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# Minutes of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of America: New York — March 17-20, 1920.

A document in the Comintern Archive, RGASPI f. 515, op. 1, d. 31, ll. 8-18.

The Executive Secretary [C.E. Ruthenberg] submitted a preliminary report containing an order of business and the suggestion that the report of the secretary be heard on each subject as taken up. The order of business was adopted with the addition of "Statement on the candidacy of Eugene V. Debs," and the suggestion in regard to the reports approved.

## Unity with the CLP.

The secretary reported that the following executive motion had been submitted to be sent the members of the committee by mail, but had been withheld because of the nearness of the meeting of the Central Executive Committee:

**Motion:** That the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party shall at once be declared united by joint resolution of their executive committees, upon the following basis:

1) The name of the united party shall be the Communist Party of America.

2) The principles and program of the united party shall be those set forth in the Manifesto and Program of the Communist Party.

3) The form of reorganization of the party shall be that adopted by the Central Executive Committee of the CP (which we understand to correspond with the reorganization plan already adopted by the executive committee of the CLP).

4) In all respects not modified by the foregoing organization plans and by the emergency situation, the Constitution of the Communist Party shall be that of the united party.

5) The two executive committees shall be at once merged into a single committee, each to retain its method of keeping its number complete, this merger to include all the administrative affairs of the two parties.

6) A convention shall be called not later than May 15, and shall be held not later than July 1920.

## *Comment:*

1) Circumstances have prevented adequate consideration of this question by our committee. Recent decisions adverse to immediate unity have been made by 4 to 6 votes. Meanwhile there has been considerable expression of unity sentiment from our membership, several referendum proposals favorable to unity which could not be submitted on account of the [Palmer Raids] arrests, and also some independent unity action by our members.

2) Unity is in line with the policy of the Third International, as made emphatic by the September 1 [1919] declaration of the Executive Committee of the International. The International aims to unite all Communist elements, regardless of previous divisions, even extending to the non-political syndicalists. The test is adherence to the Soviet system and to the proletarian dictatorship.

3) There never was any division between the CP and the CLP on fundamental Communist principles. The fact of the two parties is accounted for primarily by the inadequate Left Wing organization work within the Socialist Party, and particularly by the withdrawal from the Left Wing Conference of the Federations and the Michigan representatives. The split occurred only on the question of the method of starting a Commu-

nist Party and of Federation control of the Left Wing Council.

4) The difference between the two party programs are differences merely in the form of expression. The CLP principles, and the acceptance of the CP program by the CLP committee, would be in conformity with all the declarations of their membership. It could not be honestly contended that the CLP committee could not act for its members on this point.

5) Unity with the CLP would aid in bringing the Communist movement into contact with the American workers. For instance, the CP has hardly any English-speaking membership and no prospects of doing any organization work west of the Mississippi.

6) Unity at this time by action of the committees, instead of waiting for a convention, is warranted by the new problems of organization created by the government's attack upon both parties.

7) Immediate unity is important also because of the miserable provocateur attempts of the SP to take advantage of the hard situation of the Communists.

8) Failure to achieve quick and effective organization means future of CP as plaything of small group of hairsplitting doctrinaires and feverish talk-conspirators. It means a duplication of the SLP history. Unity with the CLP would constitute a measurable advance in actual Communist organization in the United States; it would be an assurance that the CP really means to build a functioning organization.

9) Unity of these two parties would be a splendid fighting response to the smashing government persecutions. Unity six months from now will be a dead issue unless there is effective offset to the demoralization accompanying the raids and arrests.

10) Unity will add prestige to the Communist Party in the eyes of the European parties belonging to the Third International. The European Communists have been prevented from putting proper trust in the Communist Party because of the existence of two parties, accepting affiliation and the principles and tactics of the Third International.

The following letter from the National Executive Committee of the Communist Labor party, in reply to our last proposal for a convention was also submitted:

March 9 [1920].

Central Executive Committee,  
Communist Party of America.

Comrades:

The National Executive Committee of the Communist Labor Party learns with regret that the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party has again refused the opportunity to unite all Communist forces in the United States under one banner.

