
Minutes and Executive Motions of the Left Wing National Council, August 4-12, 1919. †

Adapted from documents in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 1-8.

Meeting of National Council, August 4th, 1919.

Present: [Max] Cohen, [Isaac] Ferguson, [Ben] Gitlow, [Jim] Larkin; also [Eadmonn] MacAlpine, ex-officio.

Absent: [John] Ballam, [C.E.] Ruthenberg, [Bert] Wolfe.

Chairman: Gitlow.

Larkin called for letter of Ferguson to Ballam and Ruthenberg on motion in answer to Federation resolution, and made various commentaries thereon.

Larkin called for copy of letter sent out by Russian Federation to its branches which had been transmitted to Secretary [Ferguson] from Martens' office, this letter being a condemnation of Martens' office and urging boycotting of this office.‡ This letter had been transmitted with inquiry as to whether approved by Left Wing, and answer had been given that Council had absolutely no knowledge of such letter.

Motion by Larkin: That Committee of Two be instructed to confer with Martens and make public answer to this letter, particularly pointing out untruthful statements and wrongful use of Left Wing. (Explanation: by Committee of Two is meant the two non-Federation members of a New York City Committee appointed to confer with Martens before National

Council came into existence, these two being Larkin and Reed).

Ferguson made the point of order that this was no committee of the [Left Wing] Council with any status to represent us. The Chairman ruled the point of order not well taken, and on appeal was sustained by vote of Cohen, Gitlow Larkin [Ferguson in minority].

Larkin called for previous minutes in which reference was made to this New York Committee.

Ferguson moved that we proceed without further search of minutes, since Chairman had already ruled. *Motion defeated by votes of Cohen, Gitlow, Larkin.*

Ferguson moved that this matter be recommitted to New York Left Wing, as not coming within work of Council. *Same vote: motion lost.*

Ferguson moved that nothing be done in this matter until there has been time for all members of the Council to go on record. *Motion carried.*

On Larkin motion: *Yes: Cohen, Gitlow, Larkin; No: Ferguson. [Motion carried.]*

At this point of the meeting there was held an inquisition of the Secretary [Ferguson], by MacAlpine and Larkin, as to alleged statements before a membership meeting of the Jewish Left Wing. The Secretary [Ferguson] responded that he had made a proper interpretation of the Council action in publicly stating

†- A National Conference of the Left Wing met in New York from Saturday, June 21 through Monday, June 24, 1919. This Conference elected a 9 member executive body, called the National Council, consisting of John Ballam, Max Cohen, I.E. Ferguson, Louis Fraina, Ben Gitlow, Jim Larkin, Eadmonn MacAlpine, C.E. Ruthenberg, and Bert Wolfe. The National Council drafted a Manifesto for the organization, which was published in the July 5, 1919, issue of *The Revolutionary Age*. At the first meeting of the National Council, Fraina was elected Editor of *The Revolutionary Age* and MacAlpine Managing Editor. Both immediately resigned their places on that body, probably to head off the potential for conflicts of interest. The National Council thus subsequently consisted of 7 members and MacAlpine is referred to here as "ex-officio."

‡- Reference is to the New York office of the Russian Soviet Government Bureau, headed by Ludwig C.A.K. Martens. This de facto Soviet embassy was harshly criticized by the Russian Federation as a "Menshevik" institution.

that an organized Left Wing group, outside the [Socialist] party, might just as well elect its delegates to Chicago directly upon the basis to start the Communist Party; that the Emergency Convention [of the Socialist Party] could only have the purpose now of providing delegates to the September 1st Convention [to found a Communist Party] from states where there is no organized Left Wing, but where the whole state is under Left Wing control as a result of the elections of delegates.

Motion by Larkin: That in our opinion the carrying of the Wolfe-Ferguson resolution carries with it abrogation of the National Council; that it is unnecessary to function further; that having by the above resolution handed over to Russian Federations and Michigan faction the calling of the Communist Party September 1st, 1919, we therefore declare the dissolution of the National Council as such.

Motion to table: Yes: Cohen, Ferguson; No: Gitlow, Larkin.

