

Formation of the Proletarian Party of America, 1913-1923:

Part 1: John Keracher's Proletarian University and the Establishment of the Communist Party of America

by Tim Davenport

With his wife and daughter vacationing in lush Berrien County on the shimmering shores of Lake Michigan, Socialist journalist J. Louis Engdahl found himself forced to spend his time elsewhere engaged in a less pleasurable pursuit — earning a living. The long-anticipated 1919 Emergency National Convention of the Socialist Party of America had finally drawn to a close, with Engdahl reporting on the scene on behalf of *The Eye Opener*, the official Socialist Party weekly which he edited.¹ The weather in Chicago, Engdahl observed, had seemed as though it was “actually blistering.” The political rhetoric hurled to and fro during the week by erstwhile comrades no doubt seemed equally scalding. Over the span of a few short days, the Socialist Party had become three organizations, Engdahl noted in a letter to his wife Pauline. The number of political parties making their appeal to the American proletariat had nearly doubled.

"The working class now has five parties to divide its forces," he grimly remarked, ticking off the ranks: the Socialist Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Communist Party, the Communist Labor Party, and the "plain, everyday" Labor Party. "That ought to be enough for the time being," he continued, adding earnestly that "in fact it certainly ought to be the maximum number possible."² Engdahl optimistically declared that the ensuing months would usher in a new “period of unity,” during which the forces of American radicalism would reunite under the banner of the Socialist Party.³

Louis Engdahl was gravely mistaken, however. Not only would the fissures between these five radical organizations in the United States prove to be deep and extraordinarily difficult to breach, but within a year there would be yet another radical organization born in America, a sixth party throwing elbows in the fray — the Proletarian Party of America (PPA).

¹ *The Eye Opener* succeeded *The American Socialist* as the SPA's official voice when the latter lost its mailing privileges during World War I through the action of Woodrow Wilson's Postmaster General, Albert Burleson.

² J. Louis Engdahl in Chicago to Pauline Levitin Engdahl in Lakeside, Michigan, September 7, 1919. J. Louis Engdahl papers, University of Michigan, box 3.

³ J. Louis Engdahl to Pauline Levitin Engdahl, Sept. 7, 1919. *Op. cit.*

I. Emergence of the Keracher Factional Group.

It is a small irony of history that the Proletarian Party, an organization which later gloried in the fact that it alone of all its Marxist peers had rejected reliance upon language federations in the building of its organization was itself the product of a European immigrant.

John Keracher was born January 16, 1880, in Dundee, Scotland, a small semi-urban enclave on the pastoral east side of the nation. As a young man, Keracher drunk of the socialist waters, coming under the influence of the “impossibilist” Scottish socialist tradition, in which the figure of Socialist Labor Party of American (SLP) leader Daniel DeLeon occupied no small place. While Keracher later obscured or omitted all details of his political life prior to 1909, the anti-reformist ideology and unflinching revolutionary purism of the Scottish left-socialist tradition seems to have clearly sunk into his pores.

In his early twenties, Keracher left Scotland for England, where he lived for a number of years before emigrating to the United States in 1909.⁴ In America, Keracher settled in Detroit, Michigan, where he followed in a family tradition of shoemaking as the proprietor of the Reliance Shoe House, a small shop located at 612 Dix Avenue in Detroit.⁵ The back room of the Keracher’s store after hours would soon ultimately provide a convenient rent-paid location for the conduction of nightly study classes of Marx’s *Capital*, a book which the radical Scot regarded as socialist gospel.⁶

In April 1910, Keracher joined the Socialist Party of Michigan, state affiliate of the Socialist Party of America (SPA). While his first two years in the organization seem to have been largely uneventful, by 1913 Keracher had gathered around himself in Detroit a group of adherents of disciplined and doctrinaire Marxism and had begun to establish study groups throughout the state — the beginning of a factional organization.⁷

Eschewing the ameliorative reforms traditionally cobbled on to the Socialist program for their reinforcement of the capitalist system, Keracher and his colleagues, who included a number of individuals who had cut their ideological teeth in the “impossibilist” Socialist Party of Canada, managed to win adoption by Michigan organization of a “short program” devoid of such minimum demands at its July 1914

⁴ Al Wysocki, "John Keracher — His Life and Work," *Proletarian News* [Chicago], March 1958, page. 3.

⁵ Warren W. Grimes, "The Proletarian Party of America," memorandum of July 20, 1921. DoJ/Bol Investigative Files, NARA collection M-1085, reel 940, document 202600-1778-45X.

⁶ Oakley C. Johnson, "The Early Socialist Party of Michigan: An Assignment in Autobiography," *The Centennial Review*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring 1966), pg. 155.

⁷ Dennis E. Batt in Detroit to the Central Executive Committee [sic.] of the Communist International [ECCI] in Moscow, typescript, circa January 1921. Carbon copy in Proletarian Party papers, University of Michigan, box 7, series 8, folder 3. This letter of Batt to the Comintern, albeit written from the perspective of a partisan of Keracher, provides among the best narrative accounts of the development of the Michigan Socialist organization and is heavily relied upon here.

state convention, held in Lansing.⁸ The new radical program of the Michigan party proved no impediment to further growth, as the group's membership rolls continued to swell. Keracher was able to record another great factional triumph in the Socialist Party of Michigan when he was elected State Secretary in 1915, succeeding another shoe store owner who previously held the post, constructive socialist Joseph Warnock of Harbor Springs.⁹ The state's 1914 "no reforms" platform was adopted one again at September 1916 state convention held in Muskegon, with minor modifications.¹⁰ Keracher's influence upon the party seemed sure.

The eruption of the war in Europe changed the dynamics of the Michigan party organization. Nationalism and violence abroad brought an increasing number of non-English speaking members into the Socialist Party's foreign language branches, a trend accelerated by revolutionary events in Russia beginning in March 1917, indicative of a less-than-total grip upon the party apparatus.¹¹ A bare majority of Michigan's delegates sent to the Socialist Party's 1917 Emergency National Convention in St. Louis, five of the nine, were members of the radical study groups initiated by Keracher.¹² At the convention this group rejected the staunchly anti-militarist majority report authored by left winger C.E. Ruthenberg of Ohio and Centrists Morris Hillquit and Algernon Lee of New York as inadequate, instead voting *en bloc* in favor of an alternative war program advanced on the floor by New York attorney Louis B. Boudin.¹³ The potential split of the convention's anti-war contingent represented by the Boudin alternative resolution was averted, however, and the Ruthenberg-Hillquit-Lee majority resolution passing with a

⁸ "Michigan State Emergency Convention," *The Proletarian* [Detroit], vol. 2, no. 3 (July 1919), pp. 14-15. This program was also commonly known as the "One Plank Platform" in that it only stood for a single objective: the abolition of capitalism.

⁹ Johnson, "The Early Socialist Party of Michigan," *op. cit.*, pg. 155. Dennis Batt's January 1921 letter to ECCI mistakenly asserts that Keracher assumed the position of Michigan State Secretary in 1913.

¹⁰ "Report of State Convention," *The Michigan Socialist* [Detroit], no. 14 (October 13, 1916), pg. 2.

¹¹ By the Fall of 1916, that is, prior to the Russian Revolution, Local Detroit Socialist Party included functioning branches conducted in the following non-English languages: German, Hungarian, "German Hungarian," Polish (2), Finnish (2), Lithuanian, Latvian, Yiddish, Armenian, "South Slavic" (Croatian or Slovenian), Russian, Ukrainian, and Czech. See: "Branch Directory," *The Michigan Socialist* [Detroit], no. 8 (Sept. 1, 1916), pg. 4. Later in that same year, a Slovak branch was mentioned. Even at this early date, Local Detroit characterized itself as "chiefly" comprised of "foreign-speaking branches" and a special appeal had to be made to them to support the English-language organ of Local Detroit, *The Michigan Socialist*. See: "To the Foreign Speaking Branches," *The Michigan Socialist*, no. 5 (Aug. 11, 1916), pg. 2.

¹² The five Michigan delegates in question were John Keracher, Delbert Earley, and Al Renner of Detroit, Edward O. Foss of Muskegon, and H.A. Hedden of Jackson.

¹³ John Keracher, Unpublished history of the Proletarian Party, circa 1934, pg. 11. Manuscript in Proletarian Party papers, University of Michigan, box 1, series 1, folder 20. Keracher notes that "our delegates united with a few others opposed to the SP leadership" and that "Louis Boudin drafted the resolution for the group" — indicating a definite oppositionist intent in the movement for the Boudin alternative program. The Boudin resolution differed more in phrasing than in political intent from the radical anti-war St. Louis Resolution authored by Morris Hillquit, C.E. Ruthenberg, and Algernon Lee and which was adopted by an overwhelming majority of delegates. This document shall henceforth be listed here as "Keracher 1934 History."

strong majority, going down in history as the “St. Louis Resolution.” The episode proved to be the first of several examples of doctrinal purism, a fundamental characteristic of the Proletarian Party’s ideology.

