
Letter from Edgar Owens and C.E. Ruthenberg in Chicago to Vasil Kolarov in Moscow, Feb. 17, 1923. †

A document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 149, ll. 1-2.

February 17, 1923. which the National Defense Committee is defending.

W. Kolarow, General Secretary
Moscow, Russia

Dear Comrade:—

The Central Executive Committee of the party instructs me to make the following reply to your circular in regard to the recently established “International Relief for the Fighters of the Revolution”:

There are two organizations which are carrying on the work of defense and relief of comrades who become the victims of persecution of the bourgeoisie in the United States. These organizations are

A— National Defense Committee for Deportees and Political Prisoners.

B — Labor Defense Council.

The National Defense Committee was organized in 1920 after the “red raids” directed by Attorney General Palmer during which some 5,000 of our comrades were arrested and held for deportation and imprisonment. As a result of the activities of the National Defense Committee and its branches, the government was able to deport only two or three hundred of these comrades and only a few were actually imprisoned for a long time. At the present time the National Defense Committee exists only in skeleton form. There are pending about a hundred deportation cases and about twenty cases of prosecution involving imprisonment

In recent months the task of the National Defense Committee has been materially lightened through the granting of amnesty to Communist prisoners by the governors of two states. In the state of Illinois the governor released 18 comrades sentenced to serve from 1 to 5 years each after they had served one week of their sentences. In the state of New York the governor released five comrades whose sentences ran as high as from 5 to 10 years. Some of these comrades released from New York state prisons had served from one to two years in prison.

At the present time there are in prison in the United States only three comrades convicted of Communist activities. These are

Israel Blankenstein, convicted of being an organizer of the underground party and sentenced to serve 2 to 4 [?] years in prison. His case is being appealed to a higher court. Application for amnesty will also be made to the governor of Pennsylvania, the state in which he is imprisoned.

Joseph Martinowitz, convicted of being an organizer of the underground party and sentenced to serve from 3 to 5 years in prison. Amnesty is being asked in his case.

Charles Spinack, convicted of distributing Communist literature and sentenced to serve 5 to 17 years in prison. Amnesty is being asked for in his case.

There is also in a federal prison J.O. Bentall, one

†- This unsigned letter is misdated “February 17, 1922” in the original. Esoteric points of style indicates that the probable author of this document was Edgar Owens of Chicago, head of the National Defense Committee.

of our comrades, who was convicted of opposition to conscription for the army during the war.

In addition to these comrades in prison we have pending in the courts quite a number of cases in which the comrades who are defendants are free on bail, that is, a certain amount of property or money has been placed in the hands of the court for their appearance when the cases come to trial. These cases are:

Benjamin Gitlow, sentenced to 5 to 10 years for publication of the *Left Wing Manifesto* of 1919. After serving two years he was released on bail while the case is being appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States.

Harry Winitsky, sentenced to 5 to 10 years for acting as organizer of the Communist Party in 1919 before the party went underground. Served a year and a half of sentence and was released on bond while the case is being taken to a higher court.

I.E. Ferguson and C.E. Ruthenberg, sentenced to 5 to 10 years for publication of the *Left Wing Manifesto*. Served a year and a half when they were released through a reversal of their conviction by a higher court. The case was referred to the trial court for a new trial and is now pending there.

Thirty-five cases of comrades arrested for distribution of literature in the city of Philadelphia. These cases, after pending in the courts for from two to three years, are now being brought to trial.

B. Labor Defense Council.

The convention of the underground party held at Bridgman, Michigan last August was discovered and raided. Seventeen comrades were arrested on the grounds and five others have since been arrested and charged with being present during the convention. These comrades are: W.Z. Foster, C.E. Ruthenberg, William F. Dunne, Caleb Harrison, Earl R. Browder, Charles Krumbein, Thomas J. O'Flaherty, Norman H. Tallentire, T.R. Sullivan, John Mihelic, Charles Erickson, Eugene Bechtold, Joseph Zack [Kornfeder], William Reynolds, Cyril Lambkin, Seth Nordling, Phillip Aronberg, Alex Bail, Elmer McMillin, Max

Lerner, A. Severino, and Alex Georgian.

The raid at Bridgman came at a time when the class struggle had reached a great height as a result of the strike of nearly a million miners and railroad workers and the use of injunction, courts, and soldiers against these strikers. The Bridgman raid was considered part of the general attack upon the labor movement and the party was able to rally many labor organizations to its defense. Also some liberal bourgeois organizations volunteered their assistance.

The Labor Defense Council was organized as a result of these elements coming to the aid of the party. The National Committee of this organization consists of prominent trade unionists, liberals, and a committee of defendants — party members. The Labor Defense Council has adopted as its declaration of purpose:

“For the defense of the Michigan Criminal Syndicalist defendants prosecuted at the insistence of Federal Secret Service in its drive against organized labor.

“To carry on in connection with the legal defense, a campaign against all infringements upon the right of free speech, free press, and freedom of assemblage and all measures restricting the rights of the workers.”

The net result of the raid on the Bridgman convention of the Communist Party has been to establish closer contact between our party and the union. It gave us the opportunity to go to the unions with the reasons why the Communist Party was an underground organization and to enlist the organized labor movement in the fight for the right of Communists to openly conduct their work. The results gained, while not as great as we hoped, have placed us in a stronger position than before the raid.

Meanwhile we are obliged to fight with all our strength to prevent the bourgeoisie from putting [in prison] the 22 comrades involved in the Michigan case. Among these comrades are the most active and ablest comrades of our party, and if they are lost to the party it will mean a temporary setback to our movement.

The defense of the Michigan case has been turned as much as possible into an attack. We have been successful in exposing the infamous spy system of private detective agencies which has led to a demand even on the part of the bourgeois press for an investigation of their methods by Congress. We shall

continue this method of defense, turning the trials into an attack upon the sham “American democracy.”

In addition to these cases in which our party members are directly involved there are in the federal prisons some fifty to sixty political prisoners convicted of violation of wartime legislation — mostly members of the IWW. There are also a large number of members of the IWW in western state prisons for violation of “criminal syndicalist” laws. Besides Mooney is still in prison, Sacco and Vanzetti are still under the shadow of death sentences. At Herrin, Illinois members of the United Mine Workers are being tried for participation in a raid on a “scab” mine during the strike, in which many strikebreakers were killed.

This, comrades, is the situation in the United States so far as the victims of the class struggle are concerned.

We welcome the establishment of the “International Relief for the Fighters of the Revolution” and through our National Defense Committee for Deportees and Political Prisoners we will be glad to affiliate with the international organization and cooperate with it in every way.

With Communist Greetings,

Fraternally yours,

Executive Secretary, Workers Party of America
[C.E. Ruthenberg]

National Secretary, National Defense Committee for
Deportees and Political Prisoners.
[Edgar Owens]

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.
Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2005. • Free reproduction permitted.