
Letter of John Reed, et al. in New York to C.E. Ruthenberg in Cleveland, August 11, 1919. †

A document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 4, l. 4-11.

New York, August 11th, 1919.

Dear Comrade Ruthenberg:

Being, as you are, so far away from New York, we doubt whether you know all the details of the recent events here. We, whose names are signed to this letter, and who happen to be in a minority here, are particularly anxious to find out your exact position.

The important occurrences date from the vote on the motions submitted by Gitlow for one side, and Wolfe-Ferguson for the other, on the question of attempting to arrive at a compromise with the Federation-Michigan group.‡

To go back a little. The out-of-town delegates to the Left Wing Conference [June 21-24, 1919] seemed to think that the “feud” between some of us and the Russian Language Federations was a purely local fight. This is erroneous. The reason the fight between the Federations and the Left Wing occurred in New York was simply because for nearly five months we had had to deal with the Central Committees of the Federations here; and during those five months the entire energy of the New York Left Wing had been diverted from propaganda into matters almost entirely concerning the Federations, and their internal squabbles — expulsions of their own Branches, etc. Moreover, although they dumped all their troubles on us, they refused to abide by Left Wing decisions which did not suit them, and always threatened to “withdraw” whenever the Left Wing did not do as they wished.

You yourself had an opportunity to see their tactics at the Conference. But during the greater part of that gathering we did not oppose them, because we thought that the bigness of the movement would lead them to sink their petty little ambitions in the larger organization of a real revolutionary Socialist movement.

Even after they had walked out of the Conference, we hoped that some basis for a compromise could be found. But now it is evident that with them it is rule or ruin — either no Communist Party or one absolutely controlled by them.

Just at the moment when the Federations, realizing their isolation, were about to come over to us, our National Council, on the insistence of [Secretary] Ferguson, who has consistently sabotaged the position taken by the majority at the Conference, and who on several occasions stated that unless some basis for compromise with the Federations could be found, he would resign from the Council and accept the minority position, suddenly surrendered to the Federation and abrogated its powers.

Instead of issuing the call for the Emergency Convention and the September 1st Convention, as authorized by the Conference, *and as decided by the Council* (as you will find on consulting the record of the votes), the Council hesitated; while Ferguson and Fraina entered into unauthorized negotiations with the Federation politicians. During this time a campaign of misrepresentation of and attack upon the Left Wing was carried on in the Federation press. Although in-

†- Although the original in the archives is missing the last page, this is attributed to John Reed based on typewriter face, proximity in the archival folder to another Reed document, and content. The first paragraph indicates that the document was signed by more than one individual — Benjamin Gitlow, Jim Larkin, and Eadmonn MacAlpine are among those others who may well have signed.

‡- Reference is to motions of the members of the National Council of the Left Wing, of which C.E. Ruthenberg, Ben Gitlow, Bert Wolfe, and Isaac Ferguson were all members. The motions in question were vetted in July 1919.

structed by the Council to issue a statement, in English and Russian, to all the members of the Left Wing, explaining our position, the persons responsible delayed and delayed, and finally never did it.

Then naturally followed the Wolfe-Ferguson motion. The carrying of this motion, by five to two, was interpreted by the majority in New York as a mandate to surrender to the Federation-Michigan minority, and an abrogation of the Conference decision, both with regard to the National Emergency convention, and control of the Communist Party. Your vote was interpreted by Ferguson as follows: First, that you insisted upon a Joint Call for the Communist Party Convention together with the Federation-Michigan group; and second, that you absolutely repudiated the National Emergency Convention, and also the National Executive Committee† upon which you had acted the previous Sunday.

At this same meeting of the Council [Monday, Aug. 4, 1919], Gitlow introduced a resolution to the effect that, since matters had reached a critical stage, all the members of the Council should be brought to New York to discuss matters. The vote for this was unanimous; and the Secretary [Ferguson] gave us clearly to understand that at this plenary meeting the whole business would be thoroughly thrashed out, and a final decision taken. The following day [Tuesday, Aug. 5] an executive motion was introduced by Ferguson — for which you voted — “That the next physical meeting of the Council be held in Chicago August 29th, etc.”

This motion of Ferguson’s, of course, cancelled the previous motion to bring you to New York, and deprived us of all opportunity to acquaint you with the facts.

Ballam, who was of course committed to the Conference majority position, has for the *past four weeks* been canvassing the state of Massachusetts, telling the comrades that there would surely be an agree-

ment with the Federations, and instructing them to vote for the Joint Call — whatever it should be.

On August 5th Ferguson introduced a motion — for which you voted — “That Cohen, Ruthenberg, and Ferguson be constituted a Convention Committee, etc., and to make the call for this Convention in conjunction with the Minority Conference Group, *or any part of this group.*”

This motion, innocent as it may seem, really has the effect of kicking out of the Council the minority of that Council — of debarring them from consideration or from any say upon the vital question of relations with the Federations, of the basis upon which the Convention was to be called, and, indeed, upon all Left Wing matters. The entire direction and control of the Left Wing was put into the hands of three dictators.

What right had the New York majority to expel from the Council members who had been elected by the Left Wing Conference?

In voting for this motion you were manipulated by the tricky attorney [Ferguson] whose object has been from the first to surrender to the Federation-Michigan minority.

The ballots for delegates to the Communist Convention were issued *before the Joint Call*. To this date no one of us has seen this Joint Call. We do not know upon what basis the new Communist Party is to be formed — and yet the voting for delegates is going on.‡

We now learn that the Federations stand pat for their scheme of representation in the Convention — which will ensure the packing of the Convention with their henchmen, and the control of the new party.

