative of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party [Manley]. Fitzpatrick desired to exclude the Federated Farmer-Labor Party from the conference just as he tried to exclude the Workers Party from the July 3rd conference. However, our maneuvers in the conference resulted in the isolation of Fitzpatrick and the old Farmer-Labor Party and all the other delegates agreed upon a call for a national convention to nominate a candidate for President and Vice President and establish a national program, which will be held in St. Paul May 30, 1924. The call for the convention will provide for representation of all producers, political and economic organizations of labor, and the farmers.

The call for the convention will be signed by the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party which because it has been able to elect Magnus Johnson and Henry Shipstead to the United States Senate enjoys a widespread prestige in the United States, but the call will contain a petition signed by all the groups participating in the movement, including the Federated Farmer-Labor Party, requesting the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party to issue this call.

It is significant that of the groups represented in the St. Paul conference the representatives of three of the large State Farmer-Labor organizations were either members of the Workers Party or supporters of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party who were under the influence and accepted the policies laid down by our Party. This fact shows what is generally admitted by those who know the facts about the farmer-labor movement in the United States, that the Workers Party today has won the unchallenged leadership of this movement.

There is a second development which is related to the call for the new convention which is equally significant.

During recent elections of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, of which Sidney Hillman is the President, we made common cause with the administration of the union and an armistice was arranged in the fight between the right and left and a common slate of candidates supported by both groups [agreed upon] including the administration of the union. We did not, however, sacrifice our right to criticize [or] give up our program in the organization. Similar elections are to be held in the city of Chicago and a committee of the Party met with Sidney Hillman for the purpose of agreeing upon a slate of candidates for the city of Chicago.

This conference developed into a broader agreement than the arrangement in regard to the ACW. As you are no doubt aware, we have been in a bitter struggle inside the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, which is expelling the members of the TUEL. In the conference with Hillman, an agreement was reached that he would endeavor to arrange a conference between Comrade Foster and the President of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union for the purpose of establishing an armistice in the ILGWU. We induced Hillman to assume this role by suggesting that if he were successful in bringing about an agreement he would become the natural leader of the whole needle trades organization and would be in a strong position when the amalgamation of the ACW and the ILGWU, which seems a possibility in the not too distant future, is brought about. Also it was made very plain in the conference with Hillman that if the present struggle in the ILGWU continues, there is a great danger of the destruction of the organization.

The agreement in reference to the ILGWU, however, is a part of a program which was agreed to in the conference with Hillman, who is greatly enthused about the prospects of the formation of a Labor Party as a result of the Minnesota Conference and the convention to be called as a result of that conference.

The ACW, the ILGWU, and the SP are all still part of the Conference for Progressive Political Action, which is to hold a national convention in February. The plan as agreed upon in the conference with Hillman is to secure the support of the ILGWU and the SP for the May 30th convention and that the group formed by the ACW, the ILGWU, and the SP will make a fight to swing the Conference for Progressive Political Action, in which some two million workers are represented, to support of the May 30th convention. Should it be impossible to win a majority away from the Johnston-Stone group which controls this Conference for Progressive Political Action, which was committed to non-partisan political action and will support McAdoo for President on the Democratic ticket, the left wing of the conference under the leadership of Hillman will split away and join with the May 30th convention.

Comrade Ruthenberg while in New York recently [Nov. 8, 1923] conferred with Morris Hillquit, who is the leader of the Socialist Party, on this subject and while there was no commitment there is a possibility of securing the support of the SP for this movement.

The leaders of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party desire to nominate Robert LaFollette as a candidate for President of the Farmer-Labor Party organization to be formed at the May 30th convention. Our Party has stated on this question that while we do not favor LaFollette as the candidate of the Farmer-Labor Party ticket that if he is nominated we will not withdraw but will support him in the campaign.

The proposal to nominate LaFollette will indicate to you that the Farmer-Labor Party movement as it will be represented in the May 30th convention will not be purely a movement of the exploited farmers

and the industrial workers but will have a large element of well-to-do farmers, small businessmen and professional groups, in other words the petty bourgeois element, in the convention. From our thesis on the subject of the labor party policy you will note that we are clearly distinguishing between a farmer-labor party representing the exploited farmers and industrial workers and a third party which may call itself a Farmer-Labor Party but which will include the petty bourgeoisie, which policy of course is to crystallize the class farmer-labor party and should the May 30 convention develop a very strong petty bourgeois character it will be our policy to organize a Farmer-Labor Party as a separate organization federated in the greater Farmer-Labor Party for the time being.

We consider the developments of the last three or four weeks as represented in the report above of the utmost importance to our Party. Certainly our Party has never been in a stronger position and wielded greater influence than at this time and the coming May 30th convention presents the possibility of a revolutionary political development such as the United States has not witnessed for many years, if a great mass party of farmers and workers can be brought into existence through this convention. In the conference in St. Paul the hope was expressed that 5,000 delegates representing two or three million organized workers and farmers could be brought together in the May 30 convention. This is not an extravagant picture of the possibilities of this convention.

Our Party is the only organization represented in the conference which really has a national organization and as such is in a strategic position for building up the support for the conference.

Fraternally yours,

C.E. Ruthenberg,
Executive Secretary.

CER:PEB
OEA 12755

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2005. • Free reproduction permitted.