
Memorandum to the CEC of the CPA on the Proletarian Party. [circa December 1922]

by H.M. Wicks †

A document in the Comintern Archives, RGASPI, f. 515, op. 1, d. 168, ll. 35-42.

The Proletarian Party of America was the outgrowth of the first split in the ranks of the Communist Party of America, which occurred in November 1919, two months after the organization of the Party at Chicago in September 1919.

The history of the group comprising the Proletarian Party antedates the organization of the Communist Party by a number of years. As far back as 1914 there was a group in Michigan that had succeeded in controlling the state organization and adopting an anti-reform program, as opposed to the opportunistic program of the Socialist Party. The center of this opposition was the city of Detroit and was inspired to some degree by comrades from England and Canada who adhered to the Socialist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Party of Canada, respectively.

This opposition on the part of the Michigan comrades attracted a few comrades from outside the state, who from time to time toured the state speaking

against the position of the Socialist Party and endeavored to arouse an opposition strong enough to force the Socialist Party into accepting the principles of Marxian socialism, instead of following the leadership of the Spargos, Russells, Hillquits, Bergers, etc.

The writer of this memorandum first entered the state of Michigan in 1916 and worked with this opposition, although he had carried on an individual struggle in other states before that date. At that time the position of the party in Michigan toward trade unions was erroneous, as they held that the struggle on the economic field for higher wages and shorter hours was merely a commodity struggle. Those of us more firmly grounded in economics soon dispelled that error, which originated in the brain of someone in the Canadian movement. The position of the group on the question of religion was the cause of a long and heated controversy in the party. The official position of the Socialist Party is that religion is a private matter

†- *Harry Moore Wicks* (1889-1956) is one of the most enigmatic leaders of the early American communist movement. Wicks was born in Arcola, Illinois on Dec. 10, 1889, the son of an electrical engineer. Little is known about his early years; until this memorandum surfaced in the Comintern archive, it was not known that he was an adherent of the Keracher-Renner-Batt Proletarian University tendency from 1916. Wicks was the candidate of the Socialist Party for the US House of Representatives in the Oregon 3rd District in Nov. 1918. He ran for the SPA's governing National Executive Committee in 1919, finishing 2nd out of 28 candidates under partial returns, his candidacy given solid support by the members of the Socialist Party of Oregon. Wicks was a delegate to Founding Convention of Communist Party of America and on the 9 member committee which wrote the CPA Program in 1919. The founding convention elected Wicks to the Central Executive Committee of the CPA, which in turn elected him to its governing Executive Council. Wicks was the only member of the Michigan tendency to accept office in the new CPA, as he notes here. He also served as Associate Editor of *The Communist*. Wicks was jailed in Nov. 1919 for his political activities. In 1920, Wicks rejoined his Michigan comrades in the Proletarian Party, coming to serve on the NEC of that organization. Wicks was the fraternal delegate of the PPA to the founding convention of the Workers Party of America in Dec. 1921, conducting a bitter criticism of that organization. After the Proletarian Party's decision to support the legal arm of the Central Caucus faction's "Communist Party of America" in 1922, Wicks was named as the editor of the organ of the United Toilers Party, *The Workers' Challenge* (NYC). Wicks joined the Workers Party following the liquidation of the Central Caucus split in the fall of 1922 and served on the CEC of WPA, 1922-23. He also served on the editorial board of *The Worker*, 1922-23. In 1923 Wicks was named National Organizer of the WPA and conducted a 5 week East Coast speaking tour in Sept.-Oct. 1923. Wicks was first accused of being a spy in 1923, charged with having denounced CLP founding member Victor Saulit to immigration authorities while both were members of the Socialist Party of Oregon; the WPA

and that we should never discuss it in our propaganda. We insisted that religion must be the subject of discussion and insisted upon stressing it in relation to social phenomena to the same degree that it was emphasized by Marx and Engels. We branded as piece of hypocrisy the efforts to distort the concept of religion as a private matter as far as the state is concerned into the prohibition of religious discussions in the party and insisted that religionists should be excluded from positions of leadership in the party. This aroused the ire of such fakirs as John Spargo, Morris Hillquit, James Oneal, J. Stitt Wilson, Carl D. Thompson, George H. Goebel, and other shining lights of the party.

The outbreak of the war resulted in the adoption of the St. Louis anti-war manifesto of the Socialist Party, which we branded as a pacifist program and not a revolutionary program.

During the war our group, some of them remaining in Detroit, others scattered over the country, as far as the Pacific Coast, kept in contact with each other, knowing the close of the war would bring a realignment of Socialist forces and realizing that the Socialist Party would be split and a new party created composed of thoroughgoing revolutionists.† Our position on the war was in harmony with the “Left” movement throughout the world.