Vote on motion: same.

MacAlpine asks to be recorded as in favor of Larkin motion.

Motion made and carried to appropriate \$225 to Labor paper [*The Voice of Labor*]. Ferguson, in explanation of his vote, stated that this meant nothing as to future of such a paper, since it ended Council treasury at this time, and that the paper would have to continue on its own funds.

Motion that Gitlow and Larkin be given space in *Revolutionary Age* to publish statement in behalf of their position. *Carried.*

Motion that Ballam and Ruthenberg be asked to come to meeting dealing with Joint Call for September 1st Convention. Ferguson stated that the Council could not finance these members in making such a trip. Agreed that invitation should be based on local contribution for such trip.

Cohen asked to be put on record as favoring Joint Call for Convention only if based on 1 [delegate] to 500 [members] representation, with fractional vote for smaller groups.

I.E. Ferguson,
Secretary.

Executive Motions. August 5th, 1919.

Motion No. 1 (by Ferguson): Moved that the next physical meeting of the National Council be held in Chicago on August 29th, without financial obligations on the part of the National Left Wing Organization to bring the members of the Council to Chicago; and that there be no such meetings between now and August 29th.

Comment: There is no reason for actual meetings of the Council simply by accident of having four New York members. At the first meeting it was decided to transact business by executive motions [by mail]. The further accidental circumstance that the Secretary [Ferguson] is in New York and is a member of the Council is no reason why he should be compelled to waste hours in useless debate from which two members of the Council are always excluded, and almost in every instance three by non-attendance through reasons of distance, business, or indifference.†

The only reasons for actual Council meetings at any time would be (1) questions of finance; (2) questions of editorial policy of the *Revolutionary Age*, requiring consultation with the Editor [Louis Fraina]. All other questions are either purely secretarial or of general policy where all members should be consulted. In the latter case, it might as well be documentary in the first instance, instead of being rehashed in many hours of talk.

In all candor, this motion is not made on general proposition of logic, but on account of the personal situation which has been and is deterrent to the Council work. On the eve of the success of this work — the joining of all Left Wing elements for the new party which is to carry on the propaganda of revolutionary Socialism — there is the physical possibility for the defeated group within the Council to hamper and perhaps destroy our work.‡ I think the majority of the Council should have the gumption and frankness to dispose of a minority of two who insult us deliberately and show only the disposition to make themselves troublesome. The fact that Gitlow and Larkin happen to be in New York, and therefore generally of

†- Reference is to Cleveland resident C.E. Ruthenberg, Boston resident John Ballam, and New Yorker Bertram Wolfe.

‡- Reference is to those favoring continued action within the SPA: Gitlow, and Larkin (with their allies MacAlpine and Reed).

equal voting power with the majority of the Council in the actual meetings, points at once to the absurdity of such meetings. The flourish about bringing Ballam and Ruthenberg here for a meeting, when we have no money for the purpose, and when what is really needed is a joint meeting with the Organization Committee of the Minority Conference group, shows that even our minority members realize that the situation is not fair to the work of the Council.

It is impossible for the Secretary [Ferguson] as Secretary to get any guidance from a meeting where Gitlow, MacAlpine, and Larkin make every effort to trip him up on every statement, public or private, and the situation in the Council has gotten beyond the point where there can be advantage in the criticism of the minority. We must act instantly — and in accordance with the full implications of the resolution adopted in favor of joining the two Left Wing factions. It is up to the majority to accept the Larkin motion in the sense that the minority of the Council is now without function. They ought to resign, but since they will not meet the logic of their own votes, let the majority of the Council do so.

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Motion No. 2 [by Ferguson] is really part of this motion.

Moved that Cohen, Ruthenberg, and Ferguson be constituted a Convention Committee of the National Council with full power to complete all arrangements for a September 1st Convention to form a Communist Party, and to make the call for this Convention in conjunction with the Minority Conference group, or any part of this group.

