
Letter of John Reed and Ben Gitlow in New York to the Labor Committee of the Left Wing National Conference, August 13, 1919. †

A document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 4, l. 12-17.

(To the Members of the Labor Committee)

Dear Comrade —

Yesterday, [Tuesday] August 12th, Comrade [Max] Cohen introduced an executive motion to be acted on by members of the National Council to the following effect:

“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.”

This is the final step in a campaign on the part of several members of the Council to destroy the Labor paper authorized by the National Left Wing Conference. The motion was carried by the votes of [John] Ballam, Cohen, [Isaac] Ferguson, and [Bertram] Wolfe.

You can readily see that this means that no further issues of the paper shall come out until after September 1st, moreover, there is all likelihood that *there will never be another issue of the paper* — and the work which we all considered of such grave importance will be halted.

WE THEREFORE REFUSE TO OBEY THE DECISION OF THE COUNCIL, AND SHALL CONTINUE TO PUBLISH *THE VOICE OF LABOR*, ACTING UPON THE MANDATE GIVEN US BY THE CONFERENCE.

Cohen’s main reasons for trying to destroy the *Voice of Labor* are the following: First, that it is

“syndicalistic”; Second, that since both Gitlow and I are opposed to the present policy of the National Council, we might use the *Voice of Labor* to sabotage the Communist Party! Wolfe voted for the motion, on the ground that we were using it to sabotage the *Revolutionary Age*.

It is true that a group of us, consisting of Gitlow and Larkin on the Council, and MacAlpine and Reed on the *Revolutionary Age*, are unalterably opposed to the action of the *National Council* in surrendering to the Federations-Michigan minority upon the matter of the Communist Party Convention call, and the formation of the Party — a piece of political trickery which was put over under the leadership of Ferguson, after a series of unauthorized negotiations with the Federations by Ferguson and Fraina.

As you probably know, ever since the minority walked out of the Left Wing Conference, they have entered upon a bitter attack against the Left Wing, have refused to support the organization — issuing their own dues-stamps — and have cancelled 3,000 orders for the *Revolutionary Age*. Both in New York and in Massachusetts the Left Wing movement is bankrupt, and the *Age* is in such a position that no salaries have been paid for several weeks.

The Left Wing Conference, as you may remember, instructed the National Council to issue a call to the Emergency National Convention, which would mean the immediate formation of a Communist Party on the floor of the Convention if it was captured; and if not, that a Communist Party should be formed on

†- The permanent Labor Committee elected by the June 21-24 National Conference of the Left Wing consisted of Jim Cannon (Kansas), Jack Carney (Minnesota), Pascal Cosgrove (Massachusetts), Ben Gitlow (New York), Jurgis (Massachusetts), Key (California), John Reed (New York), Marion Sproule (Massachusetts), and Stankowitz (Pennsylvania). Although unsigned, authorship is attributed to John Reed and Ben Gitlow based on the address given in the reply to this letter made by Jim Cannon (Comintern Archive f. 515, op. 1, d. 4, l. 18) and Stankowitz (f. 515, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 24-26).

September 1st. The persons entrusted to issue this call failed to do so. Then the National Council itself resolved to issue a statement of our position to all Left Wing members, in English and Russian, in answer to the lying charges of the Federations-Michigan papers. This was also not done.

A clique in the National Council were already intriguing to find some way by which they might surrender to the Federations. The Central Committees of the Federations sent the Council a resolution passed by them, inviting the majority group to join in with the minority in their call for a Communist Party Convention. In answer a vaguely-worded resolution by Wolfe and Ferguson demanded that the Council try to find a basis for getting together with the Federations and issuing a Joint Call for a Communist Party Convention. Gitlow's motion, supported by Larkin, was to the effect that we have no further dealings with the Federations, but insist upon our own call, as ordered by the majority of the National Left Wing Conference.

Then came the new NEC's call for a National Emergency Convention.† The Wolfe-Ferguson motion, carried by a vote of five to two, was interpreted by the Council "machine" to mean that the majority group surrendered to the Federations, practically abrogated its powers, decided *not to go* to the National Emergency Convention, repudiated the new NEC, and accepted the position of the minority group.‡

At this same meeting of the Council Gitlow introduced a resolution to the effect that, since matters had reached a critical stage, the absentee members of the Council should be brought to New York for a final meeting to take a decision. This was unanimously passed. But the following day [Aug. 5] an executive motion was introduced and rushed through [by Ferguson], to the effect that there should be *no more meetings* of the National Council until the 29th, at Chicago, and that in the meanwhile no money be appropriated for any purpose.

Another motion, also passed, reads as follows:

"That Cohen, Ruthenberg, and Ferguson be constituted a Convention Committee, to make all arrangements for the Communist Party Convention, etc., and to make the call for this Convention in conjunction with the Minority Conference Group, or any part of this group."

This motion really hands over full control of the Left Wing to three men; it also debar Gitlow and Larkin from all participation or voice in Left Wing affairs, and all say about the basis upon which the Convention shall be called and the Party formed. Ferguson, in his comment upon the resolution moving the National Council to Chicago, frankly said that he wanted to get rid of the opposition in the Council.