No other interpretation can be placed upon the proposal by the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party to hold a convention, in view of their insistence that "as a basis for the convention tentative acceptance of the Communist Party constitution setting forth the fundamental relationship of the Language Federations within the party is essential.

The form of language federations has been one of the essential points of difference between the two parties. The fact that a small clique through their control of the autonomous federation groups controlled by the Communist Party convention in Chicago [Sept. 1919] prevented unity of all the Communist elements there. But now that the governmental persecution has forced both parties to ignore the constitutions that they adopted last fall, now that the Communist Party membership itself is violating those very provisions of the Communist Party constitution regarding federations, it is senseless and silly to bring acceptance of those principles as an essential preliminary to unity of Communist forces. The assumption is justified that they are trotted out rather as an obstacle to unity, so as to perpetuate the small clique control of the Communist Party by the present majority of the Communist Party's Central Executive Committee.

The Communist Party committee maintains that cooperation in the work of defense, organization, and propaganda is "impracticable" and "inconsistent" with the fundamental principles of the Communist Party. But we know that the great mass of the Communist Party's membership desire immediate cooperation of all Communist forces in these endeavors to meet the forces of reaction. We know that in this attempt to postpone even the consideration of unity to a distant convention, the holding of which is very problematical, the majority of the Communist Party Central Executive Committee (a bare majority of one) does not represent the will of the Communist Party's membership, and we appeal to this membership to enforce their will.

We ask the membership not to be lulled into inactivity with the promise of a unity convention six months hence. Our acceptance of the convention proposal was conditional upon an immediate uniting of all Communist forces to fight the common foe. Those that want unity can achieve it AT ONCE, much easier than six months from now. RIGHT NOW is the time to unite into one mighty army of all Comrades that will hold aloft the banner of the Third International. The persecutions have disrupted the old organization forms. The membership is now in a state of flux. New organization forms are being molded and built, adapted to the new conditions. While this process is going on ALL that are worthwhile can be united into ONE organization, will NATURALLY unite into one organization.

But if we wait six months, if we first go through a long period of steamroller building and wire-pulling to control convention delegates (as some of the Communist Party's Central Executive Committee's majority have already started to do against the members of their own party), if we now once more build two Communist organizations until they become set and rigid, and then pit them against each other in a convention, a unity of Communist forces will be almost impossible to attain. If the golden opportunity to unite now is allowed to pass, if the schism in the Communist ranks is perpetuated as the present majority of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party seems to desire, then those responsible for it will convict themselves of actual treason to the Communist International.

We stand ready at any time to discuss with the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party the problem of immediate merging of the Communist hosts, to bring into one great fighting organization all those who are for the Soviets and the Proletarian Dictatorship, as recommended by the Executive Committee of the Communist International. We hope sincerely that this consummation may yet be achieved.

National Executive Committee,  
Communist Labor Party,  
A. Wagenknecht, Executive Secretary.

Max Bedacht,  
Alexander Bilan,  
Jack Carney,  
L.E. Katterfeld,  
Edward Lindgren.

Thereupon there were read the instruction of the representative of the Communist International, who was sent from Moscow on about August 15 [1919] to take up the work of organizing a Communist Party in the United States. Also the thesis of the Holland Conference of the Third International on the subject of unity, and the representative of the Third International was given the floor. †

He stated that from all that he had been able to learn there were no fundamental differences between the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party, and urged the Central Executive to take action to unite the two parties.

After a discussion of several hours, the motion was put to a vote with the following result:

*Voting yes* — Damon [Ruthenberg], Isaacs [I.E. Ferguson], Langley [Jay Lovestone], and Norman [Polish Federationist = ???]. Total 4.

*Voting no* — Andrew [Nicholas Hourwich], Bernstein [Maximilian Cohen], Braun [Latvian Federationist = ???], Bunte [Charles Dirba], Raphael [Alexander Bittelman], Ries [John Ballam], Sascha [Rose Pastor Stokes], and Black [???]. Total 9.

*The motion was therefore lost.*

The Central Executive Committee thereupon formulated the following proposal and reply to the National Executive Committee of the Communist Labor party, which was adopted unanimously in its final form:

New York, March 19, 1920.

