
The National Left Wing Conference.

by Louis C. Fraina †

Published in *The Revolutionary Age* [New York], v. 2, no. 1 (July 5, 1919), pp. 4-5.

The Left Wing of the Socialist Party has unified and organized itself nationally. At its first National Conference, held in New York City starting June 21 [1919], the Left Wing was animated by a fundamental and unalterable determination to conquer the old Socialist Party for the revolutionary Socialism of the Communist International.

The most important issue before the Conference was whether a Communist Party should be immediately organized by the Conference, and the struggle in the Socialist Party now be abandoned or whether the fight should continue until the Emergency Convention. The Conference by a large majority decided to wage the struggle within the Party until September, in order to rally all the revolutionary elements for a Communist Party, meanwhile organizing, temporarily, as the Left Wing Section of the Socialist Party.

The Left Wing Conference was overwhelmingly a proletarian body. It was animated with a fine spirit of enthusiasm, which nothing could daunt. For four days the delegates labored over important problems; and the product of their labors was an organization basis and a theoretical formulation for a real party of revolutionary Socialism. It was a Bolshevik Conference, appreciating the vital necessity of a Bolshevik policy for the American proletariat. On the one hand, a fringe

of Menshevik delegates were overwhelmingly beaten; and, on the other, a tendency toward Anarcho-Syndicalism met with absolutely no response. Theoretically and tactically, this Conference stands alone in the history of American Socialism.

The Conference was composed of over 90 delegates from 20 different states, coming overwhelmingly from large industrial centers, the heart of the militant proletarian movement, such as New York, Boston, Buffalo, Rochester, Philadelphia, Providence, Pittsburgh, Hartford, Chicago, Minneapolis, Duluth, St. Paul, Detroit, Kansas City, Denver, Cleveland, and Oakland, Cal. The Left Wing has taken firm root in New England and the Pacific Coast, in the Northwest and Middle West, in New Mexico, wherever the militant proletariat is in action. A letter was received from dozens of comrades "doing time" in Fort Leavenworth Prison, greeting the Conference as the inspiration of revolutionary Socialism.

Louis C. Fraina was elected temporary Chairman, and in his opening address sounded the keynote of the Conference:

"This Conference is an expression of the upsurge of revolutionary Socialism within the Party. The crisis in Capitalism has created a crisis in Socialism, and this crisis goes to the heart of our revolutionary problems. The proletarian revolution in action has modified the



The Upsurge of Socialism

† - This report is unsigned in the original. Given that the editor of *The Revolutionary Age* was Louis C. Fraina and that the speech (sans stenogram) and parliamentary actions of Fraina are closely detailed here, it seems secure that he was the author of this piece.

old tactical concepts of Socialism; and the inspiration of the Bolshevik conquests, joining with the original minority Socialism in the Socialist Party, has produced the Left Wing. In spite of a reactionary bureaucracy, revolutionary Socialism is conquering the Socialist Party, proclaiming that in spite of the dead policies of the past, it will lay the basis for a revolutionary Socialist movement. Our Socialism will conquer not only the masses in the party, but the proletarian masses outside the party. This Conference has an historic mission to perform, and it will perform it in accord with the militant traditions of revolutionary Socialism. Our task is not an immediate revolution; it is the task of organizing and preparing for the revolutionary struggle.”

The Credentials Committee, consisting of Max Cohen (NY), J. Lasman (Mass.), Jack Carney (Duluth), A. Wagenknecht (Ohio), and J. Stilson (Chicago) proceeded to consider credentials. Pending their report various delegates spoke concerning conditions in their local movement. Zucker, of Kings Co., spoke in favor of the immediate organization of a communist Party, after which the chair urged that this particular problem be discussed when it actually should come before the Conference. John Reed, just returned from attendance at the AF of L Convention, gave a satirical and critical sketch of the proceedings, indicting the AF of L as a betrayer of the workers.

The report of the Credentials Committee recommended the seating of 66 delegates from 14 states (other delegates being seated at subsequent sessions) but split on the question of seating 15 delegates representing the Central Committees of the Russian, Polish, Lettish [Latvian], Ukrainian, Estonian, Lithuanian, and South Slavic Federations. The majority recommended seating them as full delegates. Max Cohen, as the minority, opposed this, arguing that the Federations were already adequately represented through regular delegates they elected or participated in electing, and that seating delegates from the Central Committees meant duplicate representation. The majority report was accepted.

With the adoption of the Credentials Committees's report Fraina vacated the chair, and William Bross Lloyd of Chicago was elected permanent Chairman, A. Renner of Detroit Vice-Chairman, Fannie Horowitz of New York permanent secretary,

and Rosenthal of Philadelphia assistant secretary. Committees were then elected as follows:

Manifesto and Program: Fraina (Boston), Batt (Detroit), Stoklitsky (Chicago), Ruthenberg (Cleveland), and Ferguson (Chicago).

