
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by Israel Amter:

Notes from an Interview

Conducted by Oakley C. Johnson

and Ann Rivington, 1940.

Handwritten notes in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society,
Box 9, Folder 1, microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

I met C.E. Ruthenberg for the first time at Left Wing meetings in the fall of 1918. He made a wonderful impression — calm, austere, with a certain warmth, yet a certain aloofness. Together with [Nicholas] Hourwich, [Louis] Fraina, and [Boris] Reinstein, he was very active in formation of the Left Wing.

In all my relations with Ruthenberg there was nothing personal. Outside of conventions and party meetings, I did not meet him much. There are stories of real heroism about C.E. in the struggles of the Socialist Party in Ohio, but I had no contact with these events.

I was elected a delegate to the Communist Party convention in Chicago [Sept. 1-7, 1919], but I could not go.

I had contact with him came after the Party moved its headquarters to New York [early in 1920]. I was a Sub-District Organizer and used to meet him at underground headquarters on West 40th Street.

“Scott” [Karlis Janson], the contact, brought Lenin’s writings in German. I read German fluently, fortunately.

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At the first underground convention in Bridgman [Joint Unity Convention: May 26-31, 1920], Ruthenberg [was the individual] leading it, making the main report. The convention was held to unify the Communist Labor Party with the Ruthenberg faction of the Communist Party. I was in the Ruthenberg wing. The CLP included

[Max] Bedacht, [L.E.] Katterfeld, [Ella Reeve] Bloor, etc. — they were all led by C.E. Ruthenberg.

[Jacob] Golos, [Charles] Dirba, [Johnny] Ballam, and others were on the extreme left in the separate underground Communist Party group [that did not attend the Bridgman convention]. They were sectarian as hell.

It was Katterfeld that selected the place for the first convention. It was very successful. He again selected Bridgman for a second secret convention [Aug. 17-22, 1922]. The place was on Lake Michigan.

The Bridgman place was at a crossroads where the roads converged. We noticed cars stopped along the road. Bill Dunne was assigned the task of finding out who these were. He masked himself in black glasses and a cap and he went to a hotel near the train station in Bridgman to ask about reserving rooms... He spotted Jacob Spolansky of the Red Squad of Chicago as the first person getting off the train. Dunne came back and reported to the convention. The convention was called together and warned of the presence of police.

The political situation involved the question of organization. Could there be a Communist Party under existing conditions? We, in a very sectarian manner, decided there could not. The Party, ever since the first blows of [Attorney General] Palmer in 1920 was very sectarian.

The “Liquidators” and the “Geese” were the two factional groups. I was a leader of the Geese, using the name “Ford,” and together with “Dubner” — Abram Jakira — we issued a thesis that there couldn’t be a revolution unless there was an underground party. We were the underground group in the United Communist Party. We undergrounders showed sectarianism during the Brooklyn Transport Strike, using it as a basis to issue a call for revolution [in a leaflet]...

Ruthenberg was a Liquidator — seeking to liquidate the underground party. He wanted to organize the above ground party. This group led in organizing the Workers Party.

[Jay] Lovestone, a Liquidator, together with Bertram Wolfe and [Herbert] Benjamin, organized a secret “Center” group. Wolfe and Benjamin were ostensibly in the Geese, but actually [functioned with] the Liquidators. At the convention we discovered this group (the underground-liquidators among the Geese). The Liquidators would have captured the convention if not for the raid.

As soon as we knew of the raid we decided the two groups should meet separately and quickly select delegates. Then the convention

would be called together, candidates would be elected, and the convention would disband.

The two groups met separately to elect an Executive Secretary and disband. Each group presented a candidate. There was no discussion. The Geese had a majority, but the leadership elected was Liquidationist. C.E. outlined briefly the immediate task. He was elected by both groups.¹ Foster, because of sectarianism and the strength of the Geese in Chicago, was initially not elected. He was known as a Liquidationist. There was great pressure, [however, and he was finally] elected. This illustrates the depth of our sectarianism. We elected a Central Committee and C.E. [as Executive Secretary] and disbanded.

We expected the police to surround the convention, but the police waited for their warrants. The night was terribly foggy. We decided to get everyone away as quickly as possible. The contact men [Comintern Reps], Central Committee, and foreign-born left first, by order. It was a very romantic night. It was so foggy! When walking across the lawn we had to carry a lamp, the fog was so deep. I bumped into C.E. several times.

