
Letter of I.E. Ferguson to A.M. Rovin, September 23, 1919.

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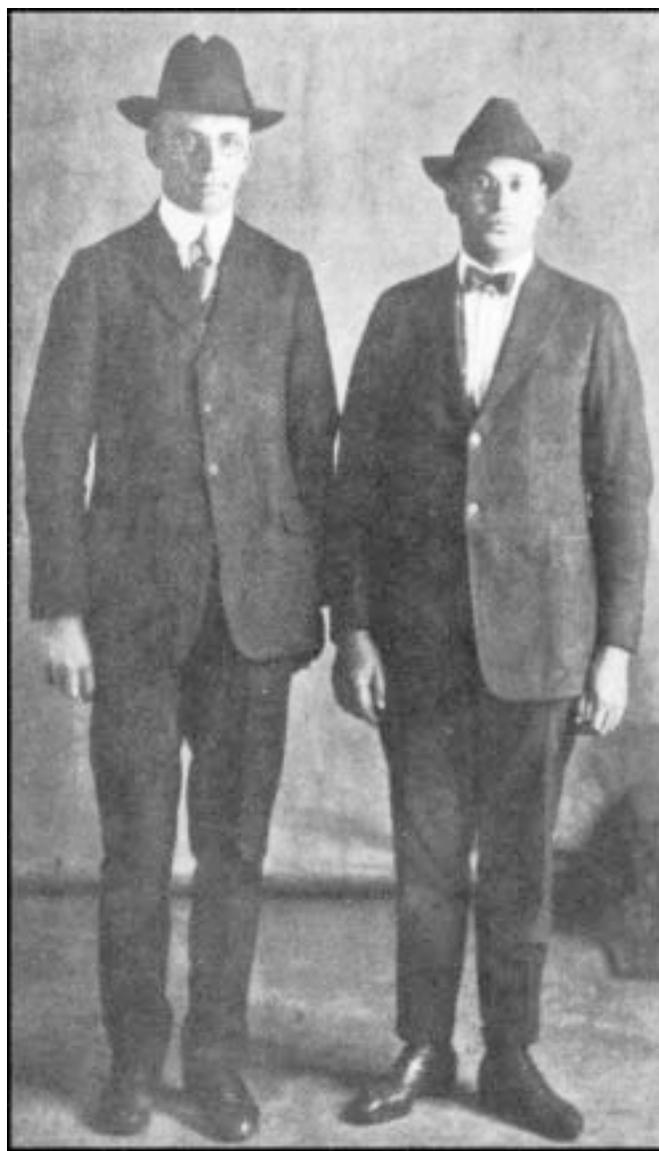
A.M. Rovin
203 Lincoln Bldg.
Detroit, Michigan

Dear Comrade Rovin:—

It is rather harsh to have anyone belittle your motives to the low plane of “personal animosity,” when there is involved such association as we may have in the United States with the tremendous undertaking of the Communist International to bring about a new civilization. I do not think there is any issue of life, no matter how insignificant, which I could meet on the basis of personal animosity. But it is shocking to have a comrade like yourself put so low a valuation on my efforts for the revolutionary movement. If that is the way you go about making an analysis of the present party situation, how will it be in the minds of many who are less informed?

But, after all, this is quite irrelevant. I do not care about the judgements on my efforts; I care about the results. And though Rovin is so crude as to present such a judgement in the form of any inquiry, that is a personal disappointment; but it does not mar the profound happiness which is mine in the contemplation of the successful launching of the Communist Party. This party is destined quickly to find its place as a powerful factor in the destinies of this country, as it swings into line with the proletarian movement abroad. It is started on a firm basis of understanding of principles and organization, and it can afford to ignore such a gadfly circumstance as the Communist Labor Party.

Your argument, that because “over 70 delegates, a



*I.E. Ferguson (at right) with C.E. Ruthenberg
at the time of their imprisonment in 1920.*

great many of them well-informed Communists of not one day's standing” — because this many delegates came together in a body, therefore it is not likely true that this can be an adventure to the detriment of the

Communist movement in this country — is an argument which misses the vital point of the whole situation. It is not a question of one group of delegates as against another group; it is a question of what each group represents in principles and membership. And I say most emphatically that when 70-odd delegates, with no relation to one another except that for as many as 70 reasons they did not like the Socialist Party Convention, proceed to start a new party at the moment when practically all of the Left Wing is unitedly engaged in starting a Communist Party, that this action is absolutely dastardly and traitorous on the part of those who were fully conscious of the situation.

