
Open Letter from the United Communist Party to the Executive Committee of the Communist International on Unity [circa Nov. 20, 1920]

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TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF
THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL.

Dear Comrades:—

Convinced that the mission of a Communist party can only be fulfilled if all the forces of communism are organized into one party and directed from one center, it has always been our endeavor to unite these forces and create a unified Communist Party in the United States. Therefore, cheerfully and in good faith, we have taken up the question of unity at every opportunity, to make sure that none of our duties as communists would be neglected. We, therefore welcomed your mandate for unity of the Communist Party with the United Communist Party and immediately proceeded with the necessary arrangements for its consummation. Only action in the capitalist courts against some of the members of our Central Executive Committee caused a delay of a few days.

During the period of this delay, by which we were prevented from calling a full meeting of the Central Executive Committee, we received a communication from the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party, asking us about the matter [Dirba to Central Executive Committee UCP, Oct. 15, 1920]....

This communication was answered by a local quorum of our Central Executive Committee [Wagenknecht to CEC CPA, Oct. 21, 1920]...

On November 2 [1920], a full session of the Central Executive Committee of the United Communist Party decided upon a course of action laid down in a communication to the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party [Wagenknecht to CEC CPA, Nov. 3, 1920]... When at a subsequent joint meeting of the sub-committees our communication was handed to them, they handed to us the original of [Dirba to CEC UCP, Oct. 20, 1920]. At a later joint meeting of the sub-committees [the letter Dirba to CEC UCP, Nov. 3, 1920] was handed to our sub-committee by a sub-committee of the Communist Party and was answered by us the next day with a communication, [Wagenknecht to CEC CPA, Nov. 5, 1920]...

Several days afterwards, a letter was handed before our sub-committee, [Dirba to CEC UCP, Nov. 4, 1920]... The statements in this last letter have, up to this day, not been confirmed by a report by our own representative and, in some parts, seem highly improbable to us.¹ The seating of an additional member in the Executive Committee of the Communist International as a representative of America is not in agreement with paragraph 8 of the constitution of the Communist International. The technical forms of unity supposedly laid down by you and conveyed to us in this communication seem to us possible but not probable. We were sure that you would leave that to the comrades in the United States, who, by their thorough knowledge of the facts and conditions would be best able to decide upon a unity, the form and substance of which would conform to the spirit and letter of your decision and that of the Second Congress [Petrograd and Moscow, July 19-Aug. 7, 1920] in regard to Communist unity.

Upon receipt of this last communication the Central Executive Committee of the United Communist Party decided to immediately instruct its representative on the Executive Committee of the Communist International [Robert Minor] to place all facts before your body with the request that you act in the matter immediately. Consequently, an answer was given to the Central Committee of the Com-

¹ Dirba's Nov. 4, 1920 communication revealed a recent decision of ECCL to extend the deadline for unity between the UCP and the CPA to Jan. 1, 1921; to temporarily seat the CPA on ECCL in a position of parity with the UCP; and to require that the forthcoming merger of the organizations be conducted on an equal basis at a convention delegated based on dues actually paid for the months July to October 1920. The UCP was hampered in obtaining information about this decision by the death of its representative to ECCL, John Reed, of typhus on Oct. 17, 1920.

munist Party to that effect [Wagenknecht to CEC CPA, Nov. 14, 1920]...

The problem of unity of the two Communist organizations in the United States was not merely a question of numbers expressed in dues payments, but is rather one, the solution of which will decide whether the representative organization of the Communist International in the United States will be a live force of the revolution or will be condemned to be merely a propaganda or educational society. Since its inception, the communist movement in America has been hampered in its development by a struggle for control by a small group of unprincipled elements. The success of the conscious work of the revolutionary section of the American working class means nothing to these people. They would unhesitatingly sacrifice the best interests of Communism upon the altar of their own ego. Knowing the immeasurable harm their activity has done and is still doing to the Communist movement in the United States, we, the Central Executive Committee of the United Communist Party, consider it our duty to carefully wight the existing circumstances, in order to carry out your mandate for unity in such a manner as would insure the American section of the Communist International against the suicidal manipulations of would-be communists.