The demographics of the swelling Michigan party caught up with the Keracher group at the 1917 Michigan state convention as control fell to party Regulars. The moderates won control of the state party apparatus and passed a new program including ameliorative “minimum demands.” The interlude out of the limelight proved to be brief for Kerecher’s forces, however. In December 1917 the editor of Local Detroit’s official organ, *The Michigan Socialist*, was jailed under the so-called Espionage Act. Control of the paper gradually slid to the Keracher group, who were temperate in espousing their particular strong views. This weekly tabloid continued to be published until its suspension owing to loss of mailing status in March 1918.¹⁴

While control of *The Michigan Socialist* had proven short-lived, its demise presented a golden opportunity for the Keracher group — a socialist information vacuum which eased the launch of a new factional publication. This new tabloid newspaper was called *The Proletarian*, with the first issue hitting the street dated May 1918.¹⁵ The debut issue of the new paper laid out the fundamental principles of Keracher’s faction in a lead editorial:

We will leave reforms of all kinds to those who think the present social system worth reforming. For our part, the revolutionary watchword, “the abolition of the system,” will be the keynote. * * *

The workers must gain political power in order to get possession of the government. It will then be possible for them to use the institution of the State for its final function — the abolition of all classes by the socialization of the means of wealth production, to the end that the toilers, both intellectual and manual, will reap the full reward of their social labors.¹⁶

Mark this well: *the establishment and propagation of Marxist study circles of a particular type was the hallmark of John Keracher and his evolving Michigan group* — in the Socialist Party of Michigan, as the independent Proletarian University of America, in the Communist Party of America, as the Proletarian Party of America. The task of the revolutionary movement in the current period was deemed to be the training of working class cadres in the “science” of Marxism in preparation for the inevitable revolutionary overturn of capitalism and the establishment of the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”

“Every Local should maintain at least one weekly study class,” *The Proletarian* enthusiastically declared, encouraging its establishment around the selection, reading, and discussion of an elementary book, such as *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels. Meetings were to be led by a “class director” selected based upon experience

¹⁴ The microfilm run of *The Michigan Socialist*, with master negative held by the University of Michigan, is missing several of these important final issues.

¹⁵ The first 12 issues of *The Proletarian* (May 1918 to April 1919) may be found on reel 1 of the “Miscellaneous Socialist Party Newspapers” microfilm held by the Tamiment Library of New York University, title R-7276. The paper switched to a magazine format in 1919.

¹⁶ “The Policy of This Publication,” *The Proletarian* [Detroit], no. 1 (May 1918), pg. 1.

and knowledge of the Marxian literary corpus, and the extremely paternalist standard procedure of the study groups detailed in print:

The director calls on one of the students to stand and start reading. After a few paragraphs are read, the director, who by the way, should be a good reader, reads the passage over again carefully and calls on the student to explain what has been read, after which he asks for additional explanation from the class. If the students are a bit slow he should try to get it over to them by questioning before proceeding to cover the points missed.... If the student knows that he will be required not only himself to understand, but to analyze and explain what he has read he will be much more attentive and think harder and that is the prime object of working class education — to add thinking capacity to direct and objectify the workers' resentment toward capitalist society.¹⁷

The launch of *The Proletarian* drew the ire of critics of the paper's line, who deemed the publication "hopelessly impossible," "dogmatic," and "narrow." Keracher replied that his paper had no intention of being any more broad than that necessary "to include everything that has to do with Socialism." The narrow course was actively embraced, excluding "anything that is not *Socialism*."¹⁸

Keracher continued to hammer home his belief that worker education stood as the fundamental task of the socialist movement:

In the past we have not lacked theoretical basis for our movement, but in the consistent application of theory to practice we have been weak. So weak that the majority of the membership is badly confused as to the purpose of the movement — not to speak of the great army of workers outside. There is only one hope for the situation. THE WORKERS MUST BE TAUGHT. * * *

By its ability to master this Socialist knowledge the working class proves its fitness to assume control of society. In the struggle for emancipation, Socialist theory is the guide to correct action. Without it the movement flounders about aimlessly, dissipating funds and energy in fruitless effort.¹⁹

Despite the existence of their new publication to advance their political agenda, the 1918 Michigan state convention, held at the party's "House of the Masses" auditorium in Detroit from September 7-8, delivered yet another defeat to Keracher and his co-thinkers. Control of the state organization was again lost to the Regulars, organized around young attorney Maurice Sugar, who was backed by the powerful language federations of the state.²⁰ On the final day of the convention there came an attempt by the Keracher group to secure state funding and official recognition of *The Proletarian* — a move vehemently opposed by the Regulars on the grounds that the publication did not support the policies of the Socialist Party's National Office. After a

¹⁷ "Working Class Education," *The Proletarian* [Detroit], no. 1 (May 1918), pg. 4.

¹⁸ Editorial Board [John Keracher], "Socialism or Slush — An Answer to Our Critics," *The Proletarian* [Detroit], no. 2 (June 1918), pg. 2.

¹⁹ [Keracher], "Socialism or Slush — An Answer to Our Critics," *op. cit.*

²⁰ Batt in Detroit to ECCI in Moscow, c. Jan. 1921, *op. cit.*

protracted and bitter debate among the 56 assembled delegates, recognition and funding for the monthly was denied.²¹

That night, with the convention adjourned *sine die*, a number of defeated Left Wing delegates assembled at the office of *The Proletarian* to discuss “ways and means of systematizing and promoting the study of Socialist Classics.” The result of this conclave was the establishment of a new organization, “the Proletarian University of America,” governed by a board of seven. Headquarters were to be maintained in *The Proletarian’s* Detroit office. The mission of the Proletarian University was to send out organizers and teachers to organize study circles in Socialist Party locals which desired affiliation and were willing to bear half the cost incurred in sending out such requested help.²² The Board of Management of the new organization included the “Big Three” of Detroit — John Keracher, Dennis Batt, and Al Renner — as well as Carlton A. Talbott of Flint, Delbert E. Earley of Grand Ledge, J.W. Brown of Pigeon, and Dr. Edward O. Foss of Muskegon.²³ Significant local circles were soon established in Rochester, New York, under Secretary Charles M. O'Brien; in Buffalo, New York; and in Portland, Oregon, headed by Harry M. Wicks.²⁴

It would be less than half a year between the defeat of the Keracher group at the 1918 Michigan convention and the next party gathering. The 1919 convention of the Socialist Party of Michigan was held in one day, February 24, in Grand Rapids and was attended by 51 "harmonious" delegates. As State Secretary Bloomenberg had recently resigned his position and a replacement was needed, one of the initial (and telling) actions of the convention saw the election of Proletarian University chief John Keracher to fill the unexpired balance of this term.²⁵ The work of the Proletarian University was formally endorsed and the locals and branches of the state called upon to work for the increased circulation of *The Proletarian*, *The Ohio Socialist*, and *The Revolutionary Age* — the organs of the Left Wing movement. The February 1919 convention once again adopted a platform bereft of ameliorative reforms, standing solely upon the maximum demand calling for the abolition of the wage system and the establishment of an industrial republic. While similar state programs had first been adopted at the state conventions of 1914 and 1916, this time Keracher’s forces sought to permanently consolidate their anti-reformist line through passage of a constitutional amendment:

Any member, Local, or Branch of a Local, advocating legislative reforms or supporting organizations formed for the purpose of advocating such reforms, shall be expelled from the

²¹ Christopher H. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912-1950*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988; pg. 75.

²² “Study Classes,” *The Proletarian* [Detroit], no. 6 (October 1918), pg. 2.

²³ “Study Classes,” *op. cit.* The phrase “Big Three” in reference to Keracher, Batt, and Renner is documented by Proletarian University faction activist Oakley Johnson and seems to have been a moniker in general at the time. See: Johnson, “The Early Socialist Party of Michigan,” *op. cit.*, pg. 158.

²⁴ “The Proletarian University of America,” *The Proletarian* [Detroit], vol. 2, no. 1 (May 1919), pp. 11-12.

²⁵ W.E. Reynolds, “The Michigan Convention,” *The Ohio Socialist* [Cleveland], whole no. 55 (March 12, 1919), pg. 2.

Socialist Party. The State Executive Committee is authorized to revoke the charter of any Local that does not conform to this amendment.²⁶

A second controversial resolution was adopted by the convention, this calling religion a social phenomenon which required explanation and instructing all party agitators to take on the matter from the perspective of historical materialism.²⁷

After a noontime luncheon prepared by the women of Local Grand Rapids, the convention dealt with the Left Wing Manifesto composed by Louis C. Fraina, accepting it only insofar as it advocated the abolition of capitalism, while rejecting that section which urged economic organization of the workers on the basis of industrial unions. Decisions of the gathering were referred to the membership for ratification by means of a mail ballot. Its planned work accomplished without factional fireworks, the convention declared itself closed *sine die* at 6 pm and its delegates headed for home.²⁸

Although they did not realize it at the time, the delegates of the February 1919 Michigan State Convention had placed the Socialist Party of Michigan on a collision course with the Socialist Party of America.

