
BoI Informant's Undercover Report of the UCP Legal Defense Convention, Chicago — Jan. 9-10, 1921.

by "Mike Benton"

Untitled document included as "Exhibit 6" in Special Agent H.W. Hess' Special Report of March 4, 1921.
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January 11, 1921.

[I] Give your report here for Jan. 8th [1921] as near as I could remember.

Reached [Harry] Keas' house at 6:20 January 8th [1921]. Keas was surprised that I could come along and glad to have me come. Before we left the house Keas asked me if I had anything on me, that is, radical stuff. Said: "I don't take any and don't want you to take anything either, so if I get pinched they can't find nothing on us and it won't be hard to get in the clear." Told Keas I didn't have anything either. At the Rock Island depot, Keas had a pass but I bought ticket. We went into the telegrapher's office and talked a few minutes with the operator. Others hanging around and when night police captain came in Keas stopped talking and gave me the wink so I went and bought the ticket for Chicago and also insurance. Keas bought insurance ticket and we put it in our envelope and mailed it to Keas' home address. We got on the train and the first thing Keas says: "I like to know why the Hell that captain came into the telegraph office." Keas got suspicious when he saw the night captain and though the might have got wise to the telegram that Keas got from [Edgar] Owens.† I told him I had seen the captain there lots of times and it was a hangout for everybody but Keas worried for quite a while before he forgot it.

We changed trains at Manly and Keas had wired

for berth. When we got on the train Keas showed his pass and his slip for the berth. Conductor told him that he would have to pay extra fare. Keas had berth #13 and I got #11-lower. Keas didn't like #13, said that it was an unlucky number, but conductor told him that was the one that was ordered for him in Minneapolis; Keas couldn't get another berth, so I exchanged with him. Told him that he could take #11 and I would take #13 and Keas accepted it in a hurry. Before we left Manly, Keas instructed that we should not make any kind of remarks on the train because we could never tell who was who and it might be a detective on the train and get us in trouble. We went into the smoking room and the Pullman conductor, brakeman, Keas, and I talked about railroad wrecks, unemployment, etc. Keas was very careful not to make any kind of a break. We retired about 11:00 pm and Keas gave orders to the porter to call us at 7:00 am next morning. At 7:00 am the porter called us and we reached Chicago about 8:32 on January 9th [1921]. As soon as we got off the train at Chicago, I had an awful time to keep up with Keas. He had a handbag and I didn't have nothing but still I had to run to keep up with him and it was a couple of blocks before I caught up with him. He stopped then and said: "Forgot to tell you not to talk to me and it was a good thing you didn't talk." Told him I couldn't talk if I wanted to because I had all I could do to run after him. We went and got breakfast and I could see Keas

†- According to the March 4, 1921, report of BoI Special Agent H.W. Hess, on Jan. 7 Keas had received a telegram dispatched by Edgar Owens of the UCP the previous day, reading: "Come to Chicago as quick as possible. Meet me at #301 Center Street 10 am January 9th."

was nervous as though he thought someone was following us.

After breakfast we took a car and got off at Center Street by Lincoln Park. The first house was on the corner, 301 Center Street. We rang the bell and Keas asked the lady if we could see Edgar Owens. The lady told us Owens was at breakfast but that we could go to his room and wait for him. This was at 9:40 am. The lady took us inside and we went upstairs and she opened the door and let us in. Keas felt more easy but he was still nervous. About 10:30 Owens came in and also another fellow from Davenport [Iowa]. Owens introduced this fellow as Leo England. Of course that is not the right name.† The fellow told us about the mayor of Davenport who left the Socialist Party so England got cold feet and told Owens not to send anything to Davenport any more, that is radical literature or any kind of a communication, until he could get back and he would have new address at Moline, Ill. After some talking he told us he had 7 members in group at Davenport and they were going to push propaganda right along. Gave him my Post Office address and told him to drop me a line in the future. I know his name is not England. He was indicted at the same time as Owens was and the case is still pending but he is pushing radical propaganda right along. About this time a Jew came in from Joliet, Ill. We learned his name as Charles Bramson, P.O. Box 1216. This Jew is a shrewd one. He has another 3 Jews in his group. Said he has good prospect for more members. Keas told Owens the same thing. Owens told us that on January 21st [1921] he will have a trial at Dixon, Ill. where he had trouble with the city mayor about a year ago but he knew he will get clear. Also Owens told us that Flynn [Edward Lindgren], the fellow who got back from Russia and who was in Mason City, had left for the Pacific coast a couple of days ago. First stop will be at Butte, Montana, to get in touch with Jack Carney.