While frothing at the mouth with continuous shouts of “Centrists,” “Counter-revolutionists,” “Yellows,” “legalists,” and similar epithets, some of the most influential leaders of the Communist Party have manifested their love for, and understanding of Communism solely by a struggle for control.

Their principle, their policy, their tactic, was: Divide and rule!

They split the Left Wing for the purpose of retaining control. In order to continue the thus created division and their rule, they then united with the Michigan group, the clearest centrist expression that the left wing of the Socialist Party of the United States has produced. After they had succeeded in splitting the Left Wing [National] Council, they played against the majority of the council the Michigan group, which ridiculed the principle of mass action in its official organ [*The Proletarian*] and all public utterances of its leaders. Vice versa, they pitted the majority of the Left Wing Council against the Michigan group, thus always holding in their hand the balance of power — control. The quality of the organization, its usefulness to the revolutionary movement of the United States, its ability for action — all these vital question meant nothing to them as long as they con-

trolled. These “guardians of pure communism,” these sworn enemies of “centrists,” ruled happily and without protest over the Menshevik Michigan group until that group itself felt the impossibility of its position and withdrew after the raids.²

With the Michigan group out of the Communist Party, the equilibrium was disturbed. The question so skillfully settled by manipulations at the first convention of the Communist Party on September 1st, 1919 by the votes of “communist” members of the federations that had never been anything else other than “dead souls” [paper members], again became an acute problem. A struggle for control again ensued and manifested itself as a struggle for unity between the communist elements.

The Communist Labor Party, the result of the first split in the Left Wing, always realized the imperative necessity of communist unity. It carried on persistent propaganda for unity and made repeated efforts to that end. At this time, the capitalist government of the United States carried out its raids and started its wholesale persecutions of communists. These persecutions were directed alike against both the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party. The raids completely disorganized both parties because they were built on an open legal basis and were unprepared for this attack. Thus it became necessary to begin anew in the upbuilding of the communist movement in America. Then the criminal waste of energy and divided efforts in the building of two parallel and rival parties became apparent. Efforts were made for immediate unity.

Those of the majority of the Left Wing Council who were now members of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party [Ruthenberg group] united their efforts with the National Executive Committee of the Communist Labor Party. The raids of the prosecution tended to clean out the left wing movement as represented by both parties, caused the desertion of the centrist elements and sifted the tens of thousands of left wingers down to some thousands of Communists. At this time, when the Communist movement, unprepared, stood the assaults of the capitalist state, the “holy shriners of pure Bolshevism” still insisted upon a division of the ranks

² Reference is to the so-called “Palmer Raids,” a coordinated national dragnet conducted by the US Department of Justice under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover during the night of January 2/3, 1920. An earlier set of coordinated mass raids were launched on November 7, 1919, targeting the Communist Party of America.

and steadfastly refused unity. Then came the earnest endeavor of the former members of the majority of the Left Wing Council who wanted to achieve this desired end — unity. But this was not to be permitted by the “rule or ruin” leaders of the Communist Party. The addition of the Communist Labor Party would have strengthened the opposition to their misleading tactics and threatened their control. It would have put a stop to their “work” for Communism in the United States. This “work” was described by the Chicago district in their own Party³ as follows:

1. They packed the Chicago convention⁴ through securing about twice the number of delegates representing their viewpoint as any membership basis gave authority for and through their caucus controlled the convention and placed themselves in control of the Party.

2. Since the convention instead of devoting their energy to building up the party, they have largely been concerned with the work of maintaining their control and have decided every question that came before the Central Executive Committee from the standpoint of their interests and the maintenance of their control rather than from the broader standpoint of building up a strong, united party in this country.

3.

4. ...In spite of Comrade Andrew [Nicholas Hourwich] having been refused permission to go to Europe and having been refused funds for such purpose he misused party machinery for raising funds out of private and party resources.

5. In order further to secure their control, they removed an member of the Central Executive Committee under the pretense of having failed to attend two meetings of the CEC.