II. The Left Wing Section of the Socialist Party and Its Opponents.

American intervention in the "imperialist war" in Europe in the spring of 1917 and the successful Bolshevik revolution of November of that same year proved to be a double-headed sledgehammer which reshaped the Socialist Party of America. As patriotic fervor swept across America, many among the SPA's conservative wing were quick to defect, including among their number some of the organization's public faces: writers and intellectuals, former members of the National Executive Committee and candidates for high office.²⁹ Party locals in small towns, isolated and under attack by the forces of propriety and patriotism, withered and vanished as the English-speaking moderate wing of the party atrophied. The dangers of membership were made manifest by a series of arrests launched under the provisions of the cynically named "Espionage Act." At the same time, party growth was hampered by the ban of many socialist propaganda papers from the mails, owing to the SPA's unremitting opposition to the European war.

²⁶ Cited in Adolph Germer, Circular letter to Michigan Locals and Branches of the Socialist Party of America, June 3, 1919. Mimeographed document of the National Office Press Service, Chicago. Copy in Theodore Draper Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, box 30.

²⁷ Reynolds, "The Michigan Convention," *op. cit.*

²⁸ Reynolds, "The Michigan Convention," *op. cit.*

²⁹ A very partial list of public figures leaving the party included popular writers Upton Sinclair, C.E. Russell, Algie Simons, William English Wallace, and John Spargo, former Presidential candidate Allan Benson, "millionaire socialist" Graham Phelps Stokes, journalists Emanuel Julius and Louis Kopelin, and former party leaders Henry Slobodin and Carl Thompson.

There remained within the Socialist Party a solid core, the organization's anti-war Center and Left, factions joined together in common cause. As time moved on, however, the tense domestic and international situation took its toll. The party's increasingly radical rank and file came to feel more and more ill at ease with their rather more moderate elected leaders, seeing them as tentative rather than tenacious in pursuit of the socialist program and duplicitous rather than dedicated to the party's militant anti-war program. Moreover, the unexpected Bolshevik victory in Russia in the fall of 1917 and the regime's survival in the face of civil war and foreign intervention, energized those believing in a revolutionary path to the socialist commonwealth through cataclysmic struggle. As the cautious and cowardly exited, impatient and energetic new members flooded into the SPA, including a large proportion to the party's non-English branches.

The Socialist Party had for years been numerically dominated by its foreign language federations, parallel organizations which consolidated all the Socialist Party branches speaking a given language under a national umbrella. These non-English branches comprising nearly 45% of the organization's total membership by the year of American entry into World War I. With the victory of the Bolsheviks, the trend toward a non-English membership only increased, with the SPA's federations associated with the primary languages of the old Russian empire — Russian, Yiddish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Latvian — experiencing marked growth. The struggles of the revolutionary movements in Finland, Hungary, and Germany, seemingly on the verge of victory in a dramatic final conflict with capitalism, similarly motivated politically attuned Finnish, Hungarian, and German-language speakers in America to join the Socialist Party. Growth of the party's non-English membership ballooned, exceeding half of the total party membership and approaching the 55% mark at the end of the first quarter of 1919.³⁰

As the brutal European war ground to an end in November 1918, the Socialist Party's membership — many of whom could not themselves vote owing to their citizenship status or lack of a permanent residence — found themselves tied up in yet another costly and largely ineffectual Socialist electoral campaign. Pent up dissatisfaction among the radicalized rank and file with the party's moderate leadership exploded. Although American revolutionaries could only dream about conquering the capitalist state, being thoroughly out-manned, out-gunned, and out-financed by the combined forces of order, there remained factional war as a satisfying proxy for class struggle. The Centrist leadership of Executive Secretary Adolph Germer, a former Illinois miner, the erudite Morris Hillquit, the pugnacious James Oneal, and their fellows was painted in stark tones. The so-called "yellow" leadership of the SPA, only a few months earlier allies of the "reds" in the struggle against militarism and political repression, was now cast as a bulwark of capitalism and an impediment to the successful victory of socialism in America.

³⁰ For a Federation-by-Federation and month-by-month breakdown of actually paid membership figures for the SPA, see Tim Davenport (ed.), "Membership Series by Language Federation for the Socialist Party of America: Dues Stamps Sold by Month, January 1917 to 1919." Corvallis, OR: 1000 Flowers Publishing, 2007. Available online at < <http://www.archive.org/details/SpaMembershipByFederations> >

An organized Left Wing faction emerged and united behind a programmatic document written by a 28-year old former member of the Socialist Labor Party, Louis C. Fraina. This Left Wing Section pushed forward this program and its slate of candidates in the biannual Socialist Party elections in an attempt to move the Socialist Party of America from an electoral to a revolutionary path, calling for a new emphasis upon the “mass action” of organized and unorganized workers. The faction’s immediate goal was expressed in a straightforward slogan — “Winning the Socialist Party for Revolutionary Socialism.” An Emergency National Convention to consecrate a new party line and new party leadership was anxiously sought by the emerging radical faction.

The Keracher group in Michigan initially greeted the emergence of the organized Left Wing Section with cautious optimism, crediting Ludwig Lore’s New York magazine, *The Class Struggle*, with having “done much to pave the way for more profound thinking on the part of American socialists” and noting with approval the emergence of a Western Left Wing centered in Portland, Seattle, and Butte, as well as a growing radical movement in Minnesota.³¹ As for the primary organ of the Left Wing movement, *The Revolutionary Age*, published in Boston under the editorship of Fraina, the Michiganders were more temperate. An authoritative article in the March 1919 issue of *The Proletarian*, likely written by Keracher, characterized the ideas of Fraina’s Left Wing Manifesto as “in the main correct,” while criticizing the document’s call for an undefined “Mass Action” and “seriously question[ing]” the advisability of the manifesto’s emphasis upon industrial unionism:

The framework of the new social order requires no building within the old. It is already built — in the form of highly organized, socialized production, which by the way is in no way connected with industrial unionism. *The task that presents itself is to abolish the present class ownership.* Let us not fritter away our time dreaming about how affairs will be administered in the future social order. Let us rather take up the work of clarifying out movement; let us cast out the dross of legislative reform, and carry to the working class an uncompromising message, rallying them for *the first step* — the conquest of political power.³²

While the Michiganders were tepid in their endorsement of the Left Wing Manifesto, they were fully on board with the efforts of the organized Left Wing Section to win control of the governing National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party. The revised constitution of the SPA called for a 15 member NEC, elected on the basis of 5 geographic electoral districts. Running with Keracher on the Left Wing state was Dennis Elihu Batt, number two leader of the Michigan organization. Batt, a native of Tekonsha, Michigan, was born the day after May Day 1886 to a streetcar conductor and his wife. A burly man with a booming voice and a natural gift for oratory, Batt had served in the US Cavalry from 1907 to 1910.³³ Upon completion of his stint in the military, Batt learned the craft of tool and die making, working as a machinist up his entry into the world of professional Socialist politics in 1919.

³¹ “Left Wing Tactics,” *The Proletarian* [Detroit], no. 11 (March 1919), pg. 4.

³² “Left Wing Tactics,” *op. cit.* Emphasis in original.

³³ Solon DeLeon with Irma C. Hayssen and Grace Poole (eds.), *The American Labor Yearbook*. New York: Hanford Press, 1925; pg. 13.

The quarterly physical meeting of the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party began in Chicago on Saturday, May 24. The week-long conclave proved to be one of the seminal events in the party's history, determining the outcome of the bitter 1919 factional struggle and sealing the organization's fate for a coming decade of decline. Only 10 of the 15 members of the NEC were able to attend the session, with two members in jail (including Left Winger Emil Herman of Washington) and three members ill (including party sage and skilled diplomat Morris Hillquit).³⁴ Just two of those who did attend owed allegiance to the Left Wing Section, with the remaining eight established SPA Regulars who were firmly committed to National Secretary, Adolph Germer.

The NEC's first order of business was to take action against seven of the party's language federations, the Translator-Secretaries of which had signed a statement endorsing the Left Wing Manifesto — an action seen as the manifestation an illegal “party within a party” by the Regulars. The language federations of the signatories were immediately suspended from the Socialist Party by a straight factional vote of 8 to 2.

