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# The Second UCP Convention.

Unsigned report in *The Communist* [UCP: New York], no. 13 (circa Jan. 1921), pg. 1.

According to the story of Ali Baba, the 40 thieves concealed themselves inside of 40 jars to be smuggled into the underground treasure-house of the honest man. But whatever may have been the case in Ali Baba's day, the thieves rule in our time, and honest men must bide. The 42 honest delegates of the latest United Communist Party convention, together with the members of the Central Executive Committee, an International delegate, a fraternal delegate, and comrades to act as technical workers were smuggled into the underground meeting place as quietly as thieves. One by one throughout the appointed day appeared the familiar faces of men and women long known among the revolutionary workers of the United States and the world.† By nightfall the convention was ready to be called to order. We came into preliminary session and organized for work.

The convention was long and full of action. The occasion for its calling was the need to pass upon the Theses and Statutes of the Second Congress of the Third (Communist) International, but the hearty acceptance of those Theses and Statutes was simple and unanimous. The strenuousness came with other questions.

To bring about unity of all Communist forces in America by combining the United Communist Party and the Communist Party was the task to which the convention gave its most vigorous attempts. The Central Executive Committee reported early on its negotiations with the Communist Party's Central Executive Committee. It became clear that the CEC of the CP was unwilling to have unity with the UCP, as such

unity would involve the giving up of the CP's present formation of loosely connected, autonomous "language federations," and would compel the CP to fuse with the UCP as a centralized party without autonomous sections for nationalities.

As the Communist International had demanded a highly centralized party as the only form of organization that could successfully lead a revolution, the CEC of the CP could not openly declare its unwillingness to give up the form of autonomous language federations. It had, for a time, contented that its real reason for failing to unite with the UCP was that the UCP was not sufficiently revolutionary, that the UCP was a "centrist" party. This reason having been nullified by the action of the Communist International in making the UCP its spokesman in the United States and in commanding the CP to unite with it, the CEC of the CP fell back upon another resource. As the Communist International, in full knowledge that the UCP is the larger party in membership,‡ had laid down as the basis that the two parties must come together in unity convention with delegations proportioned to the relative numerical strength of the parties in their underground organizations, the CEC of the CP felt called upon to make as large a showing of membership as might be possible. In this laudable ambition, the CEC of the CP did not exhibit a tabulation of its party's actual membership in underground organization, but submitted figures apparently estimated by doubling the number of actual underground members in each district.

It appears that after learning of the Third

†- Although the official CPUSA book *Highlights of a Fighting History* claims a "January 1921" date for this convention, Central Executive Committee minutes and a listing of a "Convention (x-mas)" line item in the 1921 Q-I budget indicates the 2nd Convention of the UCP was actually held in December 1920. It is believed to have begun on December 24.

‡- All available archival evidence indicates that the Communist Party was actually the significantly larger of the two organizations.

International's stipulation that membership should be estimated by the party account books for the months of July, August, September, and October [1920], the CEC of the CP conducted an intensive drive of selling membership stamps in quantities at one time to party members, and even selling membership stamps to sympathizers who were not members. Then, estimating its membership by gross stamp sales receipts, and contending that recent large sums were for "back dues," the CEC of the CP was enabled to present a claim for about twice its actual number of members.† It hoped by this means to force upon a "unified" party the system of loosely joined language federations, each federation retaining its power of independent action, thereby altogether doing away with a really unified party.‡

The CEC of the CP had accepted, as it had to, the carefully compiled and obviously authentic membership figures of the United Communist Party, but had refused to bring down to reality its easy and fictitious estimate of its own membership.

It was at this stage of the negotiations that the CEC of the United Communist Party presented the matter to the UCP convention. The CEC reported that the claim of the CEC of the CP had been investigated by party workers of the UCP as far as possible (and it had been possible to a wide extent), and the result had served to confirm the fact that the figures

had been exaggerated, often doubled and sometimes more than doubled. In specific instances in several named localities, the party workers of the Communist Party admitted to the party workers of the United Communist Party that their membership in those localities was approximately half of what their CEC had claimed. The realistic details left no room for doubt.

Under this "sliding scale" system of mathematics adopted by the CEC [of the CPA], it was plain that there was nothing to prevent the CEC of the CP from claiming a membership the size of the Harding vote. As childish as it all appeared, the action of the CP executive made, for the time being, an effective bar to unity.