National Executive Committee,  
Communist Labor Party,  
New York, NY.

Comrades:

Your reply to our proposal to hold a joint convention for the purpose of achieving unity of the Communist elements of this country has been received and has had the careful consideration of our committee.

We will not concern ourselves with the various charges and insinuations in your statement. These are evidently not intended to be taken seriously, but are included merely for the purpose of propaganda, since they do not affect the issues at stake. Our committee has, however, again considered your proposal for immediate unity between your committee and ours and has rejected this proposal by the decisive vote of 9 to 4. The reason for this rejection is that our committee does not believe that unity attained through such committee action would attain the permanent Communist unity which we earnestly desire.

As evidence of its desire to achieve such permanent Communist unity our committee has adopted the following statement, which it submits for your consideration and acceptance:

1. We accept the basis of Communist unity proposed by the Third International, inasmuch as it relates to the rank and file, but we maintain that the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party must be in agreement also on questions of tactics and organization, and since such would not be the case if we merged the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party and the National Executive Committee of the Communist Labor Party, we reject such a merger.

2. We reaffirm our desire to have the unity of both parties achieved through a joint convention.

3. We are ready to set the date for the joint convention at the earliest possible date and not later than June 15 [1920].

† - It is unclear to whom this reference was made. Samuel Agurskii was the representative of the Comintern at the convention bringing unity between the CLP and the Ruthenberg faction of the CPA in May 1920 and seems the most likely candidate, although it is by no means certain that he was in the United States from August 1919.

4. The constitutional relations of the Federations to the Party must enter as a part of the call for the joint convention, subject of course to changes by the convention.

5. In the meantime, we favor cooperation between the two parties whenever desirable and practicable through the Central, District, and Local committees of both parties, subject to the control and approval of the respective Central Executive Committees.

We have elected a Joint Convention Committee of 3 members with instructions to meet with a similar committee of your organization and to arrange a convention on the following basis:

1. The joint call for the convention must include our Manifesto, Program, and constitutional relations of the Federations to the Party.

2. Apportionment of delegates on the basis of dues stamps sold by each organization for the months of October, November, and December [1919], the total number of delegates from both organizations not to exceed 35. Books of both organizations to be open to the opposite committee members.

3. The election of delegates to be by membership action and to be conducted secretly and to be as nearly as possible alike for the two organizations.

4. The quorum to call the convention in order to consist of two-thirds of the delegates elected by each organization.

For ourselves we have adopted the following plan for the election of delegates:

1. We will apportion delegates to our districts on the basis of dues stamps purchased during October, November, and December [1919].

2. A convention of each district shall be called in which sub-districts shall be represented by one delegate for each 200 members on the basis of dues stamps purchased for October, November, and December [1919]. This convention to elect our delegates and alternates.

3. Nominations for delegates to the district conventions shall be secured from the members by the group organizers. Nominees must be members in the districts in which they are nominated. The names of all nominees shall be presented to the members for vote by the group organizers. The district convention may elect any party member irrespective of the districts.

If your committee really desires unity between the Communists of the United States and is not merely using the plea to unity as a convenient method of propaganda against the Communist Party of America, we trust you will take immediate favorable action on this proposal and elect your convention committee.

Fraternally submitted,

Central Executive Committee,  
Communist Party of America.

Executive Secretary [C.E. Ruthenberg].

## **International Relations.**

The Secretary [Ruthenberg] submitted a tentative report from Louis C. Fraina, International Secretary, regarding the work of the Holland Conference of the Third International, which he attended as a representative of the Communist Party of America. This report contained a mandate to the Communist Party of America to organize, provisionally, the Pan-American Bureau of the Communist International, which is charged with the duty of calling an early conference of all parties in North and South America which accept the principles of the Third International.

Decisions arrived at as follows:

That the International Secretary [Fraina] return to this country when his mission is fulfilled.

That in accordance with the authorization of the Holland Conference of the Third International we organize provisionally the Pan-American Bureau of the Communist International, to consist of 3 members of the Communist Party of America, a representative of the Latin-American Bureau in Mexico, and one representative from South America.