Next came the issue of Michigan. While no national party crisis had ensued from the adoption of an “impossibilist” state platform by the Socialist Party of Michigan in 1914 or 1916, the action of the 1919 Michigan convention in passing a clause specifying the expulsion of “any member, Local, or Branch of a Local advocating legislative reforms” provided a convenient pretext for National Secretary Germer, Seymour Stedman, James Oneal, and the Regulars to revoke the state's charter en route to their primary objective of abrogation of the recently completed 1919 election of party officials. In the view of the Regulars, the Michigan expulsion clause was a clear and obvious violation of Article 10, Section 3(a) of the national constitution, which required state platforms to comply with the national program — a fact which put the Michigan organization irrevocably at odds with the national organization, Illinois NEC member Seymour Stedman argued on behalf of Regulars.³⁵

Michigan's position was defended at the NEC session by Left Winger Alfred Wagenknecht, soon to be Executive Secretary of the Communist Labor Party. Wagenknecht contended that “state after state” had violated the SPA's constitution with state platforms not in conformity with the national platform. Wagenknecht declared:

I do not think that we ought to throw out of the party five to six thousand members just by a simple motion. We can have a trial, we can ask them to send a committee and explain, we can ask them to change their constitution to conform with the national constitution, we can probably do three or four or five things in this case, and every one of these is better than expelling five to six thousand members from the party by simply making a motion and not hearing from them,³⁶

³⁴ David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History*. New York: Macmillan, 1955; pg. 136.

³⁵ Article 10, Section 3(a) explicitly states: "The platform of the Party is the supreme declaration of the party and all State and municipal platforms must adhere to it."

³⁶ “Minutes of the Party National Executive Committee Meeting in Chicago, May 24,” *The Bulletin*, June 15, 1919, pg. 5.

But time was of the essence for the Regulars on the NEC, faced with a final confrontation with the Left Wing Section at the forthcoming August 30 Emergency National Convention in Chicago. There would be no time for an investigation, the preferring of charges, a party trial, deliberation, considered action. By a tally of 7 to 3, the NEC voted to immediately revoke the charter of the Socialist Party of Michigan, effectively expelling its members from the party's ranks — despite the fact that the actions of the Michigan State Convention had yet to be declared ratified by referendum vote of the state party membership.

Upon learning of the revocation of the Michigan charter from Left Wing NEC members Wagenknecht and L.E. Katterfeld, State Secretary John Keracher departed for Chicago to take up the matter with the NEC directly. Keracher surprised Executive Secretary Germer and the NEC by suddenly appearing at party headquarters the morning of Tuesday, May 28. Germer demanded to know who had notified Keracher of the NEC's action; Keracher declined to reply. Keracher bluntly asked, "Has the Michigan charter been revoked, and if so, why?" and was answered with a lie by NEC member George Goebel of New Jersey, who stated that he did not think Michigan had been expelled.³⁷

At 2:00 pm the NEC resumed its session, having returned from a lunch break which was used by the Regulars to caucus on the situation. The Michigan issue was revisited. James Oneal, appointed spokesman by the NEC, gave Keracher the rationale for the draconian action visited upon the Michigan organization. "Suddenly, Germer had an inspiration," Keracher later recalled: "He leaned forward and whispered to Oneal, who thus began to ask questions for the purpose of gaining information to bolster up the stand they had taken."³⁸ Questioned directly as to whether the Michigan constitutional amendment providing for the expulsion of advocates of legislative reform had been ratified by membership vote, Keracher declined to respond — a refusal taken as a confirmation by the NEC majority. Whether Keracher made a positive defense of the Michigan position is unclear from the so-called "stenographic" minutes; certainly he was not allowed to make his case to the membership in the version of the minutes published and mailed by the National Office in its *Bulletin*.³⁹

The Michigan expulsion, whatever righteous constitutional justification the NEC majority may have had, was in practice an exhibition of pure Tammany Hall-style power politics — a rush to judgment which flew in the face of established party procedure and was closely related to the ongoing struggle for control of the SPA apparatus. An article in the June 1919 issue of *The Proletarian* provided suppressed election returns to show convincingly that Detroit Left Wing candidates Batt, Keracher, and Left Wing Chicago attorney William Bross Lloyd would have been elected from the Socialist Party's 3rd

³⁷ John Keracher, "Adolph the Truth Seeker," *The Communist* [Chicago], vol. 1, no. 1 (July 15, 1919), pg. 7.

³⁸ Keracher, "Adolph the Truth Seeker," *op. cit.*

³⁹ Keracher's entire presentation is recorded for posterity in the so-called "stenographic record of the proceedings" published by Germer's National Office thusly: "He [Oneal] asked Comrade Keracher if the report were true. Keracher declined to state." See: "Minutes of the Party National Executive Committee Meeting in Chicago, May 24," *op. cit.*, pg. 9.

Electoral District had not the outgoing NEC invalidated the vote of the membership. These numbers “show plainer than any words why Michigan was expelled,” Keracher and his allies observed.⁴⁰ “What does it matter, about the soundness or unsoundness of their excuse?” readers of *The Proletarian* were asked. “Their defeat was the real reason.”⁴¹

Germer’s National Office hurriedly dusted off its suspended “Official Bulletin” as its mechanism of choice to publicize news of its action to the party membership. In an issue dated June 15, 1919, the majority of the outgoing NEC provided its rationale for suspending the 1919 party election, suspending the Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Polish, South Slavic, Latvian, and Hungarian language federations, and revoking the Michigan charter. The NEC majority cautioned the rank-and-file against the party membership attempting to override its decision through referendum vote, declaring that any such effort “would be taken in ignorance of the facts and issues involved.”⁴²

The Proletarian University faction had reached the end of the line with the Socialist Party and were ready to jump off the train. In a lead article in *The Proletarian* entitled “The Parting of the Ways,” top factional leader Dennis Batt charged that the United States had never in any event “possessed a real Socialist Party,” despite the fact that throughout its history there had always been a “militant minority” which sought to “place the party on a firm basis.” Now, when this radical minority had finally gained majority control, the “muddleheads and sinister politicians” of the National Office and the NEC had intervened to preserve their place of privilege. “We, the impossibilists, have always been charged by them with not being constructive,” wrote Batt; actually, however, it was the SPA moderates who had “performed no constructive work themselves.”⁴³ Batt promised that there was in the offing “a real Socialist Party” which would feature a party press worth reading and relevant literature written on a sound theoretical basis, as well as conducting consistent lecture work and study classes for the training of working class cadres.

“We are convinced by this act of the agent-provocateurs and handmaidens of capitalism within our ranks that we have reached the parting of the ways,” Batt declared.

⁴⁰ “Executive Committee Election,” *The Proletarian* [Detroit], vol. 2, no. 3 (July 1919), pg. 4. With only the State Secretary of Illinois unwilling to cooperate with the informal vote count conducted by the Left Wing, results from Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin showed Dennis Batt leading all 22 candidates with 4145 votes, followed by Keracher and Lloyd with 4075 votes each. Next closest candidate (out of the money in the race to elect 3) was Centrist Victor Berger, with 2071 votes, followed by Seymour Stedman with 1758. Had the votes of the 1919 party election actually been counted by the outgoing National Executive Committee, it is beyond all reasonable doubt that the Left Wing Section would have controlled the 15 member NEC by a substantial majority.

⁴¹ “Michigan State Emergency Convention,” *op. cit.*

⁴² James Oneal, A.I. Shiplacoff, Dan Hogan, Seymour Stedman, George H. Goebel, Fred Holt, Fred Krafft, and John M. Work, “Statement of the National Executive Committee,” *The Bulletin*, June 15, 1919, pg. 2.

⁴³ Dennis E. Batt, “The Parting of the Ways,” *The Proletarian* [Detroit], vol. 2, no. 3 (July 1919), pp. 3-4.

“The split in America has come. The time has arrived for the organization of a SOCIALIST party.”⁴⁴

For their own part, National Secretary Germer and the Socialist Party Regulars had not the slightest intention of tasting defeat with the party apparatus and assets in danger of being lost to the organization’s revolutionary wing. With the August 30 National Emergency Convention only 3 months away, Germer rushed to reorganize a new Socialist Party of Michigan so that the Regulars could take advantage of the 6 voting delegates allotted to the state.