At the outbreak of the March revolution in Russia in 1917, we opposed the position of the Socialist Party, as the party held it was a Socialist revolution and we declared that a genuine Socialist revolution was yet to be achieved. In the June days we supported the Bolsheviki as a group. In July we denounced the

actions of the government of Russia for its assaults upon the Bolsheviki and we hailed November revolution as the revolt of the proletariat and as a vindication of the Marxist position that we had so long upheld.

During the year after the Bolshevik Revolution and before the armistice was signed, our propaganda was consistent with the best traditions of the international movement. During this time there was also a marked process of clarification taking place in our group; many of the Canadian influences with their anti-union policy were eliminated. It was also apparent to everyone that the old discredited Socialist Party would have to be split, so we prepared to lead a split.

After the signing of the armistice the “Left Wing” groups of New York City and Boston began a widespread agitation for the formation of a Communist Party, mostly supported by the foreign federations, who furnished the funds to carry on their work. Because of this condition the Eastern group eclipsed the so-called “Michigan group” in reaching the mass of the party membership.

The elections to the Socialist Party National Executive Committee came early in the Spring of 1919 and a “Left Wing” slate had been proposed, including the Eastern left group and the Michigan left group and a few centrists who were not at that time definitely stigmatized. The result was an overwhelming victory for the entire “Left” ticket. Every reactionary was swept out of office.‡ But the Executive Committee of the Socialist Party met, counted the ballots and learned that they had been defeated.§ Instead of accepting their defeat, these apostles of “democracy” charged the elec-

inquest commission cleared Wicks of this charge, however. Wicks was a delegate to the 3rd Convention of the WPA in 1923 and was a consistent backer of the Pepper-Ruthenberg faction. In 1928 Wicks was a delegate to the 6th World Congress of the Comintern. He remained in Moscow for a year as North American representative to the Profintern. Thereafter, Wicks was sent to Australia and various Asian countries as a Comintern Representative. He returned to the United States in the middle 1930s, standing as the CPUSA candidate for US Senate from Pennsylvania in 1934. In 1937, long-whispered spy allegations against Wicks reemerged and he was expelled from the party. Wicks moved to Chicago and worked there as a typesetter until his death in 1956. Remembered by his peers as an unpleasant person and a mean-spirited factionalist, there are some who believe Wicks to have been a paid spy throughout his life, although no conclusive evidence proving this charge has emerged to date.

†- Wicks' reference to “the Pacific Coast” is a reference to his own move to Portland, Oregon.

‡- Although the outgoing NEC unilaterally voided the 1919 election and ordered tabulation stopped, *The Ohio Socialist* polled the various state SP organizations and compiled partial results due to the cooperation of most major state organizations. Based on these figures (*OS*, June 25, 1919, pg. 2, available as a downloadable file from www.marxisthistory.org), it appears that Dan Hogan — one of the so-called “Despotic 7” members of the outgoing NEC — was reelected in District 4, with all other members of this group associated with the Regular faction failing to be returned by the SPA's rank and file voters.

§- It does not appear that a formal tabulation was ever compiled, but the outgoing NEC certainly knew it had been resoundingly defeated and that the reins of the party had been won by the organized Left Wing Section. This prompted a de facto *coup*.

tions were fraudulent (in spite of the fact that they controlled the machinery of election) and proceeded to expel those groups that had brought about their defeat. The first group to be expelled was the state of Michigan. The Michigan vote had resulted in the defeat of Victor L. Berger and the election of representatives of the Michigan group.† The next act of the National Executive Committee was to suspend 5 of the leading foreign federations.‡

The next move was the calling of a Left Wing Conference in New York City in June by the New York-Boston “Left” combination. Although this group was badly tainted with the anarcho-syndicalism of the IWW, and although its rapid development attracted to its standard many individuals but recently in the camp of the worst elements of the reform socialists, the so-called “Michigan group” participated in this conference [New York: June 21-25, 1919]. At that conference there were two distinct elements: (1) the foreign federations and the Michigan group, although opposed on many theoretical points were agreed upon the immediate call for the organization of a Communist Party; and (2) the editors and other active workers in the English-speaking movement in the East, represented by Louis C. Fraina, John Reed, Jim Larkin, and others, who advocated a policy of “capturing the Socialist Party.”

A call for a convention to organize a Communist Party, September 1, 1919, was immediately issued by the organization committee selected by the Federations and Michigan group. As the time approached for the convention, Fraina and a few of his supporters joined in the call for the immediate formation of the Party, while John Reed, Jim Larkin, and others still held to the position of endeavoring to capture the old machinery of the SP.

The Socialist Party Convention was held the last day of August [1919] and the “Left Wing” represented

by Reed & Co. was forcibly evicted from the convention hall of the SP by the police.§

The Communist Convention was held in Chicago beginning September 1 [1919] and the Michigan group found itself in a minority position. The program and manifesto of the Communist Party that was adopted by the convention was not acceptable to us because of the fact that it endorsed the IWW and also because the leaders of the New York-Boston combination and also the leaders of the Federations advocated a policy of Blanquism — or minority action.