6. Since they have been in office these men in the CEC have been completely taken up with forwarding personal schemes and maintaining their control, and have not taken ANY constructive action in the interests of building a strong organization. At no time has the committee considered questions of propaganda policy and the relation of the party to the working class movement in this country...

7. In dealing with the problems of reorganization after the January raids and the liquidation of the legal organization, this group has decided all questions on the basis of its continued control rather than from the standpoint of the best interest of the party.

³ The Chicago district was the center of the Ruthenberg opposition inside the CPA during the first months of 1920.

⁴ Reference is to the founding convention of the CPA, Chicago, Sept. 1-7, 1920.

This accusation was made by the largest sub-organization of their own party, and published in No. 4, Vol. 2 of their official organ [*The Communist*].

This group of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party continued to bitterly oppose unity with the Communist Labor Party on the ground that the latter were Centrists and Yellows. Meanwhile conditions ripened for a split in their own ranks. A convention being on hand, these “rule or ruin” leaders prepared to expel the bulk of the membership which opposed their tactics. The majority of the Left Wing Council [Ruthenberg group] resented that move and a split resulted. These comrades of the Left Wing Council who, up to the split, were members of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party, acting as secretary and editors, were now transformed into “Counter-revolutionists” and “Centrists” and attacked as traitors to the communist movement. But the transformation did not stop there. The Communist Labor Party, which but yesterday was “Centrist” and “Yellow,” with which unity was forever impossible, suddenly became a coveted object for unity and received an unexpected invitation to proceed with unity negotiations. The “rule or ruiners” now needed the Communist Labor Party to force back into their ranks the revolting membership and afterwards to play the one against the other.

The Communist Labor Party refused to be made the catspaw of these unprincipled characters and proceeded to unite with that element of the Communist Party which sincerely favored unity and represented the bulk of the Communist Party membership.⁵ This was the only way to effect unification of the communist ranks in the United States. The United Party never lost sight of the problem of unity and has always been ready to proceed on any basis promising permanency. At all times the united party considered it its imperative duty to guard against an element which considers a Communist Party only insofar as it can control it.

In their endeavor to control they even went so far as to emasculate their program. they always realized they could not play for control in the plain and naked terms of control. So they very carefully clothed their manipulations in the most beautiful communist terms

⁵ This greatly misrepresents the level of rank-and-file support of the Ruthenberg group, which proved to represent a small minority of the total dues paying membership of the CPA outside of the party's Chicago district.

and phrases, even though they were compelled to rob those terms of all their essence. Thus, after the split, they could not merely tell their members that it was a question of control but they had to invent some differences in principle to justify their disruptive tactics. We have reported above how the perfectly good communists of yesterday were overnight transformed into the “Yellows” of today. An indication of this transformation was supposed to be evident in the attempt of those whom the Communist Party leaders called “yellow” to seek contact with the masses, which was declared to be a capital crime of a Bolshevik. The contact that these comrades endeavored to establish with the masses has since crystallized in the shop and union propaganda program of the United Communist Party.

The basis of this program is the principle that the very life of every form of activity of the working class must be permeated with communist understanding. It is an acknowledgment of the principle that a communist party must be a party of action, giving the unconscious struggle of the working class conscious communist understanding and direction. In order to justify their accusation the leaders of the Communist Party emasculated the very life of their party and degraded it to a mere propaganda organization. In its shop group program the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party expressly limits the activity of these groups to the distribution of leaflets, the organization of study classes, and the collection of party funds among sympathizers.

Their shop group program was published in No. 10, Vol. 2 of their official organ [*The Communist*]. It is such a complete perversion of the function of the party that even its own members — who to their honor, be it said, are only unconsciously a party to the manipulations of their leaders — seem to have protested. We take that from the editor’s introduction to Comrade Zinoviev’s article, “On the Formation of Soviets,” appearing on page 7 of the same number of the official organ of the Communist Party. There we read: “To those comrades who felt that the tentative program of the Communist Party on shop committees did not answer the immediate purpose, we would advise a re-reading,” etc.

