
Our Party Convention.

by John Pepper

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The present article does not purport to give an appraisal of the 3rd National Convention of the Workers Party of America [Dec. 30, 1923-Jan. 2, 1924]. It is intended simply as an expression of an attitude.

The Convention performed political work of great import. It dealt with every phase of the American labor movement and political life. It was a political convention of a political party. For the first time in the history of our Party we had as a principal issue of the Convention neither an inner organizational question of the Party nor an abstract principle, but concrete *tactical* questions. The issue was not "Shall we participate in the Labor Party movement?" but "How shall we participate?" The issue was not "Are we for or against the United Front policy?" but "How shall we carry out the United Front?"

The opinions of the delegates at the Convention were divided. Sharp differences manifested themselves. Heated debates were fought out to an issue. The final results were that on the main question the Labor Party policies of the majority of the former Central Executive Committee† were accepted, but a new Central Executive Committee was elected in which the former minority‡ forms a majority.

The explanation of this contradiction is that the majority of the Convention was a coalition of two groups. One group, which centers in Chicago‡, was not in agreement with the policies of the majority of

the former Central Executive Committee, on the July 3rd Convention [which founded the Federated Farmer-Labor Party], and on the task and role of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. Another group, which centers in New York§, was not in accord with the policies of the former majority of the Central Executive Committee in its attitude toward the Third Party. The first group‡ criticized the majority of the Central Executive Committee†, claiming that it had made a step too far to the left. The second group§ criticized the majority of the Central Executive Committee†, maintaining that it had made one step too far to the right. Both groups together formed the majority of the Convention, and elected a new Central Executive Committee, in which the former majority† was changed into a minority.

Does this change mean a revolution in our Party? By no means. If we analyze more closely the new Central Executive Committee we will find that not a single new person is on the Central Executive Committee, and that only the balance of power is shifted.◇ It is a change, but no revolution. The new Central Executive Committee is recruited from the same leading stratum out of which the old Central Executive Committee was recruited. That shows a stability of our Party. It shows that our Party has at last developed to such a degree that we have evolved a stable leading stratum. A Communist Party is not a real Communist Party as

†- That is, the Ruthenberg/Pepper group.

‡- That is, the Foster/Cannon group.

§- A reference to Ludwig Lore and his associates, the so-called "Third Faction" of the Jewish Workers Federation.

◇- The CEC of the WPA elected at the 3rd Convention consisted of: Alexander Bittelman, Earl Browder, Fahle Burman, James P. Cannon, William F. Dunne, J. Louis Engdahl, William Z. Foster, Benjamin Gitlow, Ludwig Lore, Jay Lovestone, John Pepper, C.E. Ruthenburg, and the unnamed representative of the Young Workers League.

long as it has not developed a leading stratum which is generally acknowledged by the Party membership as such. Only cheap demagoguery will deny this. But every Marxist will admit that a Communist Party must be built up from both ends, from the bottom, out of the rank and file, and from the top, out of a leading stratum.

The second lesson of the Convention for our Party is that the unity of the Party showed itself to be an indestructible fact. For the first time in the history of the American Communist movement we see a deep-going difference of opinion settled without a split. The various groups attacked each other, at times bitterly, and at times the attacks were colored with personal recrimination. But no one of the groups questioned even for a moment the Communist integrity of the other group. Each group asserted that the tactics of the other groups were wrong or even disastrous, but — for the first time in our Party fights! — no group questioned the motives of the other groups, and every group acknowledged the Communist motives of the others. The unity of the Party was not in question at all — not for a single moment. The intrinsic health of the Party has shown itself, in that unity of the Party is taken as a matter of course by every Party member today.

This is the sum and substance of the lessons of the Convention of our Party: The world party of the proletariat at last has a real American branch — a Party

which is political, which is an entity, and which has a stable leadership.

Majority and minority recognize equally that we have no non-Communist elements in our Party, and this must determine our mutual attitude after the Convention. Neither majority nor minority has the right to continue the fight. The issues are settled. The newly built majority must not indulge in revenge, and the new minority must not complain. It is not only the right, but the duty of the minority to criticize the Central Executive Committee, but at the same time it must have faith in the Central Executive Committee. In the past, our Party suffered from a lack of both. We had too little political criticism against the Central Executive Committee, and too little faith in the Central Executive Committee. We should not forget for a moment that, regardless of who has the majority or minority in the Central Executive Committee, the Central Executive Committee is *the leader* of the Party, and every Party comrade must carry out wholeheartedly every decision of the Central Executive Committee. The mutual criticism of groups cannot make a rubber ball out of the prestige and authority of the Central Executive Committee. As a representative of the majority I once quoted Zinoviev against the then minority: "Discipline begins where conviction ends." Now, as a representative of the minority, I will repeat the quotation, turning to the present minority: "Discipline begins where conviction ends."

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

Second Edition, Dec. 2005 — corrects a misidentification of the leader of the third faction.

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