

The Communist Party Convention

By I. E. Ferguson

THESE probably never was a gathering of working-class representatives in the United States which said what it meant and meant what it said more understandingly and more resolutely than the first convention of the Communist Party. This meeting of some 140 delegates, representing fifty to sixty thousand members, was unique in the annals of American Socialism in many respects, but most apparently in the character of the Convention itself. There was an all-pervading sense of realism about the work in hand, absolute candor in interchange of argument, impossibility of compromise as the solution of any item.

Three distinct groups were marked out at the opening of the Convention, and the whole proceedings represented the balancing of these three groups against one another. The delegates who pitted themselves individually against these solid formations found themselves in a hopeless situation. Three delegates who did not quickly enough yield their impulsive individualism to the mass discipline of one or other of the three groups left the Convention. They found more congenial atmosphere in the Centrist Convention of the "Communist Labor Party," where each was a law unto himself, and where the group as an entity was beyond the possibility of decisive action.

But in the meantime the most thoughtful of the bolting delegates from the Socialist Party Convention, who had been precipitated into a chance third party adventure, sensed that there was something unusually substantial about this quiet gathering where group power was grimly pitted against group power.

The Convention which opened with three distinct divisions ended a solid unit, none of the groups having lost enough ground to the others to make co-operation difficult. The third party gathering, opening with an ecstasy of emotional unity, frittered away of its inherent contradictions.

There was one moment which revealed the tense enthusiasm of this Convention, a moment never to be forgotten. On Monday, September first, near the hour of noon, an orchestra struck the first chord of the Internationale. Instantly there was a thunderous accompaniment of sustained cheering and spontaneous singing. There was no mistaking the martial challenge. It was as if the voices of the millions had come into this colorless hall to impress upon these delegates their deprivations and longings, their strength and readiness for the final conflict. It was a rare singing of the Internationale. So began the Communist Party of America.

A little while before the police had compelled the removal of the red bunting with which the hall was decorated. They also ordered the removal of two handsome floral offerings, deep red roses on a background of red shaped as a flag. The police were correct according to the city ordinance. The ordinance was correct according to the best known methods available for a privileged minority to choke off the life impulses of the masses. There must not be consciousness on the part of the masses; there must not be understanding of the symbolism of the red flag. . . . There was the arrest of Dennis E. Batt on Monday afternoon, in the Convention hall, on a warrant under the new Illinois sedition law. Someone called for cheers. There was stern quiet. The work of the Convention went on. This was the answer.

Dennis E. Batt of Detroit called the Convention to order in the name of the two committees which signed the Joint Call, the National Left Wing Council and the National Organization Committee (representing the

minority group of the Left Wing Conference.) Louis C. Fraina of New York was elected Temporary Chairman and made an address on the problems of the Communist Party.

While the Credentials Committee was completing its task, an Emergency Committee of nineteen was elected. Before the opening of the Convention the question of admitting reporters and non-party members had been raised. The Joint Organization Committee decided in favor of an open Convention, so far as space would allow.

At nine o'clock Monday evening the Convention was declared organized. At once the group lines within the Convention were sharply drawn. The first issue to come before the body was the admission of bolting delegates from the Socialist Party Convention. This issue was reflected in the election of a Permanent Chairman. The candidate of the Federation and Michigan groups, both favoring a rigid rule of admissibility of delegates, was Renner of Detroit. The National Left Wing Council group, favoring liberal interpretation of the Joint Call with respect to the bolting delegates, nominated Ferguson. Renner was elected.

Ferguson immediately presented the motion which opened the most intense debate of the entire Convention: that a committee of five be elected to confer with the committee of five of the Left Wing delegates who had bolted the Socialist Party Convention or had been refused seats in that Convention. This motion was defeated, 75 to 31. The effect of this vote was to cut off any recognition of the bolting delegates as a body.

This situation threatened a split in the Convention. The Federation group was voting on this issue under caucus unit rule. The vote was almost evenly divided between the Federation and non-Federation representatives, but the Michigan group of about twenty was now joined with the Federation bloc. The minority consisted of practically all the delegates outside the Federation caucus and the Michigan unit, and the leadership of the minority centered in the National Left Wing Council.