On June 2, Germer addressed a circular letter to all the branches and locals of Michigan detailing the outgoing NEC’s reorganizational plans:

At once call a special meeting of your Local or Branch,...and inform us, without delay, whether you repudiate the section of the Michigan constitution above referred to and accept the present National Platform and Constitution as your guide until it is changed in the regular way.⁴⁵

New charter applications were distributed by mail and those interested in rejoining the reorganized organization were told by Germer to send in “AT LEAST one month’s dues.” The NEC sent Germer loyalist Otto Branstetter to Michigan to work there on the ground for the party in an attempt to rapidly reorganize the state.⁴⁶

June 2 was also the day on which Germer wrote to Detroit Regular Nathan Welch, his choice to aid in the task of reorganizing the state’s largest city. Germer asked Welch to arrange a meeting in Detroit of Socialists sympathetic to the position of the National Office and the NEC. After soliciting a number of his close comrades for their views, Welch responded negatively to Germer on June 6, asserting that the arbitrary action of the NEC had been a “fatal blunder.” What the Socialist Party had needed at the moment had been a “clear-cut revolutionary platform around which most of us could consistently rally and present an unbroken front to the enemy,” Welch noted, lamenting that instead the NEC had delivered the Socialist Party a decisive and irrevocable split. “It is my opinion that the locals and branches who differ from the Keracher group will affiliate with some red local or movement, but will not go along with the National Office,” Welch advised. For his own part, Welch himself refused to lend aid to the National Office’s reorganizational cause.⁴⁷

The mass of Michigan Regulars melted away like a snowman in the summer sun. Many, like the recently-imprisoned party leader Maurice Sugar, moved rapidly to the left in the wake of exciting European events and the heavy-handed and patently anti-democratic behavior of the NEC and the National Office.⁴⁸ Others discontinued activity altogether, disorganized by the seemingly endless internal party war. Only the English

⁴⁴ Batt, “The Parting of the Ways,” *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Germer, Circular letter to Michigan Locals and Branches of the Socialist Party of America, June 3, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ “The Party Repudiating the NEC,” *The Revolutionary Age*, vol. 1, no. 36 (June 21, 1919), pg. 4.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

⁴⁸ Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

branch of Local Grand Rapids could be mustered by the National Office to the battle flag of its reorganizational cause; all other units had to be slowly rebuilt from the ground up.⁴⁹ Still, Germer and Branstetter no doubt felt assured that no more than a minimal reorganization would be necessary prior to the August Emergency Convention, given the certainty that the conclave's Credentials Committee would be in the Regulars' steady hand. Six important delegates had been effectively removed from the column of the Left Wing through the NEC's summary expulsion of the Keracher-led organization in the state.

III. Founding the Communist Party of America.

While current and future Socialist Party National Secretaries Adolph Germer and Otto Branstetter scrambled to construct a Potemkin hut with the words "Socialist Party of Michigan" written large upon its gilded façade, Michigan State Secretary John Keracher was also running full throttle, albeit in a completely different direction. The State Secretary called a snap Emergency State Convention to deal with the actions of Germer and the NEC, to be held in Detroit on Sunday, June 15. Each local and branch in the state was invited to participate on the basis of one-branch, one-vote.

When that weekend arrived, the party's "House of the Masses" auditorium was filled to capacity, attended by all the key locals of the state as well as many of the smaller ones. Popular Keracher loyalist Al Renner of Detroit was elected to the chair as the body's first order of business. It was not long before the body was embroiled in debate over the recent actions of the National Executive Committee. Sentiment of the assembled delegates ran decisively in favor of resistance to the actions of the NEC, with only a small group of Finnish delegates, represented on the floor by Finnish Translator-Secretary Henry Askeli, seeking to renounce the decisions of the February Grand Rapids Convention and to attempt a return to party fold.⁵⁰

The majority of the delegates entertained no such thoughts. Instead, the convention spent the bulk of its effort drafting a call for a national convention to be held September 1 in Chicago "for the purpose of organizing a new Socialist Party." The draft of the call, which had been written in advance of the Michigan gathering and submitted to its delegates in writing, was considered by the assembled body seriatim. Extended debate took place as various issues rose before the house. The issue of parliamentarism aroused the greatest rhetorical heat among the delegates, with some seeking to avoid "pure and simple parliamentary action," while others declared their desire to retreat from electoral participation altogether.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Local Grand Rapids charged that Keracher had effectively stacked the 1919 convention by denying mileage vouchers to out-of-town participants, thereby dominating the gathering with his highly motivated factional forces. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, pg. 85.

⁵⁰ "Michigan State Emergency Convention," *op. cit.*

⁵¹ "Michigan State Emergency Convention," *op. cit.*

At the close of the 1919 Michigan Emergency Convention, the Proletarian University group offered to turn over ownership and control of its monthly organ, *The Proletarian*, to the Michigan party — an offer which was accepted, with control of the publication nominally transferred to the Michigan State Executive Committee, a group tightly controlled by Keracher.⁵² This transfer of title ultimately proved to be mere window dressing, as the publication proved to be highly portable, moving with the Keracher group as it proceeded down its convoluted factional path.

At the end of April 1919, the Left Wing Section, through its weekly official organ, *The Revolutionary Age*, called a national conference of the emerging faction to be held in New York City.⁵³ The convention call, signed by Locals Boston and Cleveland and the Left Wing Section of Local New York, was issued “to locals, branches and minority groups of the Party who have adopted the Left Wing Manifesto and Program” — a target audience which did not technically include the Socialist Party of Michigan, with its “take some and leave some” partial approval of the document. Representation was to be on the basis of 1 delegate for each 500 members, with Saturday, June 21 specified for the date of the gathering.

Cognizant of this gathering, a group of five delegates had been chosen by the Michigan Emergency Convention to make the trek to New York. These representatives of the Michigan party included the “Big Three” of Keracher, Batt, and Renner, along with school principal Oakley C. Johnson and printer A.J. MacGregor.⁵⁴ The delegates were instructed by the convention to present the state’s proposal for establishment of a new party organization.

In New York City the Michiganders joined with other adherents of their perspective representing Socialist organizations from four other states.⁵⁵ The Michigan group found additional powerful allies in the representatives of the 7 suspended foreign language federations of the Socialist Party, headed by Translator-Secretary Alexander Stoklitsky and editor Nicholas Hourwich of the Russian Socialist Federation and Translator-Secretary Joseph Stilson of the Lithuanian Socialist Federation. While these federationists disagreed with the Michigan group over significant matters of policy, such as participation in elections (the Federations were opposed) or the autonomy of language federations in the forthcoming organization (the Michigan group was opposed), the two caucuses were united in a belief that there remained no future for either in the Socialist Party and that the time had come to construct a new organization.

On the floor of the National Conference, factional spokesman Dennis Batt argued that the Michigan state organization had been expelled with no hope of reinstatement from the National Executive Committee, and that there remained but one option — the establishment of a new organization. Such a course of action would be far easier than

⁵² “Michigan State Emergency Convention,” *op. cit.*

⁵³ “Call for a National Conference of the Left Wing,” *The Revolutionary Age* [Boston], vol. 1, no. 28 (April 26, 1919), pg. 1.

⁵⁴ Ruff, “A Path Not Taken,” *op. cit.*, pg. 46.

⁵⁵ Keracher 1934 History, *op. cit.*, pg. 14A.

winning control and remaking the long-established Socialist Party along revolutionary lines, Batt noted. Batt's position was met with disapproval, with the common sentiment being that the Left Wing should continue to battle for reinstatement wherever expelled with hopes of winning over a working majority of the Socialist Party to a revolutionary perspective. The Left Wing Conference moved forward with its agenda unaltered, to the growing irritation of the Proletarian University group.

On Sunday afternoon, the second day of the conference, the question of a new party came up again. A resolution in favor of immediate formation of a Communist Party of America had been taken up during the work of the Committee on Manifesto and Program, causing the committee's work to bog down in debate. The matter was taken before the conference as a whole in an effort to resolve the impasse. Reading of the resolution was immediately stopped by chairman Louis Fraina, who declared the subject out of order for not falling under the agenda of the official convention call. Fraina's decision was sustained in a tie vote of the assembled delegates, 42 to 42, but this decision was immediately reversed upon motion of Eadmonn MacAlpine of New York, an opponent of the Michigan group, who won suspension of the rules so that the contentious matter of a new party could be discussed at length.⁵⁶

Extended debate followed, during which the joint Michigan and Federation forces argued that the moment for a decisive split had arrived, that further activity trying to "win" the Socialist Party or its membership would only result in the acquisition of a few centrist elements, and that a new organization should be formed immediately on the basis of uncompromising revolutionary socialism.⁵⁷ The majority of the conference disagreed, however, remaining determined to continue their struggle to the floor of the August 30 Emergency National Convention in Chicago. The question called, the proposal of the Federations and the Michigan group for immediate formation of a new party was rejected by a vote of 55 to 38.⁵⁸

Rebuffed, that evening the Michiganders and their Federation associates met in caucus. One-third of the gathering — some 31 of 93 delegates — joined together in signing an ultimatum to the Left Wing Conference:

We have made several efforts here. You have refused to listen.... However, comrade delegates, at our caucus we have decided to make one more effort to secure your co-operation in organizing a Communist Party...on the basis of the call issued by the Communist International.⁵⁹

This ultimatum was taken to the floor on the third day of the Left Wing Conference, with the 31 signatories declaring that they would withhold all further action in the work of the conclave. Caucus members resigned from all committees and

⁵⁶ "The National Left Wing Conference," *The Revolutionary Age* [New York], vol. 2, no. 1 (July 5, 1919), pg. 4.

⁵⁷ "The National Left Wing Conference," *op. cit.*, pg. 5.

⁵⁸ "The National Left Wing Conference," *op. cit.*, pg. 5.

⁵⁹ Keracher 1934 History, *op. cit.*, pg. 14A.

continued to refuse to stand for election to a National Council of the Left Wing.⁶⁰ It was clear that a split of the Left Wing was forthcoming over the matter; the majority of the conference refused to bow. Instead, the conference majority elected its officers and proceeded to move towards a September 1 meeting in Chicago of a “revolutionized Socialist Party” or a “Communist Party that may be organized by Left Wing delegates seceding from the Convention.”⁶¹ The die for the split between the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party had been cast; rousing renditions of “The Red Flag” and “The Internationale” could do nothing to drown out that truth.