The question of mass organization was perverted into a caricature. Instead of seeing in mass action in its highest form the logical development of the struggle of the revolutionary working class for power, they, for instance, degraded it into a solution of all the everyday struggles of the workers and called upon a group of workers fight-

ing for a slight increase in wages to organize for armed insurrection. See [CPA leaflet issued during Brooklyn railway strike].

We accuse these leaders of the Communist Party of knowingly and willfully twisting communist principle and tactics into caricatures in order to prove difference in principle with the contending party, and in order to justify their continuous and malicious accusations of “Centrists” and “Yellows.”

To prove their insincerity in sending their invitation for unity to the Communist Labor Party a few days after the split within their own ranks, these leaders of the Communist Party managed to have adopted at their convention some weeks afterwards [2nd: New York City, July 13-18, 1920] a resolution of unity, the first sentence of which reads in the following extremely “pro-unity” language: “Unity with the United Communist Party as a party of Centrists is IMPOSSIBLE.” This resolution is printed in No. 8, Vol. 2 of their official organ.

Even now, while professing to carry out the mandate of your committee in regard to unity, the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party sends out a circular to its members [Dirba to CPA Membership, Oct. 20, 1920]... There you will read:

UNITY WITH THE UNITED COMMUNIST PARTY DOES NOT MEAN PEACE: NOT EVEN A TRUCE with such Centrists as Caxton [I.E. Ferguson] and Damon [C.E. Ruthenberg], with such violators of party discipline as Damon [Ruthenberg] and Fisher [Leonid Belsky], with “Americans” who can not tolerate language federations, with defenders of Debs, with legalists and all other forms of “also-communists” who found the existence of two parties a convenient shield and excuse for their violations of party discipline and principles.

In the face of this circular, their profession of willingness to submit to the mandate of your committee becomes a farce and a consummation of unity on any basis that might possibly be manipulated to give control to these people would mean a tragedy for the Communist movement in the United States. They do NOT want unity. They expressly say so. All they want is, by their well-tried methods of inflated membership lists, to capture the party machinery, expel its most conscious membership, and continue their exploitation of the Communist Party in the United States for the satisfaction of their own herocratic ambitions. Against such a destructive unity it is the duty of the Central Executive Committee of the United Communist

Party to protect its membership and organization machinery, its machinery for Communist propaganda and activity, in the interest of the American section of the Communist International.

They speak sneeringly of “Americans” who can not tolerate federations.

Comrades of the Executive Committee of the Communist International: It is high time to settle that question once and for all. This accusation implies that these “Americans” are nationalistic.

The language federations were the outgrowth of necessity. In the old Socialist Party hardly any attention was paid to the foreign-speaking workers. The Socialist Party’s instrument for the emancipation of the proletariat is the ballot. So this party deemed it sufficient to speak to those workers that could vote. The bulk of the foreign-speaking workers had no vote. Most of those that were citizens could read and understand enough English to be reached by the English election literature. Therefore the Socialist Party entirely neglected the field of foreign language propaganda. The foreign-speaking comrades in the Socialist Party finally forced that organization to allow them to form federations for the purpose of organizing foreign language propaganda. From the start these federations were largely manipulated by the leaders of the party in collusion with the leaders of the federations. They were engineered as a body against the “reds” in the party until the war. Then Soviet Russia awakened the federations’ membership. Such engineering was facilitated because the members generally knew only so much of the movement as the leaders saw fit to tell them. They long struggle between the left and the right within the party, which was carried on for more than 10 years, was hardly known to these members.

The Proletarian revolution in Russia brought about a change.

In the Left Wing fight which brought about the split in the Socialist Party and resulted in the formation of the Communist parties, the federations were effectively used against the reactionary wing of the SP and its officials. The federations were separate organisms only loosely connected with the main body and directed by their own National Executive Committees. They acted as units. This practice was continued by the federations and their leaders after the split from the SP. As their power was used before against the right wing, it afterwards was used for control within the Communist Party. These instruments of foreign language propaganda were transformed into in-

struments for control with the foreign language propaganda as a pretense.