Comrades Andrew [Hourwich], Damon [Ruthenberg], and Raphael [Bittelman] were elected the CP members of the Bureau with authority to proceed with the work at once.

It was recommended to the Bureau to immediately issue a statement in regard to the organization of the Bureau.

The following were named as alternates should any of the members of the Bureau be unable to act: 1. Bernstein [Maximilian Cohen], 2. Fisher [Leonid Bel-sky], 3. Meyers [???].

The Bureau was authorized to borrow money in the name of the Third International on our guarantee of repayment with the understanding that loans must first be approved by the Executive Council.

## **Organization.**

The Secretary [Ruthenberg] submitted a report of the progress in the various districts showing that the work of reorganization had made satisfactory progress in all but two districts. He recommended that the method of dues paying by the Federations be changed so that Federation Organizers would secure

stamps through the District Organizer. Resolutions from the District Committee of District IV [Cleveland] urging this change was submitted. Also resolution from the Estonian Federation urging election in place of appointment of Party officials, the inclusion of the editor of the Estonian paper in the editorial board constituted at the last meeting, and the submission of monthly financial reports to the Federations by the Party. Resolutions regarding the situation in the Russian Federation from Milwaukee, Chicago, and Boston districts were submitted. Also financial report for January, February, and March to the 15th [1920].

The following decisions were made on organization matters:

*The Functions of District Committees.*

1. The District Committees are the supreme bodies in their respective districts to carry out the policies of the National Organization. Their legislative powers are strictly limited to questions of administration.

2. The District Organizer is to work in cooperation with and under the supervision of the District Committee.

And amendment to section 2 reading: "The District Organizer has the right to temporarily veto all decisions of his District Committee, referring the question for final settlement by the Central Executive Committee, was defeated by a vote of 2 Yes and 5 No.

*Relations with the Federations.*

The Executive Secretary [Ruthenberg] is instructed to hold periodic conferences, either individually or jointly, with the Executive Secretaries of the Federations for the purpose of information and supervision and to establish closer cooperation between the Party and the Federations.

*Legal Organizations.*

The question of Legal Organizations arose through report on the actions of the Lettish [Latvian] Federation in that regard. The following resolution was adopted:

1) Only party stamps may be used in the collection of dues and the party work must be carried on exclusively through the underground organization.

2) The party organization cannot be part of any legal organization.

3) Committees using the names of social clubs for the purpose of holding entertainments, etc. may be organized.

4) Committees of the party organization may be incorporated to hold property, but such incorporated bodies must be made up of party members only and be under the control of the party.

5) Such committees shall not exceed 15 in number.

6) All legal publications shall be under the direct control of the party and all legal apparatus for publishing shall conform with the above decisions regarding the holding of property.

*Method of Selecting Officials.*

The previous decision was reconsidered and amended to read:

"The members of the groups shall elect their Group Organizer and the Group Organizers shall elect the Branch Organizers. District Organizers and Sub-District Organizers shall be appointed as previously decided until the convention."

*Federation District Organizers.*

The District Organizers of the Federations can be removed and replaced only by the Central Executive Committee of the Federations, either on its own volition or upon the complaint of the District Committee. The power of the CEC to remove such organizers is not affected by this decision.

*Branch Funds.*

The Branches of the Party are instructed to retain their portion of the dues collected in their treasury.

*Financial Reports.*

Copies of the monthly financial statements of the Party will be furnished to the CEC of the Federations and the Executive Secretaries of the Federations are instructed to submit a copy of their monthly financial statements to the Executive Secretary.

*Selling Dues Stamps to Federation Members.*

A motion was submitted that "Dues stamps shall

be sold to the Federation branches through the District Organizer, who will send them to the branches through the Federation District Organizer. The National Office will make payment of its quota of dues to each Federation on the first Monday of each month.

*This motion was lost* by the following roll call vote:

*Voting Yes*— Alden [???], Damon [Ruthenberg], Ries [Ballam], Langley [Lovestone]. Bunte [Dirba]. Total 5.

*Voting No*— Raphael [Bittelman], Brown [???], Andrew [Hourwich], Sascha [Stokes], Black [???], Bernstein [Cohen]. Total 6.

