
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by Bill Dunne:

Excerpt from an Interview

Conducted by Oakley C. Johnson,

1940

Handwritten index cards in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society,
Box 9, Folder 2, microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

C.E. Ruthenberg was what you might call the American spokesman for the foreign elements. The Slavs, Letts [Latvians], Poles, etc. gathered around Ruthenberg. As late as 1927 we were still publishing 22 papers — 3 Finnish dailies, 2 Lithuanian dailies, 1 Italian daily, 1 German daily, and a number of weeklies. But Ruthenberg didn't have American contacts outside of Chicago.

I considered Ruthenberg an uninspired person. He was no scholar, he couldn't write — but he was a gentleman. His relations with the Party were always very formal. Ruthenberg's big mistake was to allow himself to be used by the Lovestone caucus.

And he was monstrously vain! Well, personally vain anyway. He would become personally offended if he didn't get the deference which he expected.

I first met Ruthenberg in our apartment at 11 St. Luke's Place in New York City in 1922.¹ I was the first editor of the weekly *Worker*.² Ruthenberg was just out of prison.³ Caleb Harrison was the secretary of *The Worker*, which was the party's legal daily. Henryk Walecki, the CI Rep, was there, also Boris Reinstein, and Charlie Johnson [Karlis Janson] — a Lett,⁴ now in Moscow, and Lovestone, as well as Will

¹ Apparently the secret location of CPA party headquarters.

² Formerly *The Toiler* and prior to that *The Ohio Socialist*.

³ Ruthenberg was freed on \$5,000 bail pending appeal of his conviction of "Criminal Anarchism" in New York on April 24, 1922.

⁴ Janson was actually dead by this time, executed during the Great Purge in the USSR.

Weinstone, Rose Pastor Stokes, and Israel Amter. Katterfeld and Bitelman were there, too, but not Foster or Browder. Minor, Amter, and the Letts (the Goose Caucus) insisted that illegality was inseparable from the Party. The question of organization of the National Office was taken up, and Ruthenberg was named as Executive Secretary.

At that time we put out a theoretical magazine, *The Toiler*, edited by Clarissa Ware, in addition to the underground organ, *The Communist*.⁵

After the 1919 split of the Socialist Party there remained a middle group — including Louis Engdahl, Jacob Salutsky, William Kruse, Juliet Stuart Poyntz, Solon DeLeon — who joined us later, coming in on stipulations. Engdahl became assistant editor of *The Worker*, Kruse became Assistant Secretary with Ruthenberg, Alexander Trachtenberg became research man and publisher, and so on. This was late in 1921 or early in 1922.

Ruthenberg got out of prison just in time for the District Conventions before the August 1922 Bridgman Convention. The convention was split, 21 “Liquidators” versus 22 from the Goose Caucus. About 80 were there all together, including Language Federation Secretaries and so forth, but not all could vote. The decision of the Bridgman Convention was to establish an open political party. The actual vote on this was 21 to 21, but the Communist International ruled for a legal party.

I was sent to Chicago to get Foster to speak. He came to the convention, spoke, and then left again. The business of the convention was about over, but the majority of 22 insisted upon staying! It turns out that the majority of *one* turned out to be a stool pigeon!

Then came the raid and Ruthenberg, Krumbein, Tallentire, and others were arrested on the grounds and put in Bridgman jail.⁶

In January 1923 I became editor of the *Butte Bulletin*. then in 1924, Engdahl and I became joint editors of the *Daily Worker*.

Pepper and Lovestone began caucusing and they dragged Ruthenberg into it and made him their front man. Lovestone and Pepper were grabbing hold of the Party. In the USA Pepper made the discovery that the farmers would lead the proletariat. Ruthenberg was greatly interested in the Farmer-Labor Party. That was his great idea.

⁵ Dunne misremembers here. The run of issues between *The Toiler* and *The Worker* is continuous, it was the same publication. The naming switch was made effective with the issue of Feb. 2, 1922.

⁶ Actually Berrien County Jail in nearby St. Joseph, Michigan.

The political report in 1924 was delivered by Gitlow. The slogan “Organize the unorganized” was put forward, but changed to “Organize the unemployed.”

Zinoviev sent a cable, cooked up by Pepper and Lovestone and sent from America, saying that the Ruthenberg faction was more loyal to the Comintern than was the Foster faction. [The factional fight was bitter], Foster and Jack Johnstone and I had to have a guard to get out of a committee meeting one night!

Later Pepper was expelled and he was sent back to Moscow. There, around 1926, he was mixed up with Trotskyism, but spared his neck at the last moment by turning over all of Trotsky’s correspondence.⁷

Ruthenberg was in the USSR only once, in 1926. He was a delegate to a plenum of ECCI at that time, along with Gitlow, Bittelman, Foster, Cannon, and me. Pepper was already in Moscow by then. Browder was in Chicago.

When Ruthenberg died his body was cremated. Engdahl took the urn abroad.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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⁷ This is an unsubstantiated and extremely unlikely rumor of the day.