The necessity of foreign language federations as guardians of foreign language propaganda had ceased. To speak for all the workers is the condition of success for a revolutionary party. If they can not be reached in one language they must be spoken to in many. the very life of a communist party demands that. There is no danger of neglect. As instruments for the propaganda the United Communist Party organizes its foreign speaking comrades in special groups, which conduct their business in their own language. In every locality or district the foreign language groups are formed into branches, and the branches again form district propaganda committees in their respective languages.⁶ This method, on the one hand, insures the necessary foreign language propaganda, and, on the other hand, makes possible complete centralization of the direction of all party work in the hands of the Central Executive Committee. This form of organization enables the United Communist Party to direct from one center the whole party machinery, and utilize ALL the units for ALL party work.

The federations of the Communist Party, on the other hand, as they were taken over from the Socialist Party, are autonomous parties with separate National Executive Committees. The foreign-speaking groups and branches function through their respective district committees and those again through their respective National Executive Committees. The Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party is nothing more than the executive of the English-speaking membership, which may transmit its wishes to the foreign speaking membership through the foreign language federation National Executive Committees. The autonomy of the federations stands in the way of centralization. It takes away all power from the Central Executive Committee. Instead of this body being the supreme body of the party, it is, in reality, a tool in the hands of the federations.

If the leaders of the federations, who are also the leaders of the Communist Party, consider opposition to this form of organization "American" nationalism, then American nationalism must be a virtue of the American section of the Third Communist International.

⁶ The "group," consisting of no more than 10 persons, was the primary party unity of the United Communist Party. The fact that this model seems to have made use of horizontal communication between groups in each language would seem to have been problematic from an underground security standpoint.

In the United Communist Party even the lowest unit acts upon the decisions and activities of the Central Executive Committee. At the same time the foreign language propaganda is by no means neglected. Thus the official organ of the United Communist Party [*The Communist*] is being regularly published in English, Russian, Hungarian, South Slavic [Croatian], Polish, Yiddish, German, Finnish, and Estonian. Periodically it appears in Lettish, Swedish, Ukrainian, Italian, and Lithuanian. Publication is in preparation in Spanish, Bulgarian, and Bohemian [Czech]. Pamphlets and books have been published so far in English, Russian, Yiddish, and South Slavic [Croatian]. The publication of Bukharin's Program in German is in preparation. Leaflets are issued in great quantities in various languages. In some of these languages the party has as yet no membership. All this proves conclusively that autonomous foreign language federations are not a necessary prerequisite of foreign language propaganda. To insist upon them on that ground, therefore, is a false pretense.

This much for the "Americans" who can not tolerate the idea of federations.

As for the "defenders of Debs," we leave that entirely to the judgment of your committee, which has doubtless received our publications and therefore can, on its own accord, trace the malicious lie implied in the phrase.

Now to the "Legalists." In [the November 3, 1920] letter of the United Communist Party to the Communist Party you will find under section 2 of our conditions the following: "Only those members organized in the underground group form of organization shall be permitted to participate in the election of delegates to the joint convention."

The reason for this demand is the following. After the raids in January [1920] and the forced reorganization of the parties, some of the language federations of the Communist Party refused to fully comply with the new form of organization. The federation Executive Committees know that "dead souls" do not make a party. they had to have some real dues paying men and women. The reorganization underground would have driven out the bulk of the membership, as they were driven out of the regular party organization. the lack of communist understanding and revolutionary courage in many of the former left wingers made them afraid of the danger, and blind to the necessity of illegal underground organization. The federations did not insist upon reorganization on the plan of underground groups but

permitted the continuous existence of the legal organizations. Thus, such legal organizations exist in the Lettish [Latvian] and Lithuanian federations in Boston, New York, Cleveland, Detroit, and other cities.⁷ Though these legal organizations are nominally subdivided into groups of 10, they do not function as groups of the party but continue to function exclusively as singing societies, benevolent, and hall associations. Their only connection with the Communist Party is their payment of dues to the federation, which, in turn, pays a per capita tax to the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party, thus establishing membership. They are a dead weight to the party. They are legalistic because they do not dare to become integral parts of the party and carry on regular party activity.