### **Statement on Candidacy of Debs.**

A statement on the candidacy of Eugene V. Debs was submitted by Comrade Isaacs [Ferguson]. It was decided that the CEC considers it necessary to issue a statement in regard to the candidacy of Eugene V. Debs on the Socialist ticket and a committee consisting of Bernstein [Cohen], Andrew [Hourwich], and Raphael [Bittelman] was elected to draft the statement.

### **Russian Federation.**

A committee consisting of Bunte [Dirba], Brown [???], and Raphael [Bittelman] was elected to audit the books of the Russian Federation and to submit a report upon the authority of the present CEC of the Federation.

### **Financial.**

The auditing committee submitted a report on the audit of the books to Dec. 31 [1919], stating that everything was found in order and the records clear and definite in every respect.

### **Charges Against Andrew [Hourwich] and Ries [Ballam].**

The Secretary presented a letter from the New England District Organizer [Marion Sproule] stating that Comrade Ries [Ballam] had represented to her that the CEC of the Party had assessed the district \$100.00 for the purpose of sending Comrade Andrew

[Hourwich] to Europe as International Delegate, and that later Comrade Andrew had appeared and asked for the \$100.00 and he had given it to him.

**Motion:** That the committee suspend Comrade Andrew [Hourwich] and that recommendation be made to the proper Party unit to expel him from the Party.

Comrades Andrew [Hourwich] and Ries [Ballam] denied making the representations as charged.

*Motion to suspend lost*, 1 yes, 7 no, 3 not voting. Comrade Damon [Ruthenberg] abstained from voting and stated that he believed Comrade Andrew [Hourwich] should be censured.

**Motion:** That the committee suspend Comrade Ries [Ballam] and recommend to the proper Party unit to expel him.

*Motion lost.*

**Motion:** That the Executive Council be instructed to secure further evidence in regard to the charge against Comrade Ries [Ballam]. *Carried.*

The charge against Comrade Ries [Ballam] included a statement by the New England District Organizer [Sproule] that she had been induced to plead guilty to the charge of Criminal Anarchy, to which Comrade Ries [Ballam] had previously plead guilty, by his representation that it was the instructions of the CEC. Comrade Ries [Ballam] denied this.

Comrade Ries [Ballam] submitted his resignation as District Organizer [D-IVb Pittsburgh].

**Motion:** Not to accept [resignation]. *Carried.*

**Motion:** That Comrade Andrew [Hourwich] be censured for his effort to go to Europe without the authority of the committee. *Lost.*

Comrade Ferguson [“Isaacs”] submitted his resignation as follows:

Executive Sec., CP of A.

I hereby resign as a member of the CEC of the Communist Party. In explanation: I cannot sit on a CEC with Andrew [Hourwich] and Ries [Ballam] after the record they have made as to soliciting Party funds for Andrew [Hourwich] over the head of the CEC and after Ries' [Ballam's] plea of guilty before the Massachusetts court.

I.E. Ferguson

The resignation was accepted under new business. 2.

### Discipline of CEC Members.

Comrade Norman [??] requested permission from the committee to leave the country, stating that he was under obligation to fulfill a mission and that he also wished to submit a report to his party in Poland, which had originally sent him to the United States.

**Motion:** That no member of the CEC leave the country without the authority of the CEC. *Carried.*

Comrade Norman's [??] request was thereupon voted upon with the following result:

*To grant him permission to leave* — 2.

*To accept his resignation and leave him free to leave* — 5.

*To reject resignation, requiring him to stay here* — 2.

Comrade Norman [??] thereupon raised the point that the same procedure should be applied to Comrade Andrew [Hourwich], who had attempted to leave without the consent of the committee, and *the following motion was adopted:*

**Motion:** That we request Comrade Andrew [Hourwich] to state whether he intends to leave the country, except if sent on a party mission.

Comrade Andrew [Hourwich] thereupon stated that he did not intend to leave, except if sent on a Party mission.

**Motion:** That Comrade Andrew [Hourwich] be instructed to return the money he had secured from party sources for the purpose of leaving the country to escape prosecution or on the representation that he was going on a Party mission.

