
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by Alfred Wagenknecht:

Excerpt 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 6, Microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

I came back to the Cleveland from Washington state in 1915 or 1916. Already in this period C.E. had convictions about the Right and Left wing. O.G. Van Schoyck was the Ohio State Secretary then. C.E. asked me to run for State Secretary — and I won.¹ C.E. had already given Cleveland a lot of attention and built up the Socialist Party there and he thought the same attention should be given to the state. After I was elected the State Office was moved from Columbus to Cleveland and Party membership rose from 2,000 to above 5,000. In this period we got Scott Nearing to join the Socialist Party and lecture in the state. Bishop William Montgomery Brown also came close to us. The Bishop wanted the State Office to come to his hometown, Galion, Ohio. He said he would finance the move and the costs of the office, but we declined in the interests of the movement.

When I was in Columbus to move the office, Van Schoyck came in and took off his good suit and put on an old suit. He said his good clothes got dirty. The office was full of cockroaches — he used to eat there. I took the few records and left all the rest of the junk.

• • • • •

When we were in Canton jail in 1918, Debs talked with Ruthenberg but not with me or Baker due to prison regulations. C.E. and I were assigned to work in an old, antiquated laundry, which used a hand-worked washing machine. We had to work the lever back and

¹ The election was held in November 1916.

forth for 15 minutes for each tubful. We were doing this work — washing, rinsing, wringing. We rebelled. After we made kicks we were taken to the dark hole and were hung up by our wrists.

When C.E. was suspended by his wrists in Canton jail, Wolf said he was crying — he was in great pain, mad, in a rage.² On the basis of the protest against the treatment C.E. got, all of us got better treatment after that. We had a compromise in which we agreed to work a few days more before being shifted to other work. We were driven out to various farms where we would work, cutting grass and so forth. One place we had little to do, so we bought food from a friendly farmer and had picnics for a couple of days. Later, C.E. got work in a jailer's office, bookkeeping. He had this task from then on.

C.E. and I were in the same cell for a while. We used to play checkers. I would sneak apples into the cell, slipped up my sleeve, and share them with C.E. I remained in farm work, Charley Baker was in the bakery most of the time. We used to have banquets of white bread and apples.

We had quite a conversation over the pamphlet that C.E. wrote in the jail — *Growing Toward Socialism*. C.E., being in the office, could get paper and supplies to write with. He kept things out of sight, hidden. He was telling me about its content. We argued about it — I thought it was a little rightist.³

² C.E. Ruthenberg, Alfred Wagenknecht, and Charles Baker received a sentence of one year of hard labor at the Canton state workhouse for obstructing the draft on July 21, 1917. The sentence was confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court on January 15, 1918. Owing to their status as war resisters during a period of fanatical popular patriotism, upon arrival at Canton the three were singled out for particularly onerous work in the prison laundry. This they collectively refused to perform. As a result, isolation and stress-position torture was used in an effort to comply obedience. Ruthenberg was the first to be selected for this treatment. He was suspended for a full work day, hung from the ceiling by his hands, his feet barely able to reach the floor. Visitors to the prison discovered Ruthenberg being tortured, however, and a scandal ensued, resulting in a change of prison regime.

³ C.E. Ruthenberg, *Are We Growing Toward Socialism?* (Cleveland: Local Cleveland, Socialist Party, 1917). While Wagenknecht is adamant that this was a prison writing by Ruthenberg, it must be noted that Ruthenberg's sentence was confirmed only on Jan. 15, 1918 and that he was released from jail on Dec. 8, 1918. In other words, for Ruthenberg to have written *Are We Growing Toward Socialism?* in prison, it must have been a 1918 production — not 1917, as appears on the title page. Unfortunately, issues from 1917 of Local Cleveland's newspaper, *Socialist News*, have not survived to allow confirmation of this date. While there is no doubt that Wagenknecht and Ruthenberg must have debated the content of this tract in their cell, it is unlikely that this pamphlet was actually written in Canton and smuggled out of jail.

We were originally indicted over a speech made in Public Square in Cleveland. There were tens of thousands of leaflets that were got out, illegally distributed by a grapevine system. A young Socialist named Hennesy, now in Minneapolis, got 3 years for it.⁴ At our trial, although our indictment was for a speech, they had in court a whole bundled of the leaflets, filched at the post office. They wanted us to testify if we knew anything about leaflets. Of course we did *not* know anything. Hennesy was in charge of the state underground distribution system. He got supplies placed in various centers, where they were distributed.

When we were released from Canton we had a big breakfast. They came to jail and got us and took us to the home of Mrs. Kitty Hall in Canton. She had a family. Also there were Margaret Prevey, Rose Ruthenberg, Hortense Allison,⁵ Morris Wolf, Carl Guillod, and local people. Breakfast was served in the home in Canton at about 10:00 am.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · May 2012 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.

⁴ Ammon A. Hennesy from Columbus, Ohio, received a sentence of 9 months for refusal to register for the draft, served in a Delaware jail. He was also convicted of distributing literature against the draft, for which he received a two year prison term. See: Stephen M. Kohn, *American Political Prisoners: Prosecutions under the Espionage and Sedition Acts*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994; pg. 106.

⁵ Wagenknecht's first wife, Hortense, was the sister of Socialist and Communist activist Elmer Allison.