About this time the landlady brought a special delivery letter for Owens. It was from E.R. Bloor, the

woman who was in Mason City about 3 months ago. She is now on the Pacific coast. Stated that the army boys, sailor boys, and those who can't get any work, she was getting them on her side. She speaks at Seattle, Tacoma, and Everett and she has collected \$364.00. She is speaking on the deportation cases in Chicago and collects, sending the money to Owens.‡ Of course Owens doesn't turn in all the money he gets. He lives pretty high, room rent \$15.00 per week with bathroom, besides he gets his meals, cigarettes, also car fare, etc. What is left he turns over to the rest. Owens is a lame fellow but he is a great talker and pretty radical.§

About 11:50 am Owens received a telegram call. After he got back he said that the time for the convention was set at 2:00 pm but they hadn't decided where they were going to have it, as they were going to throw the spotters off the track but was told he would be called up again and he could then leave the room. At 12:15 all 5 of us went to a hotel for dinner. Talking there was going on but not radical. After dinner we went back to Owens' room and Owens told us more about his persecution than anything else. And told us that the delegates can come from all over the United States and Canada.

About 1:40 pm Owens received another call on the phone and was told where we were to come. Owens said this was the third place they had picked out to hold the convention. We left Owens' room. I went with this Jew, Charles Bramson. Keas and England went together and took another car. Owens went alone on another car. When we reached our meeting place I took a look and saw that they had Chicago members outside all around and if anything would happen I believe we would have been notified and some would have gotten away. We met at 228 W Oak Street, a saloon building, a saloon in front and the hall is at the back of the saloon but connected with the same building and no one could tell that they had a hall in that saloon. When we came into the hall there were about 40 men sitting in there and they were still coming in.

†- Actually, L.K. England was the real name of this individual, a founding member of the Communist Labor Party. Like Edgar Owens, he hailed from the Rock Island-Moline area of Illinois.

‡- Edgar Owens was the head of the UCP's legal defense committee, a role he continued in the unified CPA after the May 1921 merger of the UCP with the old CPA.

§- Edgar Owens was a "lame fellow" in the literal sense, characterized by journalist Jack Carney in July 1919 as "a cripple, going blind, touch of tb, paralyzed down one side."

Meeting started at 2:00 pm. Chairman made a little talk and said that "every man in the hall when I point my finger you must rise and if someone cannot identify you, you will have to leave this room. He pointed his finger at each man and always someone got up and identified him. Of course one head organizer that they call the Executive Committee knows pretty near all of them. Keas and I were Okayed by Owens and this fellow from Davenport. After this was done the Chairman said: "If any of you fellow have got anything in your pockets, destroy it right away before we start." I didn't see anyone trying to destroy anything. After this was done the chairman said: "If we are bothered, remember that this meeting is for a defense committee. That is legal and they can't do anything to us." The convention then started.

The delegates had different points and views and one by one were talking. The secretary was noting all the time. Where the secretary was sitting there was a hold in the wall where a chimney was. The hole was covered with tin. In case anything happened he was going to put the papers or records in that hole and the could be burned up in a minute., The program was bringing out all kinds of things.

At first it was reported that the Finnish Socialist Party [Federation] would federate with the UCP, about 15,000 members, all Finns, and everyone radical. The Slavic Federation, about 22,000 members were not federated with the UCP yet; they expected to go by next June. The Jews old Socialist Party would federated with the UCP, so that would be about 65,000 UCP members.† *The Toiler* would be moved to New York; also the whole nest of the UCP will be at the headquarters in New York City. Communist papers will be published in every language and they are going to have men to do different kinds of work, go and take subscriptions for *The Toiler*, and they figure on starting another paper. Other men are to go from house to house like umbrella fixers, fixing clocks, etc. and talk with the people and see if they got any libraries in the house and any old Socialist Party or radicals. They are going to make them subscribe to *The Toiler* and in

this way make Communists out of them. Also have Communists join every union club, society, or church. They are going to work slow keeping the agitation up, that is, this Russian Bolshevik propoganda. The Russian delegate who is connected with the Bolshevik and also with [Ludwig] Martens, the Russian ambassador who was reported, this Russian delegate stated that he did not need to worry about money; that they had plenty in Russia and would get it over here some way, through Japan, Mexico, or some other country. All we got to do is to spread the Communist gospel, keeping things organized, and to agitate and educate, etc. I am pretty sure this Russian fellow is from New York City and will go back there. All this propoganda is to be directed from New York City from now on. Each delegate took a turn and about 18 of them did the speaking at this meeting.