A roll call vote on this motion resulted as follows:

*Voting Yes* — Norman [??], Bunte [Dirba], Damon [Ruthenberg]. Total 3.

*Voting No* — Bernstein [Cohen], Andrew [Hourwich], Raphael [Bittelman], Ries [Ballam], Black [??]. Total 5.

*Not Voting* — Braun [??] and Alden [??]. Total

### May Day Proclamation.

A proposed May Day Proclamation was submitted to the committee, which called upon the workers to declare a one day strike May Day for the release of political and industrial prisoners. This led to a discussion of the general political strike and the desirability of calling for a strike at all. It was decided that we would call for a strike on May Day but not as a general political strike. The proclamation was referred to a committee which reported it back with slight changes and it was then adopted. (Copy is attached. This proclamation should be translated in all languages and appear in all party papers in issue nearest April 24 [1920]. It will be issued in leaflet form by the national organization for distribution about the same time).

### Press.

The resignation of Comrade Isaacs [Ferguson] as acting party editor was accepted.

The Executive Secretary [Ruthenberg] was appointed acting party editor with Comrade Sascha [Stokes] as assistant editor.

### Defense.

It was decided to elect a National Defense Committee to conduct the defense work under the supervision of the Executive Council. The election was referred to the Executive Council.

Comrade Isaacs [Ferguson] was continued in the position of party counsel and assigned to work in Chicago as secretary of the Chicago Defense Committee.

Comrade Bunte [Dirba] was instructed not to appear in the case pending against him in Minneapolis, the Party assuming responsibility for the \$1,000 bond this action will forfeit.

Four Brooklyn comrades under charges of "Criminal Anarchy" were directed to act in accordance with advice of their counsel on the question of pleading guilty to a charge of "Disorderly Conduct," with

understanding that sentence would not exceed 30 days. soon as a suitable person can be found.

Counsel for the party [Ferguson] was directed to investigate the question of whether the Ries [Balam] or Smith [Sproule] cases could be reopened by withdrawal of plea of "guilty" of Criminal Anarchy and a trial demanded.

The Secretary [Ruthenberg] stated that a check for \$250 had been received by Winitsky and turned over to him, being a contribution to the Winitsky defense by the Workers Defense Union. It was decided to ask for a full accounting of the defense funds in the Winitsky and Lovestone cases and hold the \$250 until the matter was adjusted.

It was also decided to demand an accounting from Winitsky of his financial transactions as Executive Secretary of Local New York.

It was decided to instruct the counsel for the party [Ferguson] to endeavor to secure bail for Dudinsky.

A list of the Communist Party deportee cases being handled by Attorney Recht was demanded.

### **Convention.**

It was decided that in case the CLP refuses to go into the joint convention with us that we hold a party convention of 35 delegates under the rules adopted for the joint convention.

Comrades Bernstein [Cohen], Damon [Ruthenberg], and Raphael [Bittelman] were elected the convention committee.

### **Additional Organization Matters.**

#### *Decisions:*

That Comrade Smith [Sproule] be superceded as District Organizer in the New England district as

That between the meeting of the CEC, the Executive Council make appointments of District Organizers.

The temporary division of District IV into District IV-a, including all of Ohio except towns in neighborhood of Wheeling, W.Va.; and District IV-a, including Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Erie, Buffalo, and Rochester; and District IV-c, including Detroit and all of Michigan, was approved.

### **Miscellaneous.**

That the minutes of the Executive Council be submitted to the CEC at its sessions.

That the two next highest alternates be advised of their admission to the CEC in place of Isaacs [Ferguson] and Norman [???], who resigned.

That the assistant editor [Stokes] be designated a member of the Executive Council.

That the position of Langley [Lovestone] on the Executive Council be declared vacant. Andrew [Hourwich] elected in his place.

That Comrade Andrew's [Hourwich's] expense attending the meeting of the CEC be paid.

That no motions be submitted to the CEC by mail.

That the next meeting of the CEC be held May 15 [1920].

David Damon [C.E. Ruthenberg],  
Executive Secretary.

***Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.***

***Third Edition, July 2009 — corrects dates of session, which ended March 20, not March 19, 1920.***

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