Home again from the New York National Conference, the Chicago-based Language Federation leaders and the Detroit-based Proletarian University group were never more sure of the rightness of their joint decision to move to the immediate formation of a Communist Party. A “National Organization Committee” of seven was established on the basis of rough factional parity: Keracher, Batt, and Oakley Johnson for the Michigan group, Stoklitsky for the Russian Federation, Stilson for the Lithuanian Federation, and S. Kopnagel representing the Left Wing of the Jewish Federation, with Daniel Elbaum, a Polish Federationist from Detroit, the “swing” vote.⁶² Orator and editor Dennis Batt served as Secretary of the group and was given the editorial reins to the committee’s new English-language organ, *The Communist*. The National Organization Committee maintained its headquarters at 1221 Blue Island Avenue in Chicago, headquarters of the Russian Federation in the city.

The debut issue of *The Communist*, was not long in coming, bearing an issue date of July 15, 1919. A lengthy “Call for a National Convention for the Purpose of Organizing the Communist Party of America” filled the front page, detailing the principles upon which the new organization would be launched. World capitalism was in an epoch of “dissolution and collapse,” the call contended, and the central problem for the working class consisted of “organizing and training itself for the conquest of the state” and establishing the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The worker education-dominated perspective of the Michigan group was further echoed in the call’s declaration that the new Communist Party was to be not merely a vehicle for

⁶⁰ “The National Left Wing Conference,” *op. cit.*, pg. 5.

⁶¹ Final resolution of the National Conference, quoted in “The National Left Wing Conference,” *op. cit.*, pg. 5.

⁶² The ethnic composition of the various language federations of the American radical movement is a subject which remains unstudied in the literature. In *The Roots of Soviet Russia*, Theodore Draper repeatedly uses the phrase “The Russians” to describe the alliance of suspended language federations — a term which, not accidentally, furthers his central theme illustrating creeping Russian control of the American communist movement. In actual fact, the two top leaders of the Russian Federation were ethnic Jews (Aleksander Stoklitskii and Nikolai Gurevich [Hourwich]), as was key leader Daniel Elbaum of the Polish Federation. It would not be surprising if a majority of the activists of the “Russian” Federation were in fact Russian-speaking ethnic Jews. The phenomenon of heavy participation of ethnic Jews in the radical movement has roots both in traditional Jewish culture — which has highly valued education, study, and selfless action to improve the world, thus coming into neat accord with Marxian “scientific socialism” — as well as the particularly oppressed status of the Jewish nation under the anti-semitic Tsarist regime. The fact remains that it is doubly wrong to reduce the alliance of suspended language groups to the phrase “The Russians.”

propaganda for the overthrow of capitalism but also a “clearing house for proletarian thought, a center of political education for the development of revolutionary working class action.”⁶³

Groups endorsing the principles and program of the National Organization Committee were invited to send one delegate per organization, with an additional delegate for each 500 members or fraction thereof. Each language federation was further allowed a non-voting “fraternal” delegate. Organized states were to participate as states, not locals; unorganized states were to participate via locals; Left Wing fractions in cities with no organized Left Wing local were entitled to participate as if organized into such a local.⁶⁴ This scheme had the dual effect, intended or not, of minimizing the potential voting strength of Keracher’s Michigan state organization while centralizing the control of the Detroit-based leadership over the Michigan delegate selection process.⁶⁵

Both Alexander Stoklitsky, *primus inter pares* of the leaders of the suspended language federations, and John Keracher, undisputed head of the Proletarian University group, were afforded a full page in the premier issue of *The Communist* to give voice to their views. Stoklitsky propagandized for the new organization, proclaiming that a split of the Socialist Party was already a fact and that therefore it became the “sacred duty” of supporters of the Third International to establish a new Communist Party in America. For his part, Keracher returned to the recent past, taking direct aim at Socialist Party Executive Secretary Adolph Germer and hammering “Adolph the Truth Seeker” and the NEC for expelling the Michigan state organization without providing any sort of notification of either the forthcoming action of the NEC, thereby allowing a defense to be mounted, and for then subsequently lying about their action.

Alfred Wagenknecht, deprived of the position of Executive Secretary of the Socialist Party by the refusal of the outgoing NEC to count the votes of the 1919 party election at its May session, declared himself “Executive Secretary pro tem” and attempted to reorganize the new National Executive Committee from among those others who had similarly been cheated out of office. The physical session of this body was in Chicago on July 26 and 27, 1919, with a quorum of 8 of the 15 “elected” members in attendance.⁶⁶ This shadow NEC drafted a letter to National Secretary

⁶³ “Call for a National Convention for the Purpose of Organizing the Communist Party of America,” *The Communist* [Chicago], vol. 1, no. 1 (July 19, 1919), pg. 1.

⁶⁴ “Call for a National Convention...” *op. cit.*, pg. 2.

⁶⁵ The impact on the Michigan delegate count was tempered by the allotment of 14 delegates to the state upon its bloated membership claim of 7,000 paid members. In the end, not all of these were not Keracher loyalists, it should be further noted.

⁶⁶ Those in attendance included: Louis Fraina and Edward Lindgren (Electoral District 1), Fred Harwood, Marguerite Prevey, and C.E. Ruthenberg (Electoral District 2), William Bross Lloyd (Electoral District 3), and L.E. Katterfeld and Harry M. Wicks (Electoral District 5). See: Louis C. Fraina, “The New NEC Meets,” *The Revolutionary Age* [New York], vol. 2, no. 5 (Aug. 2, 1919), pg. 3. Note that in addition to several members of the Regular faction denied election in the abrogated 1919 party vote, John Keracher and Dennis Batt boycotted this meeting. Harry Wicks, a former resident of Michigan living in Portland, Oregon and nominally a member of the Proletarian University tendency, did attend the session and thus enabled Wagenknecht to achieve a quorum.

Germer demanding that party headquarters be turned over to it and that he appear before its sessions — a demand which he rejected. In response, the shadow NEC declared the position of Executive Secretary vacant and named Wagenknecht to the post. Suspended organizations were restored to the ranks and the shadow NEC declared its intention of assuming “full control of the Emergency Convention.” State Secretaries were instructed to withhold dues money from the “old NEC” and a final declaration to the party was drafted.⁶⁷ Possession was nine-tenths of the law in this case, however, as whatever technical legitimacy the shadow NEC may have harbored was overshadowed by the simple fact that Adolph Germer and the outgoing NEC had the key to the party headquarters building and continued to control convention preparations and they did not.⁶⁸

As the date of the National Emergency Convention approached, support for the plan of taking the fight for control of the SPA to the floor crumbled. The logic of the situation weighed heavily upon the National Council of the Left Wing elected by the June National Conference in New York. The outgoing NEC had remained in office past the constitutionally designated day of July 1, revoking the charters of Socialist Party of Massachusetts and the Socialist Party of Ohio for having endorsed the Manifesto and Program of the Left Wing, and leaving determination of the merit of their decisions to the upcoming convention which the NEC itself controlled. In the divided state of New York, Left Wing branch after Left Wing branch lost its state charter and was “reorganized” out of the party by a Regular-dominated State Executive Committee. In Minnesota, parallel delegate slates were elected by the factions, ensuring that neither would be unchallenged and thus able to vote for the all important Credentials Committee of the Emergency National Convention. As July drew to a close with the forces of the Left Wing divided, the outcome of the coming Socialist Party convention floor fight could no longer be seriously considered in doubt.

While Left Wing National Council members Louis Fraina and C.E. Ruthenberg sat with the shadow NEC at its session in Chicago, negotiations continued in New York City in an effort to bring the National Council aboard with the National Organization Committee’s September 1 Communist Party convention. Council members Isaac Ferguson and Ben Gitlow met with federation representatives on July 27. The next day, in light of the failure of the shadow NEC in its gambit to force out Adolph Germer and take control of party headquarters, the National Council of the Left Wing voted 5 to 2 to end its effort to “win over” the Socialist Party.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Fraina, “The New NEC Meets,” *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ Draper characterizes Wagenknecht’s effort to bolster the legitimacy of the Left Wing by convening the party’s new NEC in physical session as “elaborate tomfoolery.” See: Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, *op. cit.*, pg. 174.

⁶⁹ The phrase is Theodore Draper’s. Voting to end the clearly hopeless effort to carry the fight to the convention floor were Ruthenberg, Ferguson, John Ballam, Bert Wolfe, and Max Cohen. Voting to continue the fight were Ben Gitlow and Jim Larkin. Editor of *The Revolutionary Age* Fraina and Business Manager Eadmonn MacAlpine recused themselves from voting on account of their position with the official organ, with Fraina now supporting the September 1 CPA convention call and MacAlpine backing the minority. See: Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-175.

