
An Open Letter to the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of America, January 11, 1921.

by Maximilian Cohen

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Dear Comrades:—

A crisis is developing in our party due to the ultimatum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International for unity with the UCP by January 1, 1921. January 1st has come and gone but the peremptory order of the EC of the CI has not yet been fulfilled. As matters now stand this demand does not seem likely to be fulfilled for some time to come.

It is incumbent upon all of us therefore to analyze the causes for the failure to obey the mandate of the Communist International for the unity of all communist forces in America, in accordance, not only with the order of the Executive Committee, but also with the fundamental plan laid down by the Second Congress itself, in the Statutes and Theses adopted by it.

I quote from the English edition of the Statutes and Theses published in Moscow:

Page 13: "Therefore the principal duty of the Communist Parties, from the point of view of an international proletarian movement, is at the present moment the uniting of the dispersed Communist forces, the formation in each country of a single Communist Party (or the strengthening and renovation of the already existing one) in order to multiply the work of preparing the proletariat for the conquest of governing power..."

Page 41: "In every country there must be only one Communist Party."

I shall quote again the six points adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist International as sent to us by our delegates:

1) To extend the date by which complete unity is to be achieved from October 10 to January 1, 1921.

2) That pending this complete unity of our movement and the election by the party of an American Representative on the Executive Committee, each party shall have a representative on the Executive with the same vote.

3) That unity must (and this is mandatory) be achieved on the basis of all the decisions of the Second Congress of the International.

4) The representatives of both parties must give a pledge to abide by the decision for unity.

5) The two parties have equal rights, the unification to be by means of a Congress and party for party.

6) Representation in the Unity Congress is to be decided upon the basis of dues actually paid for during the months July, August, September, and October [1920].

All the foregoing decisions have been formally accepted by both CECs, but nevertheless, the last point, instead of facilitating the work of unity, has tended to retard it, and created an impasse, a deadlock, which the majority of the CECs of both parties are either unwilling or unable to overcome.

The CEC of the UCP maintains that the statement of dues submitted by the CEC of the CP is "manipulated" and demand a revision of the figures in the original statement.

The majority of the CEC of the CP maintain that the statement is correct and refuse to revise the original statement.

Bickering back and forth, both CECs have utterly lost sight of the far more transcendent fact that

unity has not been achieved by the date limit set, and seem to be in a mood of prolonging this deadlock indefinitely.

It has become evident to me for some time that neither side will recede one iota from its position. In the meantime, party work is at a standstill, the memberships are bewildered, and both parties hand in a state of "suspended animation" for the time being.

Comrades, I maintain that this deadlock is injurious to the Communist movement. Instead of facilitating the liquidation of the schism in the American Communist movement and helping by all possible means in the unification of all Communist forces, these tactics on the part of the CECs of both parties are creating further dissensions in the ranks, widening the schism, and placing the desire of certain elements in both parties for control of the future united Communist movement above the real and best interests of the Communist movement itself.

I stated this point of view at the CEC meeting of December 22nd, and offered a plan which seemed likely to break this deadlock and bring both parties into a unity convention before January 1st. This motion is as follows (condensed) from the official minutes:

"To make a concession and accept representation on the present actual CP membership and UCP statement figures."

Immediately after voting down this motion, the CEC recalled me as a member of the Unity Committee. I quote from the official minutes:

"Motion to recall Allen [Cohen] from the Unity Committee. Carried."

The irony of this act lies in the fact that you have removed a comrade who sincerely and earnestly sought to achieve unity.

At a further session of the CEC we received a statement adopted by the UCP convention requesting our CEC, in view of the deadlock, to call our convention into session simultaneously with theirs, and offered to our convention on the basis of 25 delegates each.

To this request the majority brought in the following motion:

"To answer that we can call our delegates only to a joint convention that the CEC of the CP is fully competent to set, and that the CP delegates are ready to come to a joint convention upon short notice."

I made the following amendment:

"That we accept the first proposition of the UCP convention to call the CP convention now, and reject the second, about equal representation."

On a roll-call vote my amendment was defeated, only I voting in favor.

Two more times during the course of the extended session I made the motion that we call our own convention in order to break the existing deadlock. And each time I was voted down with a show of increasing bitterness and venom. So much so that in the course of the sessions, one of the members of the CEC openly threatened to make an end of my opposition by removing me as a member of the CEC.

