
Letter to Theodore Draper in New York City from Max Bedacht in Frenchtown, NJ, Jan. 20, 1955

Document in the Theodore Draper Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 30.

[January 20, 1955.]

Dear Mr. Draper:

Your question or questions require some research on my part — in the folds of my memory as well as among the scant documents available to me. I am sure that it is next to impossible to hang exact dates to the appearance of ideas and proposals concerning our Communist Party's efforts towards a Labor Party.

The successful November Revolution in Russia had undoubtedly awakened in all of us revolutionary Socialists in America the hope for a speedy change in the concepts of the American working people. I think I am justified in saying that all of us — at least subconsciously — believed that world events had relieved us and our revolutionary organizations of the tedious and patience-consuming job of weaning the American working masses away from their bourgeois illusions. Since such a belief is wrong under any conditions, the propaganda of the Left based upon it became mere radical-sounding phrases with little or no concrete meaning.

However, already at the Chicago Conventions in 1919 a sobering up process had begun. This process had started earlier and proceeded faster with those who stood with both feet on the ground of the USA. It started later and proceeded at a snail's pace with those who only had their physical feet here but had their thoughts still operating on the basis of what they believed to be the conditions in the countries of their origin.

Of course, between these two groups there was no sharp and clear borderline. The ideas gradually ebbed — or flooded — from one and to the other.

The leader and spearhead of the sobering sec-

tion was Ruthenberg. My role was that of an active lieutenant. During R.'s incarceration I stepped into his shoes.

The formation of the UCP in Bridgman [May 26-31, 1920] had dissolved the thick fog of mutual claims of the participating groups about their numerical strength and influence. We began to see ourselves comparatively weak with little influence and strength in the industrial centers of the country (and these centers are important because of the concentration there of the decisive, the industrial proletariat). We had little, if any, roots in the working class. Consequently it became daily clearer that we could not avoid the job of organizing by our own efforts the American proletariat into a conscious and active political army of its class. In the course of looking for means to this end the organization of a broad Labor Party also came up.

Of course, we also sought advice concerning the best means from the international leadership of our movement. I, for one, after my arrival in Moscow in Dec. 1920 or Jan. 1921, sought conferences with party leaders of other countries and of Russia. I have already told you on previous occasions about a conference with Lenin. Lenin's ever-repeated question was: What are you doing and what in your opinion can you do to win the American toiling masses? In a conference of the whole American delegation with Lenin in the closing days of the 3rd Congress [June 22-July 12, 1921] the problem of open, legal work was practically the only subject discussed. At that conference Lenin formally raised the question of efforts towards the formation if a Labor Party would not facilitate our job. He emphasized that propaganda by itself cannot move the working class. It reaches and effects only individuals. The class as a whole takes its lessons from experiences. Effective propaganda then translates these experiences

into theoretical conclusions.

That is the process in which the class of the toilers becomes a conscious and powerful force ready and able to defend and fight for its interests.

These conference with Lenin gave me personally a comprehensive understanding of the tasks of our CP. Despite many mistakes I have made since then, I have, on the whole, never left the path Lenin outlined to us then.

As I told you previously, the delegates to the 3rd Congress reported back, and from then on, the fall of 1921, the question or problem of initiating a movement for the formation of an American Labor Party was on the agenda of the leadership. Most of the long drawn out discussions about it were informal and never got on any minutes or records. Some of these discussions served the purpose of convincing as yet unconvinced leaders; others dealt with and sought to clarify the steps necessary toward the development of a broad Labor Party movement. There was also the question of whether a Labor Party or a Farmer-Labor Party. I remember Bill Dunne proving with census figures that the urban and rural proletariat really represents a majority of the American people, and that the term "farmer" covers too much — from formidable capitalist enterprises to the family farm — and that therefore the word "farmer" is not needed and does not fit well into a collective designation of the party needed.