Organization, Finance, and Press: Cohen (NY), Wagenknecht (Ohio), N.I. Hourwich (NY), E. Lindgren (Brooklyn), [Eadmonn] MacAlpine (NY).

Labor Committee: John Reed (NY), Ben Gitlow (Bronx), A. Anderson (Boston), [Jack] Carney (Duluth), and Jurgis (Boston).

Resolutions: John Ballam (Boston), [William] Bross Lloyd (Chicago), [Oscar] Tyverovsky (NY), Maurin (Boston), and [Joseph] Stilson (Chicago).

At the second session, Sunday afternoon [June 22], the Committee on Manifesto and Program reported. It was recommended to the Conference that the approval of the Manifesto be left to the National Council, and that only the Program be considered. After a discussion, in which the Communist Party again interjected itself, this procedure was adopted. Ferguson then read the Program on behalf of the Committee, which was considered point by point. It was in two parts — one the Communist Program, consisting of a summary of the Bolshevik Call for an International Communist Congress and of the Manifesto and Program of the Communist International; the other a Program devoted to the program of the Left Wing. An interesting discussion took place, particularly on mass action; Batt of Detroit opposed the committee's report on mass action, arguing that the term mass action should be qualified by the word political, while Fraina answering on behalf of the Committee, argued that mass action, while it develops non-politically under the impulse of concentrated industry, acquires a political character as it comes in conflict with the bourgeois state, mass action being non alone the tactics of the immediate struggle, but equally the final tactic of the social revolution.

In the discussion of the report of the Committee on Manifesto and Program, the issue of the immediate organization of a Communist Party was again interjected. This interjection of the Communist Party issued interfered with the transaction of business; realizing which, the Conference decided to suspend the regular order of business and proceed with the report of the Organization Committee. The majority of the

Organization Committee reported in favor of the Conference organizing as the Left Wing Section of the American Socialist Party, that a National Council of nine members should be elected to compose the executive organ of the Left Wing Section, and that *The Revolutionary Age* (to be combined with the *New York Communist*) should become the national organ.† The majority further reported carrying on the fight within the Party for the coming two months; that all Left Wing locals and states, including those expelled or suspended, should elect delegates to the Emergency Convention of the Socialist Party to be held at Chicago, August 30; and that if all delegates are not seated, including delegates of suspended organizations, the Left Wing delegates shall secede and organize a new Communist Party. The minority, consisting of Nicholas I. Hourwich, reported in favor of the immediate organization of a Communist Party.

All Sunday evening was given to this discussion. Fraina raised a point of order that the minority report in favor of immediately organizing a Communist Party was out of order, on the ground that it was in conflict with the call of Local Boston, Local Cleveland, and the Left Wing Section of New York City, on the basis of which the Conference met. The Chair [Lloyd] ruled the point of order well taken, and the minority report not before the house. An appeal was taken from this decision, resulting in a vote of 42 to 42, which sustained the chair. MacAlpine thereupon moved, seconded by Fraina, a suspension of the rules in order to discuss the immediate organization of a new party. Larkin amended that Hourwich, representing those favoring an immediate Communist Party, and C.E. Ruthenberg, representing those favoring the other view, be empowered to draw up a joint resolution around which the discussion could center. The resolution was as follows:

“Resolved, that the Left Wing Conference immediately sever all connections with the Socialist Party of the United States and proceed at once with the work of organizing a new party.”

Practically all the delegates participated in the

discussion. The advocates of an immediate organization of a Communist Party argued that this was the psychological moment; that further work in the Socialist Party would simply secure for us “center” elements; that we should organize immediately on an uncompromising party basis. The opponents argued that a Communist Party must be organized; that no one could oppose this party, and that the only issue was one of judgment and time, whether it should be done now in New York or two months later in Chicago; that it was absolutely necessary to proceed with the struggle in the Socialist Party for two months more, in order to rally the broad revolutionary masses of the party for Communist Socialism. The resolution in favor of immediately organizing a Communist Party was defeated by a roll call vote of 55 against 38.

The issue came up in another form when, after a caucus, the delegates representing the Central Committees of the Russian Federations [Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, South Slavic] brought before the Conference the Call of the Socialist Party of Michigan for a convention in Chicago, September 1, to organize a new Socialist Party, asking that the Conference endorse the Call. Challenged to deny that the Michigan call was not a Menshevik one, all the Russian comrades remained silent. This was also defeated. The Conference, anticipating that the repudiated National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party might call off the emergency Convention, passed a motion that, in that event, the national Left Wing itself carry on the August 30 convention.