C.E. Ruthenberg was supposed to go, especially.² But he had the psychology of a captain who wouldn't leave the ship till the last sailor is out. And he *didn't* go, he stayed. Cars were sent out, beginning at midnight [August 21/22] to Chicago and St. Joseph.

One car went after another in the night. At about 6 am we met on the other side of the road, got into a car, and rushed past the station. Ours was the last car that got out. C.E. was left behind, he would not go. Of course, this was a mistaken notion. About 18 or 19 people were caught in the raid and Ruthenberg was one.³ It was a

¹ Actually there were two Executive Secretaries elected by the Bridgman delegates. Ruthenberg was elected Executive Secretary of the "above ground" Workers Party of America, while Abram Jakira, henceforth adopting the new pseudonym "J. Miller," was elected Executive Secretary of the underground organization. In the aftermath of the convention the underground party quickly atrophied, however, while the WPA exhibited solid growth in membership. On April 7, 1923 a small convention in New York City attended by about 35 delegates terminated the underground organization.

² Ruthenberg had only been released on bond from imprisonment at Sing Sing penitentiary four months previously after having sat for 18 months on a conviction of "Criminal Anarchism" in New York State.

³ Seventeen were taken in the August 22, 1922 Bridgman raid. Three more attendees, including William Z. Foster and Earl Browder, were arrested in Chicago on August 26 on charges of having been present and taken to Berrien County Jail in St. Joseph, Michigan.

romantic mistake, but natural. Ruthenberg was austere and romantic but could not be flustered at all. He was completely under control at all times, one couldn't drive him into a panic.

There was a stool pigeon there, a guy from Philadelphia [Francis A. Morrow] — a full time Jimmy Higgins worker.⁴ The first morning, en route to the convention, two of us from New York met Morrow and another person from Philadelphia in a home. On the way he had to step into a drugstore for a minute for medicine. We waited. Just as we were leaving, two motorcycle cops drove up. We were startled but they went to another house. We rushed to the train station. Everybody in the station seemed to me to be a stool pigeon.

We went to Cleveland from Philadelphia, then to Chicago, then to St. Joe [St. Joseph, Michigan]. Then we were taken to the convention. The police must have followed us!

[Edward] Lindgren, now out of the party, was an organizer who was similarly followed in 1921 to [the UCP's] editorial offices. They raided it and arrested Jakira, Lindgren, myself, etc.

The notes and records of the Convention, including typewriters and minutes and so on, were buried on the grounds. Bill Dunne was the head of the committee, along with, I think, Tom O'Flaherty to conceal the material. But the stool pigeon knew — they got everything. The names we used were party names, [some of which they] couldn't identify.

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In arguments, Ruthenberg never allowed anger to set him off. Even during passionate phases of strife he didn't allow either passion or antagonism to dominate him. He commanded respect, even from the capitalists. He was a man of real dignity. He had a keen Marxist understanding on *general* questions, but did not have that close contact with workers — the masses — that Foster did. The Workers Party was approved abroad, not approved by the undergrounders.

The question of the Farmer-Labor Party arose after the Workers Party was organized. That party was inclined to take a wrong position

⁴ Reference is to a short story by Ben Hanford, remade as a novel by Upton Sinclair, about the rank-and-file party worker "Jimmy Higgins," who without seeking glory or gaining recognition willingly did the innumerable little "grunt work" jobs that were essential to the success of the Socialist Party, thereby actually performing heroic deeds in his own limited way.

in support of [Robert] LaFollette. The Workers Party later was known as the Workers (Communist) Party.

None dared to attack Ruthenberg. Lovestone and Pepper, [his factional associates], most of all connived to split the Communist Party and did all in their power to undermine the leadership of C.E.

In January 1923 I went to the USSR [as the American delegate to the Executive Committee of the Communist International]. I returned in October 1924. When I got back, the first person I saw was Foster. His first greeting after “Hello, Comrade,” was “Do you think we should have a Farmer-Labor Party?”

During the latter part of Ruthenberg’s life I was in Ohio. I was there from 1925 to 1929. Sometimes C.E. would come to Cleveland for a meeting. He was always a great stimulus to the whole Party organization. He was well-known, a Cleveland boy, always a help, and well loved. His visits were moments of extreme illumination. News of his death came as a great shock to the whole Party.

I would characterize Ruthenberg as the most advanced American leader on the political field we had at that time, a man who knew thoroughly the needs of the people and who formulated policies to meet those needs. He tried, more than anyone else, to apply Marxism to conditions in the USA. He was the one man who [during factional struggles] maintained the confidence of the Party. He was the force that held the Party together.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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