A minority program was submitted by our group but was defeated by the Federation-New York-Boston combination.

An Executive Committee was elected and the Michigan group voted in caucus to refrain from accepting positions on the committee. One member of the Michigan group — the writer of this memorandum — refused to abide by the decision of the caucus and accepted a position on the CEC, hoping to be able to propagate the Michigan tendency in order to test the Party position at the next convention.

The leaders of the Michigan group declared they would remain in the Party, but refused to take any responsible positions. They had been publishing a monthly theoretical magazine, *The Proletarian*, for a few years and in their first issue after the convention of the Communist Party they printed their minority program for the information of their readers. The Central Executive Committee met in Chicago on November 15, 1919, and summarily expelled the group of comrades who were responsible for the publication of *The Proletarian*.

(I was absent at that meeting when the expulsion took place, being detained in jail, while my citizenship was investigated.)

Immediately the expelled group prepared to issue a call for the organization of another Communist

†- The Michigan group members whose election was invalidated by the outgoing NEC included Dennis Batt and John Keracher, as well as William Bross Lloyd, who was not an adherent of the Michigan faction.

‡- Actually, there were 7 language federations of the Socialist Party which were arbitrarily suspended by the NEC on May 25, 1919: the Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Hungarian, and South Slavic.

§- While there was indeed a brief and sensational “clearing of the hall” prior to convocation of the SP Convention by Executive Secretary Adolph Germer in association with the Chicago police, the principle mechanism of control of the convention was not one of physical expulsion, but rather a stacking of the delegates in the run up to the convention through the hasty “reorganization” of minuscule new state organizations in hostile territory by the outgoing NEC and the allotment to these “new” state groups of full delegate complements to which the massive suspended organizations had been entitled, combined with the factional control of the convention’s Credentials Committee by the Regular faction.

Party, to be known as the Proletarian Party. Then on January 1st the famous Palmer “Red Raids” came and temporarily stopped the activity for a new party, as most of our active members were either under arrest or fugitives, as were all other members of the entire movement.†

In June of 1920 the Proletarian Party was organized in Michigan, with but few members and scattered locals in Detroit, Rochester, and a few smaller places.

Meanwhile the Communist Party had split again as the result of a number of the leaders joining hands with leaders of the Communist Labor Party (organized simultaneously with the CP and under the leadership of John Reed & Co.) and organized the United Communist Party.‡

The Proletarian group (formerly referred to as the Michigan group) had never been affiliated in any way with either the CLP or the UCP, although for a number of months it fought a fierce theoretical battle against the UCP and its position on “minority action.” (Copies of *The Proletarian* are submitted showing that our position on this question was also correct and also dealing with the question of parliamentarism).

In the various attempts made by the 3rd Inter-

national to unite the Communist elements of this country, the Proletarian Party was never consulted, although it has from the beginning declared for the principles of the Comintern and from the time of the issuance of the 21 Points has been a staunch supporter of them, in deed as well as in word.

From the time of the organization of the Proletarian Party the membership, although it has not increased much, has been gradually built up until it is now over a thousand and composed entirely of English-speaking workers, most of whom have been here all their lives. Many of the members are prominent in their labor unions and are competent speakers and writers whose services to the movement are very valuable.

On the organization of the Workers Party, the Proletarian Party participated through fraternal delegates, who branded the program an abortion and then launched an attack upon it through their magazine and from their platforms and forums.§

The organization of the WP created a split in the Communist Party (that had been united in June 1921) in January of this year [1922] and the Proletarian Party Executive Committee decided to cooperate with the opposition in the CP in attacking the WP

†- The coordinated mass dragnet known to history as the “Palmer Raids” was actually conducted during the night of Jan. 2/3, 1920.
 ‡- Wicks was out of this particular political loop and his description of events here is wholly inadequate. The 1920 split of the old CPA was a product of inner-party factional struggle; the matter of alliance with the CLP was secondary, almost to the point of being an afterthought. At issue seems to have been a personal and political division of the CEC in which the majority group, headed by Nicholas Hourwich, refused to discipline Hourwich and his Boston associate “Riess” (pseudonym) for demanding funds from party units to support Hourwich’s trip to the forthcoming Comintern World Congress in Moscow — demands which starkly violated a previous specific decision of the CEC. With this as a pretext, a revolt broke out in the Chicago subdistrict headed by Russian Federationist Leonid Belsky, apparently a bitter Hourwich opponent. The split was formalized when the CEC majority ignored an ultimatum by CEC minority leader C.E. Ruthenberg to keep hands off and instead moved against the Chicago organization prior to a forthcoming convention, seeking to remove the Chicago leadership from power. This action caused Ruthenberg to lead an exit of the Chicago-based minority faction from the party on April 18, 1920. Ruthenberg took with him the CPA’s treasury, the cause of much anger. Despite this bitterness, for the rest of April 1920 it remained unclear whether subsequent events would see a unity convention bringing together the majority (Hourwich-Dirba-Bittelman) and minority (Ruthenberg-Ferguson-Belsky) factions of the old CPA — or a unity convention bringing together the Ruthenberg minority faction of the CPA and the Communist Labor Party, which had anxiously sought unity ever since its foundation. Ultimately, the latter option was exercised by the Ruthenberg group, which united with the CLP to form the United Labor Party at a convention held near Bridgman, Michigan, May 26-31, 1920. The chief leaders of the Communist Labor Party were Alfred Wagenknecht and Ludwig Katterfeld, not John Reed, it should be noted.