The convention was dominated by an appreciation of the dawning industrial crisis, the mass lock-outs, and the consequent imperative need of unifying ALL the forces of Communism as directed by the Third International, at any cost within reasonable security to the revolutionary movement. The question of unity was widely discussed from the floor. There was general agreement that the membership of the Communist Party, if it could be reached, would show a willingness to conform to the International's demand for a highly centralized party, and that therefore a drastic effort to get the delegates of the two parties into one convention was justified. The drastic means was soon agreed upon, and the agreement was unanimous; that

†- To reiterate, there is no archival evidence whatsoever that this practice was carried out by the old CPA — which incidentally did not reckon its membership based upon cash dues receipts at the center but rather by sale of physical dues stamps. While there was unquestionably a flurry of CPA stamp sales in September and October 1920, such fluctuation from month to month was not unheard of. It was for this very reason that a 4 month test period was specified by the Comintern to determine true organizational size. In reality, the quarterly average of actually paid memberships of the old CPA in Q-III and Q-IV remained relatively constant (7,192 and 6,973, respectively), demonstrating *post facto* that the Q-III figures (plus October) given to the UCP to investigate were actually *not* "pumped up" for factional reasons. Indeed, the lowest stamp sales figure for *any* of these six months still significantly exceeded the approximately 4,000 paid members of the UCP. So, too, did the 6,652 stamps sold in January 1921, a month for which the CPA would have had absolutely no reason to retain inflated statistics. [See Comintern Archive, RGASPI f. 515, op. 1, d. 50, l. 79; available from [www.marxisthistory.org](http://www.marxisthistory.org) as the downloadable document "Membership Series by Federations for the (old) Communist Party of America, July 1920 to Jan. 1921."] The old CPA didn't need to cheat to bolster its membership — *it actually was the larger of the two organizations*. Rather, it was the UCP which was unable to provide dues statistics to back up its rosy Sept. 14, 1920 claim to the Comintern that its "available membership figures indicate a [UCP] membership at the present moment of about 7,000." [Do]/BoI Investigative Files, NARA M-1085, reel 940, case 202600-1775, doc. 583.] It was the UCP, the organization which faced being on the short end of a 40-60 delegate split at the looming unity convention, that felt its organizational existence threatened and which hastily raised the red herring issue of inflated dues stamp sales. In so doing, the UCP thereby sank the unity convention at which it would have been dominated, managing to shrilly place the blame for the failure on the CPA for good measure.

‡- Here we have an absolutely clear and concise statement of the primary issue which divided the two American Communist Parties. The old CPA, after the departure of Ruthenberg and his associates on April 18, 1920, was essentially a federation of 6 semi-autonomous language federations: the Lithuanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Latvian, Polish, and Jewish (in descending order of size). The first 5 of these retained publications, property, and organizational staffs which exceeded or rivaled those of the central CPA organization itself. The UCP saw this structure as the root of factional strife and machine-politics.

the right of proportional representation would be waived and the Communist Party invited to participate in unity convention with equal representation. Three delegates were elected as a committee to carry to the CEC of the CP the demand for a unity convention on this basis. The result was an evasion of the issue by the CEC of the CP, which fell back upon its old insistence of having a majority delegation or no unity.

Throughout the convention, committees or messengers hurried to the CEC of the CP with the urgent messages of the convention and returned with cold replies. The convention was punctuated by these arrivals and departures, and the report of a messenger was each time made the immediate order of business. The convention offered to remain in session any length of time that might be necessary to settle the matter, or, if that be impracticable, to reconvene at an early date.

As messenger after messenger arrived, each making clearer the fact that unity with the CP was not being reached through that party's CEC, the convention decided not to accept as final that CEC's refusal. A communication was drafted to the delegates (already elected and awaiting call) to the forthcoming CP convention [3rd: Brooklyn, Feb. 1921]. The sense of the communication was that the United Communist Party would not accept as final a refusal of its offer of unity on a basis of equal representation unless such refusal might come from the highest authority of the Communist Party — a Communist Party convention. The CEC of the CP refused to forward this communication to its elected convention delegates. However, in the hope that the invitation could be made ultimately to reach the forthcoming CP convention, the UCP convention prepared for the eventuality of the invitation being accepted. This preparation took the form of selecting 25 delegates authorized to respond to future call to meet with an equal number of Communist Party delegates in unity convention. Each district delegation nominated its desired representatives, who were elected by the convention.

The International Delegate gave an extended account of the 2nd Congress of the Third (Communist) International [July 19-Aug. 7, 1920]. From this account it became apparent that congresses of the Communist International are not formal affairs for reg-

istering the revolutionary labor movement's obedience to "Moscow's dictation," but are vital, creative struggles between the various plans for application of Communist principle — the clearinghouse of revolutionary thought, the melting pot of anachronisms from all quarters of the globe! It is plain that the International Congress began with more diversity of opinion than did this American convention, and that like this American convention, it was drawn into unity of program by the all-compelling common interest of world labor.

The strongest notes of the International Congress were three: [1] the need of ridding the revolutionary ranks of semi-revolutionary features inherited from the old Social Democratic opportunist parties; [2] the need of pinning down to realistic tactics such elements as have taken to flights of unreality; and [3] the need of reaching a common basis of action with revolutionary industrial unionism as will liquidate differences of understanding of the revolutionary struggle and ultimately shape the organized labor movement for its destined role in the overthrow of capitalism and building the new order.