At that time [John] Fitzpatrick was President and Ed Nockels Secretary of the Chicago Federation of Labor. While both were good craft unionists after Gompers' own heart, they had a lot of experience about the maneuvering of the politicians for the Labor vote. So they saw the possibility of a gain for labor if it put itself into a strong bargaining position for election day. To this end they desired a quasi-political organization of the workers, preferably the functioning of the Chicago Federation of Labor (or similarly labor elsewhere) as an entity in the political arena. [Bill] Foster, who previously had given little attention, if any, to the problem of political action by the workers, began to interest himself in this problem. After the 1st Congress of the Profintern in 1921 [July 3-19, 1921], he had joined the CP. He took a leading part in our discussions. He had for a long time been a delegate to the Chicago Federation of Labor from the Carmen's Union and was

on terms of friendship with Fitzpatrick and with Nockels. That is why I cannot very well see the need of Browder and Johansen as go-between. Through their friend Foster, Fitzpatrick and Nockels had direct access to the [Central Executive Committee of the party]. At any rate I cannot remember that Johansen's name was even ever mentioned in this connection.

We, that is Ruthenberg and his co-workers, were not too enthusiastic about the allies that thus presented themselves. We had no illusions about them and they left no doubt about their concept of the proposed United Front, but the inherent differences did not come to the fore in the beginning. At any rate the efforts of Foster, prompted by his friends, pushed ahead our discussions and considerations of a Labor Party. The greatest obstacle in our way seemed to be the "Left Wing" of our party itself.

To overcome that obstacle the advice and help of the ECCI was asked. All this fell into the period of serious consideration by the ECCI of a broad United Front policy of all affiliated parties. So the "legale Arbeiter Partei" of which Zinoviev spoke in your quotation was not the legalized CP but the broader Labor Party movement, of which the CP was supposed to make itself a part. The CP was supposed to retain its separate entity within such a broader political working class movement.

It was in the course of the discussions and deliberations about efforts for the development of a broad Labor Party movement that the concepts about the possibility and the need of a legal, respectively illegal Communist Party in America crystallized. Out of these discussions the Geese were born as an organized group. They had ghosted about before around questions such as "force and violence." But the discussions about our approach to the masses via a Labor Party touched off the "final conflict." Our side became more and more convinced that the successful and effective functioning with and within a Labor Party would require and make possible the open functioning of a legal Communist Party. The illegalists-in-principle, on the other hand, for whom control meant leadership, could see a protection for the purity of the principles of the Party only in the underground. Safe in the underground, the Party's revolutionary character would not be "besmirched" with responsibility for the legal, and therefore necessarily and automatically reformist, activities

and demands of a Labor Party. They were willing to go along with efforts for the development of a Labor Party, but they insisted to protect the “revolutionary virginity” of the CP with an underground existence. So the issue became that, rather than the Labor Party. For us, after our though limited experience of leadership (control, unfortunately) within the Workers Party, such a policy was unacceptable.

I remember Parley Parker Christensen. He paid us an unofficial visit at our Chicago 1919 Convention. I also remember his visit to the Soviet Union [Soviet Russia]. But I know nothing about the role of the Chicago Federation of Labor in connection with that visit. I have no doubt that Lenin, as was his habit, enquired seriously and in detail about the chances of whatever existed of a Labor Party movement in the US. For such inquiry he needed no prompting from anybody. I could also believe that the actual developments in our country toward a Labor Party movement strengthened Lenin’s conviction that on the road to a mass Labor Party lay the cure for the isolation of our CP from the masses, as well as a valuable school for the political education of the American working class.

The differences between us Communist and the leaders of the Chicago Federation of Labor came to the fore and culminated in the National Convention in St. Paul for the formation of a Farmer-Labor Party

in 1924 [June 17-19]. The question of a LP or a F-LP was decided for us by our contact with the progressive elements of the Non-Partisan League in North and South Dakota. The St. Paul Convention was organized with their help. Meanwhile, however, the LaFollette for President movement was in process. This had cooled off the immediate enthusiasm for a Labor Party on the part of the Chicago Federation of Labor group. The St. Paul Convention did not endorse LaFollette, but nominated its own candidates (who later withdrew). The proceedings of the St. Paul Convention broke up the behind the scenes bridge between us and Fitzpatrick. It also initiated the bitter and destructive fight within the CP between the Foster group and the Ruthenberg (later Lovestone) group. Foster accused the National Committee of the Party that it broke faith with Fitzpatrick.

Today I think we all, from Foster and Ruthenberg and back, made serious tactical mistakes at St. Paul. But my opinions of today cannot change the history of events the CP was engaged in in 1924.

With sincere and friendly greetings

Yours,

Max Bedacht.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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