Finally, instead of this, a motion was brought in removing me as editor of the official organ [*The Communist*] and from the Editorial Committee as well. Since no charges were brought against me as editor, the only reason for my removal as editor is the difference existing between the majority and myself on the question of unity. In fact, the latter reason was given by the maker of the motion, and was accepted as sufficient cause.

Now comrades, I maintain that those in control of the Party are not acting in a spirit likely to achieve unity; on the contrary, to judge by the decisions of the district conventions as reported to the CEC and recorded in the minutes, the prevailing spirit seems to be — not to unite with the UCP, but to crush it. I shall quote from the minutes:

District 2 [New York City]: "Went on record against letting any UCP men on the CEC of the united party."

District 3 [Philadelphia]: "Against UCP on the united party."

District 5 [Detroit]: "UCP 'disorganizers' not to be admitted to any official positions."

District 6 [Chicago]: "In case of unity no UCP leaders to be admitted to any responsible position in the party."

In addition I may quote (almost verbatim) what one of the CEC members stated at a CEC meeting in the course of the discussion:

“My conception of unity is this — the CEC, all ours; the District Organizers, all ours; the Sub-district Organizers, all ours; all official positions, all ours; besides, we have an official black list of about 200, whom we shall proceed to eliminate.”

Comrades, it would be criminal on my part to keep silent while such proceedings are resorted to in the party which not only interfere with unity but actually **prevent** it.

Your only justification for such conduct is the fact that you seem to stand on a so-called “decision” of the Communist International — the four months’ membership dues which gives our party a clear majority of delegates at the unity convention. But such a majority, or any kind of majority, does not give us the right of using our majority to lure the UCP to come in as a minority in order to crush it completely, as the decisions of the district conventions imply.

In the face of the incontrovertible fact that the UCP has been admitted to the Communist International; that the UCP is ready to accept the theses and decisions of the Second Congress unconditionally; that the UCP have something of vital importance to contribute to the American Communist movement; that the Executive Committee [of the Communist International] demands full and complete unity between the two parties “party for party” — you still cling to your belief that the UCP is a “centrist party” that you must unite with in order to crush it, etc., despite all the proofs to the contrary.

In addition, you fail to take cognizance of another important factor which makes unity imperative — real, organic, lasting unity, which shall preserve what is best in both parties — and that is: There are many Communists who now stand outside of both parties who are waiting to affiliate as soon as unity is achieved. Also, a number of independent organizations formally affiliated with the Socialist Party have left that party because of the SP rejection of the 21 Points and its opposition to the Communist International. All these additional forces must be rapidly assimilated and welded together into the united party.

The time has come for the Communist move-

ment in America to shed its “swaddling clothes” and to embark upon a full-fledged “mass movement” (not mass party) for the purpose of exhorting a real (not fancied) influence over the working and exploited masses. The class antagonisms are growing ever sharper; the economic crisis and unemployment situation are growing deeper and wider, and Communists must be prepared to win the masses away from the outlook of the opportunistic and reactionary leaders to the cause of the proletarian revolution and for Communism.

All this requires a wide and varied practical preparation and experience not only for the proletariat, but for the inexperienced Communist movement itself. The Communists must prove their right to leadership and confidence of the masses by actually penetrating into every phase of the workers’ lives, their everyday struggles and their mass organizations, etc.

Such a tremendous task demands the liquidation of the schism which exists between both parties as soon as possible. It requires the utilization to the full of every available and capable comrade in the united party, in whatever capacity he may be best fitted — subject of course to the needs and limitations of the party.

Those who at this time strive to perpetuate the now senseless division of Communist forces; those who impede the task of accomplishing organic unity — whether they be in the CP or in the UCP; those who stand in the way of unity by making a fetish of a plan which was intended to facilitate unity — those individuals are not awake to the living realities and needs of the Communist movement, however much they may protest their loyalty to the Communist International.

Comrades of the CEC, I have tried to set forth my position as clearly as possible. I feel that a new orientation is necessary within our own ranks toward unity. I have tried to give the impetus for this orientation in this statement.

I feel that our membership will demand, and rightly so, an accounting of our management of the party’s affairs. Our official position as set forth in the majority’s stand, is untenable, and will be proven so in the near future.

As it is impossible to appear before the membership in person to state my position, I requested the Editorial Committee to throw the pages of the official

organ open for a full and frank discussion of the majority and minority views on this important question. They have refused. I therefore urge the CEC to publish this letter in the party press, and to reverse the decision of the Editorial Committee.

Trusting that you will comply with this request,

I am,

Fraternally yours,

Henry Allen [Maximilian Cohen]

CEC Member of the Communist Party of America

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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