If at the end of June the insistence of the Michigan and Federation forces to proceed with the call for immediate formation of a Communist Party divisive act of an indisciplined minority, now it was the holdouts in favor of a Socialist Party floor fight with whom the onus for a split lie. The radical Westerners Wagenknecht and Katterfeld sought what they viewed as rightfully theirs — control of the NEC had been won at the ballot box.⁷⁰ Their fight was based upon an argument of Socialist Party legality and to be won the battle had to be successfully resolved upon the convention floor. The New Yorkers — Jack Reed, Ben Gitlow, and “Big Jim” Larkin — were driven by an almost pathological hatred of some of the leading personalities in the leadership of the Language Federation group, who were regarded as intolerably arrogant and an absolute bar to the success of the fledgling communist movement among the English-speaking masses of American workers. For them, lowering the battle flag and joining the CPA convention call represented an unthinkable act of capitulation and acceptance of certain failure. Reed and Gitlow, deprived of their weekly, *The New York Communist* through its merger with *The Revolutionary Age* by action of the June National Conference, soon found a new vehicle for their opinions in the labor newspaper approved by the same gathering, *Voice of Labor*.⁷¹ They would fight on to the floor and bolt if necessary, as previously planned.

As the summer of 1919 progressed, the position of Keracher’s Michigan group and the suspended Language Federations had improved markedly. Its convention now had the official sanction not only of these minority factions from the June National Conference, but also the governing National Council elected by that body. The irreconcilable Wagenknechts and the Reeds were left to make common cause with such dubious “Communists” as the kindhearted middle-aged lawyer Marguerite Prevey of Akron, Ohio, and good old Fred Harwood of New Jersey.⁷² The Michigan group felt it alone represented the true English-speaking voice of the American communist movement. In preparation for the convention, Keracher and his co-thinkers composed a program for the new group, an action which seems to have been at least tacitly encouraged by the leadership of the Federation group. Prospects seemed bright.

The first of September came, scorchingly hot. As anticipated, the quixotic effort of Alfred Wagenknecht and John Reed and their supporters to win control of the SPA through a floor fight had proved laughably hopeless, with the Credentials Committee of Judge Jacob Panken of New York assuring an impossible uphill climb. Even the legitimately-elected Left Wing California delegation had been denied voting rights from the outset, left to swelter in a side room while the convention proceeded to endorse the

⁷⁰ Both Wagenknecht and Katterfeld had been prominent in the radical Socialist Party of Washington, the later even serving as State Secretary during his time in the state.

⁷¹ Jack Reed was Editor and Ben Gitlow Business Manager of both publications. The pair were an especially close political team in this period. The Fraina-edited *Revolutionary Age* was moved from Boston to Fraina’s hometown, New York City, as part of the merger, a decision made on financial grounds.

⁷² Max Eastman, who attended all three Chicago conventions as a journalist for *The Liberator*, supports the view that there actually were “many delegates” at the Communist Labor Party convention “who had no understanding of the Moscow program, and whose revolt against the old party was but an emotional reaction against the acts of its officials...” See: Eastman, “The Chicago Conventions,” *op. cit.*, pg. 14.

suspensions and expulsions which had been delivered by the outgoing NEC. Small bolts by Left Wing delegates had followed, with a motley array of 90 or so, many without delegate credentials, holding their own assembly downstairs in a billiard room of Machinists' Hall as the Germer machine droned on in the main auditorium upstairs.

Nearby, the organizers of the founding convention of the Communist Party of America planned to do their convention right. The auditorium of the Russian Federation's headquarters hall was immaculately decked out for the occasion with banners and bunting. A 10-piece orchestra was on hand to add to the ambiance, and over 100 visitors were on hand to join nearly 140 delegates in the formation of a new political party in America.

The planned noontime launch of the new organization experienced a most unwelcome interruption. At 11:30 pm the Anarchist squad of the Chicago Police Department sprung into action. Detective-Sergeants McDonough and Egan ordered the immediate removal of all red decorations which covered the 250 or so lights and had red bunting taken down from the walls, apparently to put the gathering into compliance with the state's "red flag" law. Massive red banners reading "Welcome Delegates to the First Convention of the Communist Party of America," "Long Live the Third International," and "Long Live the Dictatorship of the Proletariat" were pulled down by police command.⁷³ When attorney L.M. Montgomery of Chicago remonstrated, he received practical instruction in the reality of legality in the form of a police thrashing and an arrest for disorderly conduct.⁷⁴

The Language Federation group, headed by Alexander Stoklitsky and the Russian Federation, made use of the commotion. While the attention of the gallery was directed to the chaos on the floor, word was quickly passed among Federation delegates to assemble in a room on the second floor. Some 40 or 45 delegates retreated to this sanctuary and there established what English-speaking convention delegates would refer to as the "Russian Steam Roller."⁷⁵

Many Russian-speaking delegates had already been working together on the organization of the Communist Party of America for more than 10 days, having recently attended the 5th Convention of the Russian Federation in Detroit, which had adjourned on August 28 — just 3 days prior to the Chicago Founding Convention. They had already chosen their leadership in the form of a nine man "Secretariat" stacked with

⁷³ James O. Peyronnin, Report for September 1, 1919, DoJ/BoI Investigative Files, NARA collection M-1085, reel 931, file 313846. Special Agent Peyronnin sat undercover as a "journalist" at the press table at the convention.

⁷⁴ Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 182 and Peyronnin for Sept. 1, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ This and other details below revealing the workings of the Federation faction come from the report of the Bureau of Investigation's "Confidential Employee No. 121," N. Nagorowe, elected a delegate by Branch 2 of Gary, Indiana. See: A.H. Loula, "In Re Communist Party Convention: Report of Confidential Employee No. 121," Sept. 22, 1919, DoJ/BoI Investigative Files, NARA collection M-1085, reel 931, file 313846. Nagorowe's summary report was actually written on September 17, 1919 and submitted to Bureau of Investigation headquarters by his handler, Special Agent August H. Loula. This seminal document will henceforth be referred to as "Nagorowe: CPA Convention Report, Sept. 17, 1919."

members of the Russian Federation from New York City.⁷⁶ While the police were preoccupied with removing the convention's decorative gingerbread from the walls downstairs, Nicholas Hourwich of New York was busy constructing the framework for Federation control of the founding convention. It was essential, the loquacious Hourwich insisted, that the Federation faction should appear "thoroughly disciplined, a solid bloc, a merciless political machine for the success of the cause." He therefore moved that the Federationists bind themselves to the unit rule of voting, pledging to abide by the decisions of the Secretariat. Only weak opposition was voiced to this idea in the Federation caucus; enough that a provision was added stating that on major decisions, the Federation Secretariat should be guided by the majority decision of delegates meeting in caucus. Remaining opposition is said to have been silenced by threats of expulsion from the new organization.⁷⁷

The fundamental principles of operation resolved, the Federationists trooped back downstairs to take their seats for the opening of the convention. The faction entered together through a side door and took their seats on the left side of the hall as though they were a single parliamentary party. The central table was occupied by the Secretariat to make it easy for other Federation delegates to see their hands go up in unison so that they could quickly and decisively vote likewise.⁷⁸

Noon came and Secretary of the National Organization Committee Dennis Batt called the gathering to order. Editor of *The Revolutionary Age* Louis Fraina, a member of the National Council of the Left Wing, delivered the keynote address to the gathering:

The beginning of this movement has its roots many years back and has but now reached the stage where it can proceed as the dominant one. Our work here is to formulate the position and structure of an organization that will be the weapon by which the working class will train and organize itself for a conquest of political power. The party is here. The movement is here. It is for you to shape its structure. The Communist Party of America is a fact.⁷⁹

The organizers and adherents of the communist movement were not the only ones who had looked forward to September 1 with a sense of anticipation. The Bureau of Investigation of the US Department of Justice had also long prepared for this day. As would later be the case at the underground Communist conventions of Woodstock, New York (May 1921) and Bridgman, Michigan (August 1922), the American secret police

⁷⁶ This Secretariat included Chicago-based Translator-Secretary Alexander Stoklitsky as the factional chief, Nicholas Hourwich and Harry Hiltzik as top lieutenants who actively set the tone, as well as Oscar Tyverovsky, George Askenuzi, E. Missin, and J. J. Kravsevich from the New York Russian organization. Although this group of seven was said by informant Nagorowe to have "ruled," they were joined on the Secretariat by John Schwartz and A. Forsinger of the Latvian Federation. Forsinger later resigned, to be replaced by Joseph Kowalski of the Polish Federation. See: Nagorowe, "CPA Convention Report," Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Nagorowe, "CPA Convention Report," Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Nagorowe, "CPA Convention Report," Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Stenographic report of Fraina's opening speech in August H. Loula, Report for September 1, 1919, DoJ/Bol Investigative Files, NARA collection M-1085, reel 931, file 313846.

would remain well informed of radical activities through placement of their own “confidential informant” on the floor in the person of delegate N. Nagorowe of Gary, Indiana. Special Agents of the Bureau sat undercover at the press table or were conspicuous in the gallery, carefully watching the proceedings and taking notes.