§- Wicks was one of these fraternal delegates to the Founding Convention of the WPA [Dec. 23-26, 1921].

Δ- The unified CPA (“Communist Party of America, Section of the Communist International”) was established at a Joint Unity Convention held outdoors near the Overlook Mountain House, outside of Woodstock, NY, May 15-28, 1921. This convention brought together the United Communist Party with the majority faction of the old Communist Party of America, mentioned above. The split of this organization referred to by Wicks was caused when Joseph Stilson and J. Wilenkin of the old CPA began voting with the 5 former members of the UCP on the Central Executive Committee of the new unified organization, breaking the 5-5 division on that body. The 3 minority members of the CEC — Charles Dirba, George Ashkenuzi, and John Ballam — organized in late October 1921 a group known as the “Central Caucus,” consisting of a major section of the members of the old CPA, which split the organization rather than be forced into participation in the new Workers Party of America without the benefit of pseudonyms. The actual split of

and its tendencies.Δ

The writer of this memorandum became the editor of the publications of the opposition and when the CEC representative came to this country for the purpose of achieving amalgamation of the two factions, I endeavored to get the Proletarian Party to again enter the ranks, assuring them that their tendency had been vindicated by the experience of the revolution and the various theses of the Communist International.†

The leaders of the party insisted that they would not consider applying for admission to a party recognized by the Comintern, since the Comintern had never recognized the fact that the Proletarian Party had existed, in spite of the fact that they have been the most consistent supporters of the principles and tactics of the Comintern and that they are the oldest of the “left groups” in the United States.‡

Since this Party is composed of valuable elements, having active locals in Chicago, Buffalo, Rochester,

Los Angeles, Detroit, Milwaukee, and small groups in Cleveland, Flint, Michigan, and a number of small places, and considering the fact that they are entirely composed of English-speaking elements, who are anxious to work in harmony with the Comintern, and since the fact that the Comintern has so far ignored them is the only excuse they now have for remaining out of the Communist Party of this country I suggest that a communication be sent direct to them requesting them to work in harmony with other Communist groups in the United States.

Such a communication would undoubtedly force the leaders of that party to act or would alienate their membership from them, with the result that all the better elements of the Proletarian Party would join the recognized party of the Comintern [the CPA] and proceed to work under the discipline of that party.

Fraternally submitted,

[H.M. Wicks] §

the unified CPA took place in November 1921, not January 1922. As with all party splits of this period, the 1921 Central Caucus split was the result of multiple reasons, including lack of organizational control over job appointments, personal animosity and lingering ill feelings from the previous period of factional warfare, as well as honest policy disagreements.

†- The majority of the Central Caucus faction's rival Communist Party of America seems to have liquidated itself at its 2nd Convention, held in September 1922. The name of the Comintern Representative that attended this gathering is not known at the present time.

‡- This assertion by Wicks that the Proletarian Party was then the oldest of extant left groups is interesting and technically correct. Both the 1920 convention establishing the UCP and the 1921 convention establishing the unified CPA formed new organizations — terminating the previous structures and adopting new constitutions and programs and electing new slates of officers. Due to the fact that the old CPA and the unified CPA shared the same name, this fact has been obscured in the literature. Technically, the Communist Party USA was established in May 1921 at Woodstock, not in September 1919 in Chicago.

§- The signature is clipped from the archival original as a security precaution, as was often done during the underground period. The suggestion made that the Comintern write a letter to the Proletarian Party was forwarded to the Comintern by CPA Executive Secretary Abram Jakira [“J. Miller”] in a December 12, 1922 letter. This request resulted in a letter to the PPA from Otto Kuusinen of the Comintern dated Feb. 19, 1923, which was received by the Proletarian Party on March 29, 1923, and rejected with a letter from PPA Executive Secretary John Keracher on May 26, 1923. (All available as downloadable files from www.marxisthistory.org).

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