The meeting lasted for 13 hours, from 2:00 pm January 9th until 3:00 am January 10th. There were 63 delegates from all over the United States. One delegate was missing from Philadelphia. They did not know whether he had been picked up by the police or not. Two delegates were from Canada, one from Winnipeg and the other from Toronto. Said that they didn't have very many members, and had just been getting started and had about 400 members altogether. Said that the Canadian government doesn't bother much about radicals so they will grow fast in future. A few of the district committee were Chicago delegates. Keas and I were. Also there was about 82 head members and leading radicals of this organization.

It was mentioned how one operator who was an old-time organizer and worked for Theil Detective Agency and Burns Detective Agency between Chicago and New York and all eastern points, he wrote 70 page confession of what he and other stool pigeons were doing; that the government does not take much action to break up the party except Chamber of Commerce, Bankers Association, and other capitalists in general. This operator knows a good many undercover operators from Burns Agency and Theil's and he will go from place to place and try to uncover those stool

†- These membership figures range from the bloated to the delusional. The Finnish Socialist Federation's membership in 1921 is exaggerated here by a factor of 2. The number of its members alienated from the Socialist Party was probably in the ballpark of 6,000. There was no such thing as "the Slavic Federation," let alone such a group with an astounding 22,000 members. The Jewish Federation, what remained of it outside of the rival Communist Party of America, was depleted by dissension, apathy, and splits to a paid membership of perhaps 500, half of whom remained loyal to the Socialist Party.

pigeons. He is going to work for the Communist Party from now on. Might be he was at this meeting but I couldn't tell. I couldn't identify everyone here but a good many I could if I run into them, as I had 13 hours' time and I took good notice of them. Their policy is to overthrow the United States government. The charge is made that the United States of America government is run by a bunch of big capitalists in Wall Street and they've got to overthrow this present government and give power to the workers like they have in Russia. They claim that the Bolshevik propaganda is spreading rapidly. In Germany, France, Italy, and other countries, even in China and Japan — the United States of America will be the next one.

A few delegates tried to leave the hall after 10 hours but there was a guard at each door for 3 doors and every delegate was compelled to stay until the finish. Not one was allowed to go until that time. The next convention will be held next June or July. All the programs will be drawn out from this convention, probably some of them will not be accepted but those that are accepted will be published in the Communist paper and I presume it will be sent to each group of the UCP. It was stated that the UCP was gaining and the Communist Party losing. Also that the United Communist [*sic.*] were gaining. Also stated that there was a crisis coming and when the railroad strike breaks out in the future, next spring or summer, the Communists have got to take the lead in that crisis, same way as it happened in Russia, where only 30,000 people started it and the Bolsheviks got hold of it and overthrew the Russian Tsar; that we got to do the same way in the United States now and when the proper time comes we got to overthrow the American Tsar and put the power in the hands of a bunch of radicals.

Among these delegates I decided about 24 or 26 of them were Americans and the rest foreigners. At 3:00 am we left the hall, everybody went in different directions. Some took taxis, others streetcars, and some walked. Mr. Owens introduced me and Keas to this Carl Alton [=???], who gave Keas his address and made appointment for 9:00 am. Keas and I got a taxi and went back to 301 Center Street and to a room at Owens' headquarters. Before the convention was ended they took up a collection; Keas put in \$10.00 and I gave them \$3.00 and they collected \$546.00 and turned it over to Owens. This collection was for the

Defense Committee, so Owens also took a taxi. It was a good day for Owens.

When we got to our room Keas was pretty nervous, worse than I was when we were at the convention — and let me tell you, that's the hardest shift I put in for some time. I was nervous just as well as Keas and anyone else. I expected we were going to get raided and I had chills for 13 hours. I thought if we got raided, the policemen using clubs, I might get some of the clubbing myself. They got a good undercover place but if any operative was in the hall he could have caught all the ringleaders at that time. All these leaders are hard-boiled fellow that have been revolutionaries for the last 15 or 20 years, most of them have been indicted and some of them have got good beatings, been in jail serving sentence, and some will be tried in the future. They are all getting more radical every day. They are not working as openly as they used to do and all this radical propaganda is going to be handled through underground work. If the radicals are let alone with their propaganda for a couple of years we will have a mighty hard task to deal with them because they take men like William Z. Foster, National Secretary of the Steel Workers Union. He is just about to unite with the UCP. If he does he will pull over about 150,000 union members and with them and then the United Miners of America next. The UCP are now trying only to get the leaders. They don't care whether the whole membership comes across or not, if the leaders join then in case of a strike or crisis the leaders will get the rest of the membership. If they can get but one leader the rest are going to follow him in case of a crisis. If American labor gets controlled once by the radicals, let me tell you they will come first.