This Communist Labor Party represents just exactly this: the trickery of about a dozen reckless men who were in the strategic position to mislead about 30 delegates who really belonged in the Communist Party Convention but were purposely kept away by misinformation. The other 30 in this Communist Labor Party Convention were drifters of one kind or another, men and women incapable of decision, and at the moment representing no membership and no set of principles. The dozen misleaders were conscious Centrists and a few of personal venom.

You say there is “no difference in their interpretation of Communist principles” — and that is a join, Comrade Rovin. The Communist Labor Party has no vestige of principle, Communist or any other kind. Do you not know, perhaps, that all that was done in the gathering was to make a poor copy of the program work done at the Left Wing Conference at New York? Do you expect me to complain of program statements which I myself prepared or edited in the first instance? No, I only complain of the changes. And though this appears as immodesty, I am prepared to show you that every change made represents a looser understanding of what is involved — and I will wager offhand that you yourself will select as the best-phrased clauses, showing the most accurate understanding, those which were unchanged from the Left Wing text. The entire Program Committee of the Left Wing Conference sat in the Communist Party Convention: Fraina, Ruthenberg, Stoklitsky, Batt, Ferguson.

In the work of the Communist Party Convention, you will discover not merely a copy of former programs, but the incisive development of a Communist program in relation to party functioning. You will find the de-

velopment from a program merely in criticism of the Socialist Party to a program of the broader scope of the working class movement in its revolutionary aspects — and that not merely in a chance phrase upon which everything can be appended, but in precise, cogent propositions.

One new clause in the Communist Labor Party program is that against “autonomous federations.” What is meant by “autonomous”? This is a free-for-all phrase. It can only have meaning as it is defined by the provisions of the party constitution. I think the Communist Party has handled the federation question with a statesmanship that is realistic, yet uncompromising so far as the principle of party centralization is concerned. And I think that the Communist Labor Party has issued a flourish to the effect that it desires to be a revolutionary proletarian party without the proletariat. Do we not know that nearly 60% of our wage-workers are of foreign birth, and that they cannot presently be brought into the movement except by some such device as the federations? But the Communist Labor Party wants an *American* movement — an American Communism! Have you patience with such manifestations of internationalism? I have mildly dismissed the whole affair as an unfortunate “adventure” with 30-odd delegates as the victims of a too-quick panorama of events, and yet I must prove that it is something other than personal animosity and desire for “power” which accounts for my descriptive?

I have been at great pains to explain how good Communists — there were about 30 such in the Communist Labor Party Convention — could have been lead away from a better representation of their membership than by taking part in the starting of the Communist Labor Party. These delegates actually represented membership, six to seven thousand, almost exclusively from the Western states. All the Eastern membership, except some straggling elements here and there, were definitively represented in either the Socialist or Communist convention. It is an exaggeration to say that 10,000 were represented by the delegates who assumed, without mandate or directly against their instructions, to start a third party. How do you suppose that this membership is going to be held by an illusion as against one or two realities? Centrism cannot be constituted into a party — and there will never be a Communist Labor Party. At most

it will be a society of discontented Centrist leaders, without a membership worth counting. The Western membership will most certainly come into the Communist Party.

The leaders of this adventure were fully informed of the Left Wing reunion — and purposely came to Chicago to fight against the union of Left Wing forces, realizing that they, as individuals, were automatically ousted in this amalgamation of forces. There was Gitlow, one of the minority of two on the Left Wing National Council, and Jack Reed, an Associate Editor on *The Revolutionary Age*, both in close touch with the situation, and both obsessed with a passionate opposition to any move to deal patiently and in the understanding of the general movement with the problems of the federations — or rather, with the Russian Federation in particular. Both were *persona non grata* to the Russian Federation leaders, and it was obvious that at the moment these leaders would have an important part in the Communist Party, therefore they turned against the Communist Party. The same of Wagenknecht, Katterfeld, Lore, Boudin, and in a lesser degree of Lindgren. Of these Katterfeld stands out as sincerely the extreme of obsession, but not without sincerity, though it distorted his immediate functioning. Wagenknecht played a conscious personal game, all the time, going back as far as you like. He is the dangerous Centrist type, making appropriate concessions in phraseology, but with the clear design to stop at a slight change in fundamentals, and with the design also to ride in on the superficial change. The same of Lore, the outstanding intellect of this third party fiasco. Boudin, of course, who is a splendid student, has been always avowedly opposed to the Communist position, and left the Communist Labor Party Convention because it did not recede from the Left Wing position.

It takes something besides the tossing about of phrases by leaders to make a party, and that something the Communist Party has..... It is amusing to read of anyone “misleading” the Federationists, who themselves have been the real leaders of this whole Left Wing and Communist movement in the United States, going back to the exiles of early 1917, including Trotsky, Bukharin, Kolontai, Rutgers, and others.