The United Communist Party can not permit these people to participate in the election of delegates to the joint convention because they are not communists. It can not allow the Communist Party even to count these people as bona fide members and base representation upon them, because the moment the parties united and the principle of strict centralization and underground organization is applied to them, they will disappear from the communist movement, and rightly so, as they are anything but communists.

To permit these people membership in its party is a clear demonstration of legalism on the part of the Communist Party. To speak of the United Communist Party as legalistic, in view of these facts, is such brazen impudence that the English language is too poor to characterize it sufficiently.

The continuous claims of the leadership of the Communist Party as being the true guardians of Communism in America have been shattered by recent developments in their Lettish [Latvian] federation. On July 24th, 1920, the Executive Secretary of the Lettish [Latvian] Federation in the name of the National Executive Committee of that federation issued a proclamation to the present capitalist government in Latvia, promising that government the support of the Lettish [Latvian] Federation of the Communist Party. (A copy of that proclamation [in the CP Latvian Federation paper *Rihts*, date of July 1920, has been sent to the Executive Committee of the Third International].) Part of the membership resented this manifestation of nationalism on the part of its Executive Committee and proceeded to oust it. The Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party remained si-

⁷ The Lithuanian Federation in particular had many of the "hall socialist" social aspects for which the Finnish Socialist Federation is best known.

lent. Sure of its support, the National Executive Committee of the Lettish [Latvian] Federation nominally suspended the Executive Secretary and then proceeded to expel the revolting membership. A convention, called by the old Executive Committee, and fully controlled by it, went through the motions of reinstating the Executive Secretary, censuring the old committee and electing a new one, composed of willing tools of the censured old committee. To give this farce a touch of the tragical, the revolting membership was declared expelled on the ground of its being NATIONALISTIC. Finally the convention invoked the pontifical blessings of the Central Executive Committee of the party to sanction their action. Considering the excellency of the performance, that committee could not possibly withhold its consent and, today, the whole coterie of leaders of the Communist Party is lustily shouting at the expelled Lettish [Latvian] comrades: "Catch Thief!"

All the foregoing facts make it imperative that the Central Executive Committee of the United Communist Party lay down the conditions for unity as enumerated in [our November 3, 1920 letter to the CEC of the Communist Party]:

1. No autonomous federations, since these federations defeat the object of centralization and are a constant danger to the unity of the party.

2. Only real party members shall participate in the election of delegates to the convention, all others being members in name only.

3. Representation at this convention in the ratio of 6 [UCP] to 4 [CP] to guard against the repetition of former practices on the part of the leadership of the Communist Party. This demand is by no means dictated by a fear that the Communist Party outnumbers the United Communist Party. The official financial reports of the two parties as published in their official organs and bulletins show beyond a doubt the numerical superiority of the United Communist Party.

4 and 5 are self-explanatory.⁸

Comrades: we have tried to lay before you all the facts and circumstances relative to unity between the communist parties in America. We have shown you that we refused unity on the basis proposed

⁸ Point 4 called for the theses of the 2nd World Congress of the Comintern and decisions of ECCI to constitute the basis for deliberations of the joint convention, while Point 5 made note of the obvious fact that for the unification process to be completed by ECCI's Jan. 1, 1921 deadline, the convention would have to take place by that date.

by the Communist Party because WE WANT REAL UNITY. The Communist Party, on the other hand, in seemingly accepting unity wants to continue disunity and disruption, which they have managed to maintain in the communist movement in the United States since its inception.

There is only one way out of this dilemma: If the Executive Committee of the Third (Communist) International can not see its way clear to uphold the decision of the Central Executive Committee of the United Communist Party, then it must order an immediate affiliation of the Communist Party to the United Communist Party. At the convention to be held subsequently the representation will in reality be based upon the communist membership of the united party and all groups entitled to same will have representation.

We have instructed our member on your committee [Robert Minor?] to lay this communication before you together with such other facts as he may be able to furnish for your guidance.

Trusting to your interest in the American section of the Communist International, we expect immediate action and a decision guaranteeing real and lasting unity of the Communist forces in America.

With Communist Greetings,

**CENTRAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF
THE UNITED COMMUNIST PARTY OF AMERICA.**

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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