

Membership Series by Federation for the (old) Communist Party of America, July 1920 to Jan. 1921.

Based on a document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 50, l. 79

“Dues Actually Paid” as Reported by CPA Executive Secretary Charles Dirba to the May 1921 Woodstock Unity Convention

Month	“Non Fed.”	Jewish	Latvian	Lithuanian	Polish	Russian	Ukrainian	TOTAL
07/1920	----	115	411	2,380	166	474	1,122	4,668
	0.0%	2.5%	8.8%	51.0%	3.6%	10.2%	24.0%	
08/1920	56	176	1,169	744	233	2,432	1,534	6,344
	0.9%	2.8%	18.4%	11.7%	3.7%	38.3%	24.2%	
09/1920	211	132	313	5,054	80	3,030	1,745	10,565
	2.0%	1.2%	3.0%	47.8%	0.8%	28.7%	16.5%	
Q-III Ave.	89	141	631	2,726	160	1,979	1,467	7,192
	1.2%	2.0%	8.8%	37.9%	2.2%	27.5%	20.4%	
10/1920	289	75	731	3,890	57	2,191	1,227	8,460
	3.4%	0.9%	8.6%	46.0%	0.7%	25.9%	14.5%	
11/1920	219	259	----	1,519	337	1,574	1,211	5,119
	4.3%	5.1%	0.0%	29.7%	6.6%	30.7%	23.7%	
12/1920	233	246	485	2,719	594	1,670	1,392	7,339
	3.2%	3.4%	6.6%	37.0%	8.1%	22.8%	19.0%	
Q-IV Ave.	247	193	405	2,709	329	1,812	1,277	6,973
	3.5%	2.8%	5.8%	38.9%	4.7%	26.0%	18.3%	
01/1921	105	182	781	2,369	183	1,631	1,401	6,652
	1.6%	2.7%	11.4%	35.6%	2.8%	24.5%	21.1%	

Notes (by Tim Davenport):

1. This represents what is probably the best membership series extant for the old CPA. It picks up after the April 18, 1920 defection of former Executive Secretary C.E. Ruthenberg and his associates, which thoroughly disorganized the party apparatus for the months of April and May 1920. The document regrettably does not include a comparable breakdown of paid dues by Federation for the months of February or March 1921. Total paid memberships for these months are given by Dirba as 6,497 and 6,360, respectively. In addition, an incomplete figure of 5,893 is given for April 1921.
2. It merits mentioning that there were a total of six Language Federations in the old CPA. Notably absent were Finnish, South Slavic (i.e., Slovenian and Croatian), Estonian, German, Hungarian, Italian, and Scandinavian Federations.
3. The size of the Yiddish language Federation is strikingly small. While there were a great many ethnic Jews in the other language Federations of the old CPA (notably the Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Russian), the miniscule size of the Yiddish language section is remarkable. I would not be surprised to learn that fully one half the membership of the old CPA were of ethnic Jewish origin — there are no hard statistics extant, but I'd venture that guess — yet less than 3% of the total members of the party held membership through the Yiddish language Federation. It is an interesting observation, perhaps a topic worthy of serious sociological study by a future scholar.
4. Ditto the tiny "Non-Federation" (i.e., English language) membership of the organization — barely 200 of 7,000.
5. Conversely, the vast size of the Lithuanian Language Federation is impressive. Well over 1/3 of the old CPA in the post-Ruthenberg period were members of the Lithuanian Federation. This was truly a core constituency of the organization and further emphasizes the pivotal role that would be played by Lithuanian leader Joseph Stilson in repairing the split of the so-called "Central Caucus" (former members of the old CPA all) at the end of 1921.
6. It is astounding to note that nearly 85% of the old CPA were members of just three Federations: the Lithuanian, the Russian, and the Ukrainian.
7. These figures do not include the memberships of "exempt" (unemployed) members, who would have increased the total by approximately 10%, according to figures in another portion of the Dirba document. Nor do they reckon for that percentage of the membership who stood in arrears of dues at any given moment, which may well have boosted the percentage of actual members on the books by another 10% or more. On the other hand, be advised that these figures do include a Canadian contingent of over 300 — a group which would leave the unified CPA to start the Communist Party of Canada during the course of 1921.
8. As a membership organization making use of monthly dues and a multicentric collection process (old CPA Federations collected dues through their own apparatus and transmitted a percentage of collections to the center), there are wild swings in membership count from month to month. The dynamics of the old CPA and other such monthly-dues organizations are best understood by examining changes over quarters rather than on a monthly basis.
9. There seems to have been some sort of great factional struggle in the Latvian ("Lettish") Federation in this period which negatively impacted membership in that organization. The old CPA was truly a federation of Federations, each of which had their own internal dynamics.
10. Executive Secretary Dirba calculated a "membership churn" (my term, not his) of "fully 1300" (his words, not mine) for the first quarter of 1921. Dirba cited a decrease in the average paid memberships of over 450 and the collection of 870 initiation fees during this interval. In other words, the old CPA — an organization with roughly 7,000 members — lost nearly 20% of its people in a period of just three months! Most of these were replaced, but people left and people came and there must have been great discontinuity and a real lack of ideological training among the party's rank and file. "Membership churn" was a continuing problem for the Communist Party throughout its history, as a river of new people ineffectually rushed into and quickly poured out of the party's ranks. It seems likely that non-Communist political organizations of the day experienced a similar "drop out" phenomenon — as all political groups of whatever stripe still do today. The Communist case was no doubt exacerbated by a relatively high cost of membership dues, extensive time commitments required of participants, and antagonistic societal pressure against party membership. Dirba himself attributed the old CPA's high rate of attrition to "old members" who "left for Russia during this time, as we have not lost any membership in any other way." (*Ibid.*, archival list 77). I do not find this explanation compelling.

Edited with notes by Tim Davenport.

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