As to your request for information about Fraina and my relations with Gitlow and Reed, the answer is

simple. Gitlow, as a member of the Council, was always opposed to me because of my pro-Federation bias. I was frankly pro-Federationist in the realization that this was the membership which made the Left Wing movement a real force, and I was personally a representative of Federation membership. But there was no personal animosity toward Gitlow on my part at any time. I was amused at the childish extremes to which he went after the Council lined up firmly for Left Wing unity. But I was present when Gitlow was decisively defeated in his own Local (Bronx) — and here Gitlow had the floor several times as long as anyone else. So you can figure out that Gitlow at Chicago represented Gitlow and who else? — let me guess for you, some of the slimy ones who are playing a cheap grafting game with the Martens office, and who are keenly interested in any fight against the Communist Party.

John Reed? I am directly responsible for the employment of Reed on *The Revolutionary Age*; and Fraina and I have always held Reed in high esteem. The trouble with Reed is that he is a first-class journalist and a very low-rate politician. He is juvenile and impulsive in party functioning, in spite of all good intentions. Personally a splendid fellow, Reed has gone a long way to kill his party usefulness this past half year. I hope he will pull himself out of the present tangle — and I would vote for him as a writer for our party papers, as a journalist, not as a dialectician, today, and be happy to work with him. I am going to get after Reed personally as soon as circumstances make the approach possible, because I refuse to surrender my personal esteem for him. Gitlow, I can tell you with “animosity” is a featherweight in every sense except the physical. Reed is one of the most capable journalists in the country, and is of instinctive revolutionary caliber, if he can only hold himself together for the long, quiet grind.

In all this I feel that I have dealt with the situation in a rather superficial way. I would be glad to analyze for you the whole history of the Left Wing development to show how the National Council came to its decision. The idea of a play for “power” (whatever that may mean in connection with a practically outlaw agitational organization) on the part of Fraina or myself is really too silly for a rejoinder. Only it is queer that we were the only ones who *fought* the Federation

extremists and the “Michigan confusionists” (to borrow your happy phrase) — and fought them to a successful finish, while the others ran away from the fight, calling their foolish little sideshow an opposition camp! We never relented our real opposition to a sectarian new party, nor to the Michigan reactionism in Socialist teaching. We fought a bitter fight within our Communist Convention, and we won because the Federationists yielded to *principle*, even though we were the minority. That fight was rather too subtle for our friend Tichenor to understand offhand, and in emotional impulse he, too, ran away from it..... And it was our opposition to the Federationists which won us their respect; while the Michigan truckling to the same group won Michigan nothing but contempt. You will see that the Federation membership will choose other representatives from Michigan, which is a state controlled by the Federation votes. And meanwhile there is not a speck of Michigan influence in the new party. And there is no Russian Federation dominance. There is a clear case of control in the light of the general movement, with no tinge of [sectarianism] or cliquism.

Perhaps you mean by your allusion to the misleading of the Federations that they have been disappointed in many upon whom they depended for the English expression of the Communist movement. That is undoubtedly the case. While I fail to comprehend the “power” idea with regard to the new party, I am highly conscious of the terrific responsibility in sharing the theoretical and tactical expression of Communism in America. I shall try to make myself equal to the responsibility, and I will not shift an inch one way or the other because many will question my motives as “personal.”

In all candor, Comrade Rovin, if the personal could enter into the equation I think I would withdraw from

the movement, because I have one inducement presently in favor of caution and because I do not like personal rancor, no matter whose fault it is. I would spare myself the harshness. But I feel an impersonality toward this work, as of destiny. It is one with my most profound instincts of workmanship, my instincts of study and teaching and agitation. I feel that to leave this work is to negate myself, and I will take it as long as it is clear to me that I can be of service. I am not a sensationalist; I will do my darndest, short of perversion of principle, to keep from paying the price of imprisonment for any length of time for any activity as an agitator. If I attain conspicuousness in the movement, it will be because of serious effort, not on account of any sort of flashiness; and I will only cherish place in the movement as it is the clear mark of service rendered, constructive service. Indeed, I had the joy for a year and a half of doing party work in the shadow of another man, and found my ample satisfaction in the work itself, without notoriety.

This much I write in the personal strain because your letter directs my mind this way, not that I mean to put myself on the defense. I am frank to say that there are phrases in your letter which you cannot easily explain away or apologize away; and that there is an assumption of making judgements without information which compels me to read your letter with far less seriousness than the length of my answer would denote... It is rather in continuation of our old conversation in this very room that I have written the foregoing, forgetting your letter.

Earnestly,

I.E. Ferguson

Edited by Tim Davenport. Photo from James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism. (NY: Prometheus Research Library, 1992).

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