Comment: The time has come for the majority of the Council to assert itself decisively against the dilatory tactics of a minority which insists on bringing within the Council meetings a rehash of every little New York squabble between the Federation politicians and those who are characterized by the Federationists as the Left Wing politicians. Every day is of great importance. This is no time for such silly debate as has gone on within the Council meetings, but a time for action — action to which the minority members of the Council are so bitterly opposed that they instinc-

tively pounce upon every little point as a means of justifying their opposition and preventing progress toward reconciliation.

Nothing in this comment is meant to disparage other members of the Council as to motives or as to service to the labor movement. There is only meant the narrow point that those comrades have lost their serviceability to the Council in the immediate business in hand, and it is only sensible for the majority members to protect the Council work from conscious or unconscious sabotage. It is impossible to convince these comrades just at this moment that New York is not the United States, even with regard to the Left Wing and the Federations. Let the majority members effectually get all such discussions over where it belongs — to the Communist Party Convention — and meanwhile let the subcommittee wind up the work which must be taken care of at once.

Aside from personalities there is urgent reason for a subcommittee, because one meeting will not settle all arrangements, and intercommunication between two groups can better be handled by three men than by seven, the three being free from hindrance of the formalities of meetings to vote down a minority, which can tie up the New York meetings of the Council.

As to the Federation question which holds New York in a continual whirl to the benefit of the Right Wing, only one of the three named in this subcommittee, myself, is avowedly pro-Federation, so there is no danger that this viewpoint will predominate. The choice of myself to handle the item of the new NEC and its Convention; Cohen has been openly anti-Federation and gives New York its representation on the subcommittee through its own Secretary (Cohen being still Secretary of the New York Left Wing). Also there is the geographic situation of myself in Chicago, with Ruthenberg half way between here and Chicago; and in all likelihood I will be back in Chicago the last half of August.

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Motion No. 3 (by Ferguson): Moved that no further appropriations of funds be made by the National Council until August 29th at Chicago, and that all funds be held by the Secretary for expenses already incurred and the surplus as a Special Convention Fund,

subject to disposition on August 29th or later.

Comment: This motion simply avoids the question of finances during the interim of no meeting until August 29th. If money comes in, as it will in small accounts at any rate, the National Council ought to have some fund in relation to the Chicago situation, and the chances are already poor enough. We cannot raise money overnight, and never had the situation in control from this viewpoint; and it has been conspicuously the minority members of the Council who have disregarded the work of the National Left Wing from this angle, from the worthy motive, however, of promoting the *Revolutionary Age*. The point is that there has never been serious consideration of the National Council as taking complete charge of the Chicago situation, a possibility which should never be ignored no matter what the pressure of the *Revolutionary Age* due to its present deficit.

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Argument of Ferguson Against Larkin Motion: Is this time to intrude controversy about the Martens office into the work of the National Left Wing Council? Must we abandon ourselves to the sport of Larkin in hunting down the lies of the Russian Federation? To what end? If the business of the Council were an anti-Federation fight there would be excellent logic in favor of this motion, because the statement is scandalous, so far as the translation in our hands shows. I am not arguing that the criticism against the Russian Federations shall not be made. I am against the proposition of saddling upon the National Council a New York feud, and especially our representation by two bitter anti-Federationists. Reed and Larkin, holdovers from a New York committee never chosen by the Council, a committee which never functioned and has been considered dead even as a New York committee.

When it becomes time to deal with the Martens issue, and it appears that there is reason for making it a national issue of the new party, representatives will be chosen to do so who can speak from a national point of view; whereas Larkin and Reed are both in avowed hostility at this time to the fundamental work of the National Council. Personally I have heard a great deal about this issue as basic to all that is now happen-

ing within the Socialist Party, and I characterized this as part of the delusion that the whole American movement is simply an echo of the New York feuds. If there is anything in this Martens issue, and this I think has been grotesquely exaggerated, it certainly is no legitimate affair of the National Council. Let anyone search the record of the Left Wing Conference to show how it comes within our mandate, and he will find absolutely nothing. Or are we direct heirs of all New York Left Wing squabbles?