Another intense discussion took place on the report of the Organization Committee recommending that the executive body of the Left Wing Section shall be a National Council of nine members, elected by the Conference itself. A minority of two, Hourwich and Lindgren, brought in a minority report that in addition to these nine, there shall be at least seven other members to be elected — one each by the Central Committees of the Russian Federations (this, in time would mean at least eleven members on the Coun-

†- *The Revolutionary Age*, issued under the auspices of Local Boston, Socialist Party and edited by Louis C. Fraina did, in fact, merge with *The New York Communist*, issued by Local Greater New York and edited by John Reed. The last issue of each was dated Saturday, June 21, 1919. *The Age* moved its base of operations to New York City, where it continued with Fraina as Editor, *New York Communist* Associate Editor Eadmonn MacAlpine as “Managing Editor,” and *New York Communist* Business Manager Benjamin Gitlow handling his same task for the new publication. The seven weekly issues of the New York-based *Age* were designated as “Volume 2.”

cil elected by Central Committees of the Language Federations).† This proposal would have meant control of the National Council by delegates of the Federation Central Committees. The argument made in favor was that the Federations constitute the backbone of the Left Wing, and are solidly Bolshevik; the argument made against was that the Conference could not approve of separate and duplicate representation, the Federations already being adequately represented by delegates at the Conference itself; and that we should have membership control, not Central Committee control. The minority report was defeated. A National Council of nine members was thereupon elected, as follows: C.E. Ruthenberg, of Cleveland; Louis C. Fraina, of Boston; I.E. Ferguson, of Chicago; John Ballam, of Boston; James Larkin, of New York; Eadmonn MacAlpine, of New York; Benjamin Gitlow, of New York; Max Cohen, of New York; and Bert Wolfe, of New York. (At the first meeting of the Council, Fraina was elected Editor of *The Revolutionary Age*, and MacAlpine Managing Editor; these two comrades thereupon resigned as members of the Council.)

On the third day [Monday, June 23], 31 delegates, consisting mostly of the Federations, decided, after a caucus, that they would withhold further activity in the Conference because of its attitude on the Communist party, these delegates resigning from all committees and having previously declined nominations for the National Council. The 31 practically bolted the Conference.

At the following sessions (eight in all were held) the reports of the Committees on Manifesto and Pro-

gram, Labor Organization, and Resolutions were disposed of. A discussion took place on the question of a resolution endorsing the IWW. The report of the Labor Organization Committee was finally adopted, accepting the IWW as a revolutionary mass movement, but condemning the theoretical shortcomings of its spokesmen. Resolutions were adopted approving the class war prisoners strike, sending our greetings to all comrades in prison, condemning and opposing intervention in Mexico, expressing our solidarity with the comrades of Russia and Hungary, and calling upon workers to refuse to work on munitions for the counterrevolution, and that the National Council be instructed to study the agrarian problem. The Labor Organization Committee brought in a plan for actual agitation among the workers, a permanent Labor Committee being elected, subject to the National Council, for this work, as follow: Reed (NY), Jim Cannon (Kansas), Marion Sproule (Mass.), Carney (Minn.), Cosgrove (Mass.), Stankowitz (Penna.), Key (Cal.), Gitlow (NY), and Jurgis (Mass.).

The final act of the Conference was the adoption of the following motion, made by Fraina: "That the National Council call a conference in Chicago, September 1 of all revolutionary elements willing to unite with a revolutionized Socialist Party or with a Communist Party that may be organized by Left Wing delegates seceding from the Convention of the Socialist Party to be held August 30."

After an **inspiring singing** of the "Red Flag" and the "Internationale," the Conference adjourned, determined to conquer for Communist Socialism.

†- There were seven so-called "Russian Federations" suspended by the Socialist Party — a useful shorthand term, perhaps, but crudely imprecise both linguistically and territorially. Three groups were Slavic language organizations springing from the territory of the old Romanov empire: the Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish Federations. One group was linguistically Slavic with no territorial connection to Romanov Russia — the South Slavic Federation, composed of Slovenian and Croatian speakers, with a smattering of Serbs. Two groups were from linguistically Baltic areas under Romanov occupation — the Latvian and Lithuanian Federations. The seventh was linguistically dissimilar to all the above and emerged from a territory having nothing to do with Romanov Russia — the Hungarian Federation. These seven were projected to be joined by at least four other Socialist language groups that did not view themselves as part of the "Russian" orbit, these most likely being the Finnish, Jewish (Yiddish), German, and Bohemian (Czech) Federations. Note that the Finnish and Yiddish groups hailed from lands which were in fact formerly part of the Romanov empire, the South Slavic and Hungarian Federationists did not. Russified Jews tended to join the Russian Federation itself, examples being the leaders Stoklitsky and Hourwich. The Scandinavian Federationists (Norwegian and Danish) were most closely associated with the Socialist Labor Party in this period and were probably not part of Fraina's calculation, nor, probably, were the small Estonian and Italian Federations.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

Cartoon "The Upsurge of Socialism" by William Gropper appeared in the original.

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