This minority organized itself in caucus, but without adopting the unit rule. The minority determined to pit its moral strength against the majority which had rebuffed the Left Wing delegates. This strength consisted of the fact that the withdrawal of this minority from the work of the Convention would leave the Russian Federation group no English-speaking expression outside the editorial staff of the Detroit *Proletarian*, a situation which had already been found highly embarrassing.

Tuesday morning Ferguson, Lovestone, Fraina, Ruthenberg, Selakowich, Ballam and Cohen resigned from the Emergency Committee. Comrades Paul and Fanny Horowitz resigned as Secretaries. Comrade Elbaum of Detroit, one of the strongest men in the Federation caucus, also resigned from the Emergency Committee. This was a thunderbolt in the majority camp. It is to be noted that the minority was never without Federation delegates, the South Slavic and Hungarian representatives coming in at the start, and as the situation developed Lithuanian, Polish and Jewish Federation delegates showing that they would not tolerate anything in the nature of arbitrary Federation control of the Convention or of the new party.

The minority "strike on the job" had its quick effect. The Federation caucus conceded the reconsideration of the motion for a committee of five to make a statement to

the bolting delegates; also the election of Ruthenberg and Ferguson on that committee. The inter-play between the two caucuses required a clearing house in the way of a Joint Caucus made up of nine members from each side. A newspaper reporter made the just complaint that a Convention run in this way rather left the spectators out of the reckoning. It meant a deliberate measuring of forces, agreement on maximum and minimum demands, and the use of the Convention floor only on the clearly formulated programs.

The "diplomatic negotiations" between the two Conventions appears elsewhere in this issue. The insistence of the Wagenknecht-Katterfeld group on a joining of the two Conventions as conventions was an absolute barrier against unity. The fight for unity within the Communist Convention could be carried no further until the credentials of the bolting delegates came up for consideration. Otherwise a case would have to be made for the admission of about 40 delegates who represented no membership, or were without any instructions upon which they could accept the Joint Call, or were open opponents of the Joint Call or of the Left Wing program. Those who talked about unity while making such a demand showed themselves to be either without sincerity or without conception of the fact that a real Communist Party could only be started upon the basis of Communist principles and Communist membership.

With the issue of new delegates out of the way, there was a realignment of the three groups in the Convention. Now the separation was on matters of party program and organization, and this separation reflected itself also in the Convention elections. The Michigan bloc of twenty remained in a hopeless minority at all times.

The work of the various committees speaks for itself in the documents published in this issue. The main business of the Convention was the formulation of a program and of a constitution. The Program Committee consisted of Comrades Fraina, Elbaum, Stoklitsky, Hourwich, Bittleman, Batt, Cohen, Lovestone and Wicks; the Constitution Committee, Hiltzig, Ruthenberg, Ashkenousi, Ferguson, Tywerowsky, Stinson, Forsinger.

There are a number of features of the constitution which mark the sharp distinction between the Communist Party and the Socialist Party. Membership is not merely a matter of dues-paying in the new party, but depends on active participation in the party work and acceptance of party discipline.

A clause which precipitated a lively debate was Section 7 of Article III barring from membership any person "who has an entire livelihood from rent, interest or profit." The Committee divided four against three on this provision, with Comrade Stinson presenting the side of the minority for himself, Ruthenberg and Ferguson. The majority argument, as made by Com. Hourwich, was that the provision may be unscientific but that it is hard to convince the workingman that exploiters of labor are themselves to be trusted in the fight against exploitation. The minority argument was that such a mechanical clause could only operate to exclude the few exceptional individuals whose consciousness is not controlled by personal interest in the capitalist system. The clause easily carried.

A motion "that no member of a religious organization shall be eligible to membership" was tabled. However, a resolution was later adopted stating the attitude of the Convention on the subject of religion.

Section 9 of Article III also was the subject of lively debate. This clause bars