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New York, August 9th, 1919

Executive Motion by Cohen:

MacAlpine, Reed, and Gitlow have sent in their resignations from the *Revolutionary Age*. I move that their resignations be accepted; that none of these be replaced, but that Fraina, Cohen, Wolfe, and Ferguson be constituted MANAGING COMMITTEE of *Revolutionary Age* until paper is turned over to Communist Party Convention — to include both editorial and business management, without salaries above present pay for one editor and one business manager. (Pay of latter to go to hire experienced help).

Note: MacAlpine, Reed, and Gitlow sent in their resignations to take effect immediately because of their opposition to the decisions of the majority of the National Council, especially with reference to the issuance of a Joint Call for the Communist Convention on Sept. 1st. The *Age* is now without a managing editor, associate editor, and business manager, and unless this motion is passed will not be able to come out.

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New York, August 11th.

Executive Motion by Cohen:

That Reed and Gitlow be removed as editor and business manager respectively of *The Voice of Labor*, and that the matter of this paper be taken up by the executive body that comes out of the Communist Party Convention.

Comment by Cohen:

1.— Reed and Gitlow refuse to accept the decision of the National Council concerning the Communist Party Convention and are acting against this decision, trying to mobilize sentiment against the Convention.

2.— The first issue of the *Voice of Labor* is One Big Union in tone and One Big Union alone. It is syndicalist, and not Bolshevik, in tendency. It is published by the Left Wing, but is actually damaging the Left Wing; to allow its further publication (one issue more is scheduled before September 1) under present conditions is not alone to divide the Left Wing but to confuse its Bolshevik policy.

3.— A small group around Reed and Gitlow are more unionist than they are Bolshevik. There is danger that they may use the *Voice of Labor* against the Communist Party.

4.— *The Voice of Labor* is the labor paper decided upon by the Left Wing Conference.

**Minutes of Executive Motions
of National Council.**

Aug. 5th — Ferguson: That the next physical meeting of the National Council be held in Chicago on August 29th, without financial obligation on the part of the National Left Wing Organization to bring the members of the Council to Chicago; and that there be no such meeting between now and August 29th.

(Explanation: leaves Council on basis of original motion that this body act by executive motions).

Yes: Ballam, Cohen, Ferguson, Ruthenberg, Wolfe. [*Motion carried.*]

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Aug. 5th — Ferguson: Motion that Cohen, Ruthenberg, and Ferguson be constituted a Convention Committee of the National Council with full power to complete all arrangements for a September 1st Convention to form a Communist Party, and to make the call for this Convention in conjunction with the Minority Conference group, or any part of this group.

Yes: Ballam, Cohen, Ferguson, Ruthenberg, Wolfe. [*Motion carried.*]

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Aug. 5th — Ferguson: Moved that no further appropriations of funds be made by the National Council until August 29th at Chicago, and that all funds be held by the Secretary [Ferguson] for expenses already incurred and the surplus as a Special Convention Fund, subject to disposition on August 29th or later.

Yes: Ballam, Cohen, Ferguson, Ruthenberg, Wolfe. [*Motion carried.*]

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Aug. 6th — Ballam: I move to strike out Clause 3 of the Ferguson-Wolfe resolution of June 28th upon which I voted favorably.

(Explanation — clause relating to Emergency

Convention).

Yes: Ballam, Cohen, Ferguson, Wolfe.

No: Ruthenberg. [*Motion carried.*]

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Aug. 9th — Cohen: Motion that we accept the resignations of MacAlpine, Reed, and Gitlow on *Revolutionary Age* and that none of these be replaced; but that instead Fraina, Cohen, Ferguson, and Wolfe be constituted the Editorial and Managing Committee of the paper, with salaries limited to present salary of one editor and business manager.

Yes: Ballam, Cohen, Ferguson, Wolfe. [*Motion carried.*]

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Aug. 12th — Cohen: Motion that Reed and Gitlow be removed as editor and business manager respectively of *The Voice of Labor*, and that the matter of this paper be taken up by the executive body that comes out of the Communist Party Convention.

Yes: Ballam, Cohen, Ferguson, Wolfe. [*Motion carried.*]

(Wolfe objects to comment by Cohen; votes yes because *Voice of Labor* is being used to sabotage *Revolutionary Age*).

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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