Before the Join Call was agreed upon, before the basis of representation was known, the ballots for delegates were sent out, and are now being voted upon. Not being allowed to see this Joint Call, Reed, Larkin, and MacAlpine withdrew their names from the ballot. Gitlow remains upon the Bronx ballot — ~~Bronx delegates being instructed to go to the National Emergency Convention~~ [also resigned being that the Bronx voted in favor of the Joint Call].§

Reed, MacAlpine, Gitlow, and the entire staff resigned from the Revolutionary Age; Reed, because he disagreed with the editorial policy of surrender to the Federations; MacAlpine, because Fraina turned over editorial control to Ferguson during his two weeks absence on sick-leave; Gitlow, because Ferguson refused to call a meeting of the Council to consider the serious financial situation of the *Age*, and because Cohen accused Gitlow of being responsible for the situation of the *Age*, because he was "sabotaging" it by being in opposition to a majority of the Council.

As a matter of fact, MacAlpine remained on the *Age*, without getting any salary, for two weeks after he had resigned, in order to get out the paper while Fraina was away. And Gitlow promised to remain on the paper until he could turn over the affairs of the *Age* in perfect shape for his successor.

Cohen then introduced a motion [Aug. 9] — which was passed — that a Committee composed of

†- Reference is to the "incoming" National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party, headed by Executive Secretary-elect Alfred Wagenknecht — a group elected in the disputed Socialist Party election of 1919.

‡- The five members of the National Council in favor of this position were: Ballam, Cohen, Ferguson, Ruthenberg, and Wolfe. Those opposed: Gitlow and Larkin. Reference to "minority group" relates to the Federations-Michigan alliance which bolted the National Conference of the Left Wing in June and insisted upon immediate formation of a Communist Party — this after being voted down on the question by the gathering.

§- Handwritten amendment to the typewritten document.

Ferguson, Cohen, Wolfe, and Fraina should *immediately* take over full control of the paper; thus Gitlow was forced out before he had a chance to make good.

IN THE MEANTIME, \$275 BELONGING TO THE *VOICE OF LABOR* WAS THROWN INTO THE POT TO TRY AND REDUCE THE DEFICIT OF THE *REVOLUTIONARY AGE*; THIS MONEY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL REFUSES TO PAY — WITH THE RESULT THAT THE FIRST ISSUE OF THE *VOICE OF LABOR* HAD TO BE PAID FOR BY PERSONAL LOANS RAISED BY REED AND GITLOW.

To cap the climax, yesterday [Aug. 10] the staff of the *Voice of Labor* was barred out of the office, and three new locks were put on the doors by Cohen!

To give you an idea of what kind of Communist Party is to be formed at Chicago on September 1st, let me tell you the basis of representation at the Communist Party Convention laid down by the Federations, and published by them July 30th in *Novy Mir* — a basis of representation upon which, we understand, the Federations still insist.

One delegate for each 500 members; if a State organization has already joined their Communist Party — which is now in existence — the State shall have 1 delegate; if not, then every Local which has joined will have a delegate; if the Local has not joined, its place shall be taken by the local Conference of the Russian Language Federations. The call proceeds, "But in most cities the only Bolshevik Branch is the Russian Branch. Such a Branch, if it has only 25 members, is entitled to a delegate." A fund created by the Organization Committee — Dennis E. Batt, Secretary — will make up the deficit in expenses for small or poor Branches.

"Comrades!" it ends, "Vote carefully. Never mind if your delegate doesn't know English. It is better that he know only Russian and vote as a Bolshevik, than that he know English and vote as a Menshevik or Centrist."

We contend that a Communist Party organized on such a basis, in which are represented groups opposed to each other in principle — like Michigan and the Federations — and moreover, dominated by a foreign-language ideology, not only cannot make any appeal to the great mass of the workers in this country, but also is inevitably bound to split in pieces — or

at any rate, to consume all its energy in internal squabbles over control.

We believe that we have much more important work to do — to reach the working class with revolutionary propaganda of the kind contained in the *Voice of Labor*.

The enthusiastic reception accorded our first number, of which Massachusetts alone took more than 10,000 (the edition was 25,000); the eagerness with which the rank and file, sick of technical phraseology and party squabbles, takes to the paper; and the way all sorts of non-Socialist workers buy it and read it — all these things make us believe that we have hit upon something really big.

We believe that if anything comes out of Chicago, it will be a Party or organization formed at the National Emergency Convention, or from the delegates to that Convention; and not to the Communist Party crazy-quilt gathering.

But at present our feeling is that whatever happens at Chicago, the *Voice of Labor* and its propaganda is of primary importance in the building up of a revolutionary Labor Movement in this country.

~~WE ARE GOING TO KEEP ON WITH THIS PAPER, AND WE WANT YOUR SUPPORT.~~

[The Labor Committee was empowered by the National Left Wing Conference to proceed with this most important work and we propose to act upon that mandate. During the whole of this Left Wing controversy — first with the Right Wing and now with the Federation-Michigan group — general propaganda has been almost wholly neglected. We ask you to stand firm, give us your advice and direction on the paper and the methods of propaganda. With your cooperation we propose to continue the publication of the *Voice of Labor*, in spite of the efforts now being made to shelve it. We have had enough of revolutionary phraseology and compromising action, let us get down to basic work, let us reach the workers, who are seething with discontent, with our message.

Give us your wholehearted support and we will make this portion of our work felt throughout the length and breadth of the country.]†

†- Handwritten deletion to the typewritten document, last two paragraphs appended by a second typewriter.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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