After we reached the room Keas remained there but I went out to lunch. The next morning we got out about 7:00 am, after bidding Owens good-bye, said he would drop into Mason City some time this next summer., We went to breakfast then took a streetcar and went out to see Carl Alton [=???]. "When we got to this place I looked up at the number and it was #3301 Racine Avenue and the corner of School Ave. He lives in the old store building. He was at the breakfast table when we rapped on the door. A lady came out and Keas asked for Carl Alton [=???]. The lady said no one by that name lived there but Alton [=???] overheard Keas' voice and he told his wife it was all

right and she let us in. We started talking right away and Alton [=??] asked Keas if he was willing to go east. Said "We are going to move The Toiler and everything else to New York City and I wanted you to come there. I talked with the others and they want you to come. We have been watching you for a year and they want you to go east and take charge of the editorials and cartoon business and also as a member of the Executive Committee." Also Alton [=??] says he doesn't know how soon they will call for him. Might be a month or two or might be next summer. Keas said he would accept and he would do his best. Alton [=??] said he didn't stay at home much, traveled most of the time. He has a hand-case Remington typewriter; said he had been indicted and that the police were now looking for Carl Alton and that if they knew it was him that they would grab him in a minute. That during the war he was arrested at Salt Lake City and brought to Chicago by Federal government but he was not going to give up. Also he had word from a German who was in Ft. Leavenworth penitentiary, that he got released by President Wilson at Christmas time and that this German fellow has joined the UCP and is a big leader among the German element. His name was mentioned but radical papers of that time will give his name as being released from the penitentiary.

Carl Alton [=??] told us they were going to get plenty of money from Russia and the main point was to spread the propaganda until, when the crisis comes, the Communist Party got to take the lead. This fellow was a pretty shrewd organizer. Keas warned him about being careful and told him how he could be pinched. He said before he left Mason City he would like to organize a couple of groups and also a couple of other towns in Iowa. Said that the only Communists in Iowa now were at Davenport, Sioux City, and Mason City. He said in a couple of weeks he would take a layoff and he knew fellows at Clarinda, Cedar Rapids, and Waterloo; that he is going to write to them, see them personally, and see if they would join the party and start UCP group at these places. Said he had an operator working at Savanna, Ill. on the Milwaukee, I think; that he got information from this operator, whose name

is Fritz, and he gave Keas information about the armory and ammunition so Keas is going to have everything ready in this line of information and when this crisis comes they got to get hold of the Government arsenals all over the country.

Carl Alton [=??] told Keas that every IWW was in sympathy with the United Communist Party and that the leaders of the IWW were members of the UCP. Alton [=??] doesn't think much of Debs but he thinks if Debs got out of prison he would leave the Socialist Party and then join the United Communist Party. Now that Haywood is UCP but can't do much except in time of a crisis. That is, he would do all he could and hang the capitalist class. Keas smiled and said: "I don't want to hang them as too much work and slow progress. Just put them up by the wall and let loose of the bullets." They were cheaper than rope and that's the way they were doing it in Russia. Just before we left here at 12:45 pm this Russian fellow who was at the Convention and stated we were going to get money from Russia through Mexico or Japan, this Russian fellow came in and shook hands. We were introduced as comrades and no name was mentioned. I had a good look at this fellow and I believe I can place him in the future. We talked about 5 minutes and this Russian stated that when Martens got back to Russia he will have things fixed up fine, that is, financially. We took the streetcar back to town.

This Carl Alton [=??] has 5 children, the youngest about 5 weeks old. Also his mother-in-law lives with them. He is on the road most of the time. He told Keas that he was going to have the Mason City [sub-]district transferred to the Minneapolis District. Keas will hear from Alton [=??] when he is transferred to Minneapolis.

After getting dinner we went to the train and started for home. This trip cost Keas about \$95.00 as he had to buy clothes and pay the operator in his place. Keas is pretty near broke now. Keas didn't talk much on the return trip. He was pretty well tired out. Did not take a sleeper as he was short of money and I had to do the same as Keas.

Reached home on the morning of January 11th.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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