The general report of the CEC was an occasion for much debate, dominated by sharp insistence upon high efficiency on the part of the Central Executive Committee. There was no lack of criticism of every phase of the party machinery that showed the slightest weakness, and the spirit was that of refusing to accept any excuses in the place of effective action. No one who heard this debate could imagine the United Communist Party to be a flaccid thing in the hands of officials. The Convention was the Supreme Power of the Party, and it jolly well knew it. Nor was there any laziness. Every act of the CEC was overhauled with minute care, and the report was finally accepted. Some of the criticisms and directions as to future action of the CEC were incorporated in resolutions adopted.

The report of the Constitution Committee was received with tense interest. The provisions of the proposed constitution were taken up seriatim, little groups about the floor acting as the "watchdogs of the Left," "watchdogs for clarity of meaning," etc. The Constitution was finally passed to the general satisfaction, in the form as printed elsewhere in this issue.

The Fraternal Delegate of the Young Communist League made a report such as must appeal to the

heart and head of all that have watched the development of the revolutionary movement in recent times. The Revolt of the Young! Their revolt — not only from the sordid ideology of an unclean, old civilization — but their revolt, as well from the decrepit “Socialism” that has compromised with that old, unclean civilization and become a toady to it. The Young Communist League delegate was received with enthusiasm, and the CEC was instructed to take the necessary steps for cooperation with and guidance of the League.

The Resolutions Committee report was acted upon with a due and healthy degree of dispute. The resolutions that are published speak for themselves and need not be dwelt upon here; those that are not published are not for the attention of even this underground reporter.

The Program Committee of 5 had a difficult job. The proper program of action — the application of Communist principles to the concrete situation in the class struggle — demands the most searching and realistic thought at the present stage of the revolutionary movement. At an earlier period, a few long months ago, the clarifying of principles was the most outstanding task. Now, with those principles outlined in letters of fire above the Russian crucible, there is not so much room for difference of opinion on fundamentals among true revolutionists; the realistic application of those fundamentals becomes the outstanding constructive work of Communists.

The largest proportion of thought and debate on the program was given to the question of Communist action in the field of organized labor. The determination to lay out a mode of action that would bring the wide masses of organized and unorganized labor into their natural function in the class struggle for emancipation, instead of palliation, of labor, ran like a red thread through the convention. The desire to get away from theoretical “might-have-beens” in regard to labor union structure possessed every delegate. In this, the Theses of the 2nd Congress of the Third International served to validate the majority opinion. (It is interesting to note that immediately after the close of the convention a message was received from the Third International served to endorse the program adopted by the convention. In fact, the forecasted form of the UCP labor program had come to the attention of the International and the comrade who projected it

had been especially commended.)

The keynote of the principle speeches, as well as of the program as adopted, were the rejection of the separatist tendency in labor unionism. The unanimous opinion was that the time had come to win the broad masses of labor unionists to the ultimate cause of labor — revolution. There was no difference of opinion on the score that this can be done. With full regard to the heroic work of industrial unionist movements in the past and present, the delegates were all of the opinion that industrial unionism must no longer express itself in the form of splitting away from the large masses, where such splitting can be avoided without the giving up of the revolutionizing work within the union masses.

The discussion of the program closed with expressions of tribute and loyalty to the new Red International of Trade and Industrial Unions.

The principal formal purpose of the convention being the endorsement of the Theses and Statutes of the 2nd Congress of the Third (Communist) International, the motion was put and carried unanimously. Possibly an interesting report might be written about the debate on these Theses and Statutes in a convention of the Socialist Party, but there was no difference of opinion and consequently no debate on that subject in the United Communist Party convention. Therefore the tremendously significant action of acceptance of the Theses and Statutes furnishes no material for the reporter’s pen.

Came the time for electing a new Central Executive Committee. There’s no denying that this is an important question and no one denied it; on the contrary, a great number of the comrades felt obliged to guarantee results by caucusing in advance of the nominations. But caucuses of groups within a party are fragile in proportion to the strength of party unity; when it came to the voting for CEC candidates, the caucuses did not hold. Of the delegation from District 7 [Chicago], two who had accepted nomination to the CEC and who were disappointed in the unexpected defeat of another candidate offered their resignations immediately after being elected. The resignations were rejected by the convention.

And so closed the Second Convention of the United Communist Party, after midnight, with voices suppressed. Our comrades in faraway countries will

be shocked to learn that we did not sing “The Internationale,” nor cheer for this or that ideal, but that we had to be content with a ragged popular air on a screechy phonograph, and with low spoken farewells.

But there’ll come another day, when honest men may sing and what thieves there may then be will have to hide.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.*

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