Perhaps you have seen the basis of representation, as published in *Novy Mir* of July 30th. One delegate for every 500; if a State has *already* joined *their* Communist Party, it is entitled to one delegate; if the State has not joined, then each Local which has joined

†- Reference is to the “incoming” National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party, elected in the SPA party ballot of 1919. The “outgoing” NEC refused to recognize the validity of this vote, which elected Alfred Wagenknecht as Executive Secretary and a sizeable majority of Left Wing supporters to the Socialist Party’s NEC. The “outgoing” NEC, headed by Executive Secretary Adolph Germer, also refused to end its term on the July 1 date specified in the party constitution, resulting in two parallel Socialist governing bodies from that date, neither recognizing the legitimacy of the other.

‡- The Joint Call, signed by Isaac Ferguson and Dennis Batt, was published in the August 23, 1919 (ultimate) copy of *The Revolutionary Age*. It provided for representation of 1 delegate for each 500 members, or major fraction thereof, for “organized states,” and that locals from “states that are not organized” should also send delegates. Delegates were additionally to be assessed a \$50 organizational fee, proceeds of which were to be allocated to the railway fare of delegates.

can send a delegate; if no Local has joined, then the *place of the Local shall be taken by the local Conference of Russian Language Federations*. “But,” says the call, “in most cities the *only Bolshevik Branch is the Russian Branch*” — of course this means that the Russian Branch shall be the judges of Bolshevism. “In such case, the Russian Branch, even if it has only 25 members, shall send one delegate.” The appeal winds up by saying that the Organization Committee is raising a fund to supplement the \$50 demanded of each delegate, in case these smaller Branches are too poor. It ends, “Comrades! Never mind whether the delegate knows English or not. Vote carefully. It is better to speak only Russian and vote as a Bolshevik, than to speak English and vote as a Menshevik or Centrist.”

In order to test the sincerity of the Federations, Reed introduced a resolution in the last membership meeting in New York, to the following effect:

“That our delegates be instructed to participate in the formation of a Communist Party that shall be a centralized organization directly controlled through Locals and Branches, and that no groups can be organized on language lines within it functioning independently of the will of the entire body.”

This was defeated by the meeting, which was packed by the Federationists, and a proposal to put it to referendum was also voted down.

According to your vote on the Ballam resolution, you insist upon the National Emergency Convention. The National Council, however, is engaged in a vicious campaign repudiating the National Emergency Convention.

This will inevitably result in the following situation: There will be two conventions in Chicago — one the Communist Party Convention, dominated by the Federations and their strange bedfellows, Michigan — the other the National Emergency Convention, at which most sections of the country will be represented. The action of the National Council virtually means the desertion of the revolutionary rank and file of the Socialist Party, and tends to drive them back into the arms of the Right Wing.

Upon the present basis the new Communist Party will be made up of elements unalterably opposed in principle, torn by a struggle on the part of the Federations for control over the English-speaking elements — in fact, it will mean the continuation on a national

scale of the bitter feud which has rendered the New York Local so ineffectual, and will make the new Party absolutely impotent to accomplish its work.

Feeling that further participation in the work of forming the Communist Party on this basis was a waste of energy, Reed, Larkin, and MacAlpine withdrew their names from the ballot for delegates in New York. Gitlow remains on the Bronx ballot, with the understanding that Bronx delegates are to go to the National Emergency Convention, as per instructions of the Left Wing Conference.

According to the motion submitted to you by Cohen, Gitlow resigned from the *Revolutionary Age* because of his opposition to the majority of the National Council. This is untrue in every respect; for the situation of the *Revolutionary Age* is as follows:

On [Thursday] August 7th Gitlow appeared before Ferguson and presented to him the critical financial situation of the *Age* — due primarily to the sabotage of the paper by the Language Federations, which refuse to support it, decreasing the orders by 3,000 copies, and doing everything in their power — and succeeding — to curtail the circulation. On that day Gitlow asked Ferguson, as National Secretary, to call a meeting of the Council to consider this serious matter, for the life of the paper was threatened. Ferguson abruptly answered that no meetings of the council could be held, and that a motion had been passed not to appropriate any more funds, for the *Age* or anything else. Comrade Cohen, to whom Gitlow next applied, viciously attacked him, stating that the financial condition of the paper was due to Gitlow's own attitude, and that Gitlow was sabotaging the *Age* by his opposition to the Council.

Reed resigned as editor of the *Age* because he did not agree with the editorial attitude of the paper.

When Gitlow resigned, he promised Ferguson to remain on the paper and get everything into shape so that another man could come in and get out the paper without any trouble.

The subsequent motion, introduced by Cohen, that a Committee composed of the New York majority of the Council should take over the paper immediately, denied Gitlow the opportunity.

MacAlpine's resignation, which dates from three weeks ago, occurred on the demand by Fraina that Ferguson be given editorial control during his absence;

MacAlpine, however, on the request of the Council, agreed to remain on the paper until Fraina returned.

As a result of the actions of the Council, all the rest of the staff of the *Age* — except Fraina — resigned.

Far from sabotaging the paper, the staff worked without pay for a long period of time. On the date of the resignations, the following salaries were due:

Gitlow	\$185.00
MacAlpine	\$ 88.00
Daniels	\$ 30.60
Stenographer	\$ 22.00

Furthermore, moneys aggregating \$275, belonging to the Voice of Labor, were turned over to the Revolutionary Age, with the result that the first issue of the Voice of Labor had to be paid for by loans raised personally by Reed and Gitlow.

* * *

[handwritten: "Page following lost."]

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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