In marked contrast to the discord prevailing at Machinists’ Hall, the Communist Party convention appeared as a smooth operation. It was a slickness, Dennis Batt later recalled, “due to the fact that the dominant element was a well oiled machine.”⁸⁰ From the outset, the Michigan group was marginalized, with the studied factional parity of the Michigan group with the Federation group on the National Organization Committee a thing of the past. From 18 candidates, a Credentials Committee of 7 was elected, with bloc voting by the federations clearly in use. Elected were Joseph Stilson and Juozas Baltrusaitis (Lithuanian Federation), Daniel Elbaum (Polish Federation), A. Forsinger (Latvian Federation), S. Kohnagel (Jewish Federation), as well as Meyer Lunin and M.L. Olkin (Russian Federation).⁸¹ All were Federationists. None would make the floor of the Communist Party convention as a voting delegate without running this formidable gauntlet.

From the perspective of Stoklitsky and other leaders of the Federation group, the question was which of the two antagonistic factions of English-speaking delegates should be integrated into the leadership of the new organization in order to “make the Communist Party have some American names,” as the Bureau of Investigation’s undercover delegate phrased it. This was a delicate matter, with the Federationists needing to sow enough doubt as to the final decision which English-speaking faction would gain their favor that both sides would remain engaged and guessing, thus averting a premature split.⁸²

It did not take long for this Federation strategy to run into an unanticipated glitch. The superficial harmony of the CPA convention vanished at its very first evening session when the question of unity negotiations with the “other convention” at Machinists’ Hall arose. For their part, the Left Wing delegates declaring themselves the Communist Labor Party of America were anxious for unification by organic merger of the two groups, albeit on terms of complete organizational parity. Such an event would have placed the Federationist faction in the position of becoming a distinct minority to English speaking delegates — many of whom it regarded to be completely oblivious to the theory and practice of revolutionary socialism according to the Bolshevik model. Such an eventuality would never be acceptable, given the commanding position in which the Federationists found themselves on the CPA convention floor.

When on that first evening National Council leader Isaac Ferguson of Chicago proposed that a 5 member committee be established to conduct unity negotiations with a similar committee named by the bolting delegates downstairs at Machinists’ Hall. Ferguson’s proposal was damned by Nick Hourwich as “dangerous,” a sentiment echoed by fellow New York Russian Federationist Harry Hiltzik, who vehemently declared that Wagenknecht, Reed & Co. had “got a good licking and now we do not

⁸⁰ Dennis E. Batt, “A Year Gone By,” *The Proletarian* [Detroit], vol. 2, no. 9/10 (Jan.-Feb. 1920), pg. 4.

⁸¹ Peyronnin for Sept. 1, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁸² Nagorowe, “CPA Convention Report,” Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

want them. This is a convention to establish a ‘Communist Party’ and it would be dangerous to recognize them.”⁸³

This blatant signal that the communist movement would remain divided lest the Federationists lose control prompted a crisis in the CPA convention. A split was threatened. Following a caucus of their own, the National Council faction launched a mass resignation, which included Vice Chairman of the convention John Ballam, two recording secretaries, and 7 members of the 16 member Emergency Committee elected as an executive board by the convention earlier in the day. Stoklitsky and the Federation faction initially moved closer to Keracher’s Proletarian University faction, giving indications that the program drafted by the latter group would be used as the basis for the program of the Communist Party adopted by the convention. The popular number 3 man in the Michigan organization, accountant Al Renner, sat as Chairman of the Convention.⁸⁴ A reinvigorated Federationist-Michigan alliance appeared to be in the offing.

The Federationists found themselves in a difficult position, needing to calm the National Council faction without surrendering on the basic question of mass admission of delegates from the CLP convention at Machinists’ Hall. An extremely lengthy meeting of the Federation caucus followed the closing of the first evening session, running until 3 am. Federation delegates were cautioned not to cave in individually to the demands of the English-speaking delegates but to stand firm and vote according to the unit rule as determined by the Federation faction’s Secretariat.⁸⁵ By the afternoon of the second day, September 2, a decision had been made — to reverse the decision not to negotiate with the CLP’s unity delegation while at the same time sabotaging actual unity proposals and thus avoiding a mass influx of English-speaking delegates which would tip the balance of power on the floor. A committee was named, consisting of C.E. Ruthenberg and I.E. Ferguson of the National Council faction, top Federation faction leaders Alexander Stoklitsky and Nicholas Hourwich, and Daniel Elbaum of the Polish Federation — nominally a delegate from Michigan but actually an individual firmly in Stoklitsky’s camp.

The National Council faction saw the convention’s reversal of its previous decision and formation of a negotiating committee as a great victory and assumed that some form of organizational unity would be forthcoming shortly. As the Bureau of Investigation’s delegate on the floor later noted, “the Americans, now off their guard, were drawn into the game and pacified for the time being.”⁸⁶

At the same time, the convention approached the time at which it was to begin work on a program by which the further activity of the organization would be guided. Two competing documents were written prior to the Chicago gathering, each intended to serve as the basis for a final document. Keracher’s Proletarian University faction, which placed its entire revolutionary strategy upon the task of delivering of scientific Marxist

⁸³ Peyronnin for Sept. 1, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ Nagorowe, “CPA Convention Report,” Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ Nagorowe, “CPA Convention Report,” Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ Nagorowe, “CPA Convention Report,” Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

truth to the working class through study circles, believed the CPA's program to be a document of supreme importance. Keracher, Batt, Renner & Co. had been lead to believe by the Federation faction that its draft program, not that drafted by Louis Fraina of the National Council, would serve as the basis of the new party's fundamental document. At its last caucus meeting prior to consideration of the program on the convention floor, Federation leaders Stoklitsky and Hourwich, while acknowledging that the National Council faction was "more kindred to the Bolshevik theory and readily subject to Bolshevik psychology," argued that the Michigan document was more valuable in terms of style and substance. The Secretariat agreed to take the Michigan document as the basis of the new party's program.⁸⁷

Something happened behind the scenes of the behind the scenes meeting of the Federation faction. As Bureau of Investigation informant and Federationist delegate N. Nagorowe later told the tale:

But for reasons known only to the few members of the Secretariat, Stoklitsky and Hourwich without warning switched to the other side and, failing even to give any intimation of it to their own caucus members, adopted the Fraina manifesto and ignored the Michigan document. The first we learned of it was when, by midnight on Wednesday, September 3rd, while assembled in our caucus in a smaller hall on the second floor, the leaders of the Michigan group, D. Batt and A. Renner, with a number of their followers, appeared and demanded to be heard.⁸⁸

The baritone orator Batt spoke for the Michiganders. He expressed the faction's profound displeasure at having been "tricked" by the Federation group through its eleventh hour reversal and decision to use the Fraina document as the basis for the new program. Batt demanded that the Russians end their duplicity or risk a split. When Batt and his associates had left, the Federationist leadership said nothing to the caucus about the circumstances surrounding its reversal on the question of the program. Instead, Stoklitsky, Hourwich, Hiltzik and the Secretariat demanded — and received — a vote of confidence. "From that evening on the Russian leaders got a free hand and much of the later developments are known to them alone," Nagorowe later told his handlers.⁸⁹

After alienating and almost losing the National Council faction on the first day of the convention, now it was the Proletarian University faction which had been pushed to the brink of a split. It came time for elections to the governing 15 member Central Executive Committee of the CPA. Heads of the Federation were to sit with the CEC in an advisory capacity, a situation which allowed the Federation factional leaders to reckon that it would need only 6 of the seats on the CEC, with 6 seats parceled to the National Council faction and 3 to the smaller Proletarian University faction. In the view of Nagorowe, however, Russian Federation chief Alexander Stoklitsky "feared the influence of the Michigans right along and on this occasion he resorted to another trick:

⁸⁷ Nagorowe, "CPA Convention Report," Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ Nagorowe, "CPA Convention Report," Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ Nagorowe, "CPA Convention Report," Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

He failed to inform the Michigan leaders that any seats at all would be given to them on the Executive Committee.”⁹⁰

Having been deceived on the matter of the program, the Keracher group now believed themselves on the brink of another betrayal by the Federation bosses. When nominations opened for the CEC, the Michigan group, one after another, declined their nominations. This action came as a complete surprise to the Federationists, who hastily substituted additional candidates to fill the list. The grave displeasure of the Proletarian University group was further emphasized when the faction declined to vote for any of those nominated or to further participate in the work of revising the Fraina program.⁹¹ While they did not engage in a mass bolt, choosing to remain in the CPA to fight for their position another day in the same way that previous reversals had been overcome in the Socialist Party of Michigan, neither would the Keracher group fully participate in the founding of the organization. The table had been set for a full-fledged split in the coming year.

END OF PART ONE.

⁹⁰ Nagorowe, “CPA Convention Report,” Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ Nagorowe, “CPA Convention Report,” Sept. 17, 1919, *op. cit.*