
Speech to the American Commission of the Communist International: Moscow — May 6, 1924

by William Z. Foster

Typescript in the Theodore Draper Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Box 38.

Session of the American Commission of the 6th of May, 1924.

Comrade Dorsey [Foster]:

Comrade Pepper has let fall several remarks, which in my opinion require an answer. I believe that the question of the character of the present majority of the Workers Party is a very important question. If it is true that, as was pointed out today, the party finds itself in the hands of the worst sort of opportunists, then I believe that the Comintern should not permit the party to carry out this maneuver, and in spite of the report of Comrade Lozovsky I must ask permission to report a few matters concerning our policy in various critical situations, with which our committees have had to deal during the immediate past.

Now for the question of activity within the trade unions. Comrade Pepper believed that the Party was overdoing the work in the trade unions. The contrary is true. You will permit me to illustrate that point. Shortly before our Congress I submitted a document in which all branches were urged to let their members get into the trade unions in order that they might take active part in the work of the unions. Six weeks passed before this document was sent to the membership of the Workers Party — and at the same time this is the most important document that has ever been written on the trade union question in the history of the Workers Party. At the same time, however, the Party was sending out such unimportant things as reviews of current periodicals. It does not look as if the trade union work of our Party were being overdone; on the con-

trary, I believe that our Party has neglected the trade union work and I am sorry to say that the minority is actually sabotaging it.

There are two circumstances which I should like to bring to the attention of the Comintern: one is the question of the Third Party, and the other the question of the situation within our Party. These questions are bound to crop up sooner or later in all our debates. Comrade Pepper has also made an assertion which would be a very serious thing for our Party, were it true that our majority, and particularly I myself, look upon the trade union work as something absolutely apart from the political work. In reference to the statement that I am a syndicalism, and that the majority of our party follows a syndicalist policy, I should like to quote some passages from my report to the last Congress of the Workers Party:

In carrying out the trade union work, one should never for a moment forget that the aim of this work is the building up and strengthening of the Workers Party. The moves towards amalgamation, the Labor Party, the organization of the unorganized in the unions create for us a valuable "sphere of influence" and win for us the sympathy of a large number of workers who recognize the practical leadership of the Communists in everyday struggles. It is the duty of all Party units to watch very carefully the trade union work which is being carried out by the Party and its members, and with the aid of the activity of the workers who have been brought under our ideological leadership to absorb these elements into actual Party membership. As long as this is not done, our work is unavailing. The recognized aim of our work on the trade union field must be, first and foremost, the building up of the Workers Party in a Communist mass party.

This quotation contains the quintessence of the trade union activity of the group which is building up

the trade unions, and I deny the statement that we are carrying on the trade union work as an end in itself. Our activity was directed exclusively to the building up of the Workers Party. Pepper is a very shrewd man and he knows that there are two complaints which can be raised in Moscow against the majority. One of these is that they are called syndicalists, the other that they are called opportunists. I am here to deny all such complaints made by Pepper. He says that our trade union policy is to make an alliance with the official bureaucracy of the American Federation of Labor. I can say that that is a ridiculous accusation. I should not like to take the trouble to refute such an accusation before this commission. Our activity in America has made many a union official our enemy. No Communist movement in the world faces the opposition of such a trade union "democracy" as we are up against. How else can it be, when our policy has called forth such an opposition? And it is ridiculous to imagine that we are carry out a policy of alliance in regard to this trade union bureaucracy.

Another important matter which I should like to touch upon is Pepper's attempt to identify Comrade Lore with the majority. Pepper is able to accomplish some wonderful juggling, but how he can find it possible to identify Comrade Lore with our majority passes my understanding. Lore is one of the minority members of our committee. Pepper knows that Lore belongs to the Right Wing of our Party, but he identifies him with us with the end in view of discrediting our majority in Moscow. In the 30 minutes granted me, I should like to review quickly some points in our stand on the important questions of policy, which have been coming up in our party in the immediate past.

If the tendency of our party has changed from a correct Communist policy to a policy of opportunism, I will admit that the situation is a serious one, which must be set right. Among the letters received by you is a report [in] which Pepper took a great deal of pains to make me a leader of the Communist Party, and now he accuses me of being the worst kind of opportunist. If I am such an opportunist (and Pepper and his following have taken a great deal of pains to make me appear one), then Pepper must be called to account for having supported such an "opportunist" as I.

What happened at our last convention? There was a rebellion and a new majority came into power. Pepper claims that it is an opportunistic majority, that the Party is in danger, that there is a crisis in the Party. Let us see what the old majority did. In our opinion, the old majority was opportunist in its first policy towards the farmer. We fought this policy, we said that the former majority absolutely overestimated the importance of the farmer, that it was expending too much energy in the attempt to organize the farmers, and too little in efforts to organize the industrial workers. It is altogether characteristic that in the November [1923] Thesis of the old majority the first paragraph treats of the farmers, and the basis for that is that the direct policy of our party under the regime of the former majority was concerned first and foremost with the organization of the farmers and only secondly with the organization of the industrial workers. And because we tried to reverse this process, we came in for the most severe criticism. In the November Thesis we said on the subject:

However important the rebellion of the exploited farmer is in the present political situation, and however necessary it may be that a strong alliance be formed between the exploited farmers and the industrial workers may be — there is nevertheless a great danger in the present tendency of the present majority of the CEC at the time to base their Labor Party policy upon an uprising of the farmers and to reduce the role of the workers to a subordinate one.

I insist that the action of the old CEC in regard to the farmer movement was downright opportunism. The worst sort of opportunism that the entire foundation of our party could support. I assure you that the present majority of the CEC is considering the carrying out of no such policy.

There is another question in connection with the organization of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party. When this party was founded, various theses were written. These theses aimed at the ideal that we had to transform the FFLP into a Communist mass party. The group which forms the present majority of the Workers Party fights this interpretation to the very end. We looked upon it as simple idiocy, as nothing more nor less than of the *<missing word>* of our party, and for that reason we fought it. We do not need two mass Communist parties in America, but rather one Communist Party.

(*Comrade Radek*: One is enough.)

According to my notion, one is enough. The idea in this case was that we must pull a long strike in order to bind together a big fat section of the labor movement and to transform this into a mass Communist Party. We have heard something of opportunism, but would it be possible to follow a more dangerous opportunist policy than this? This thesis was incorrect in theory and laughable in practice. This FFLP is such a loose organization that it cannot fulfill the distinct purpose for which designed. Neither the old majority nor the present majority could transform this corpse into a Communist mass party. We have simply the August theses at the Congress.

Concerning the United Front, we have heard in Chicago that it offers a very good proof of the opportunist tendencies of the present majority. I should like to say a few words concerning the United Front in Chicago. The United Front in Chicago arose, so to speak, out of a whole series of united fronts. We had a united front for the defense of political prisoners. We had a united front upon the trade union field, and one with the Farmer-Labor Party on the question of the organization of a Labor Party. That lasted for over a year, and I can simply say that the contact which the Workers Party gained from this concerted action was of enormous value. This United Front lasted about a year. It was the most significant activity that the Party developed during this time, and the entire concern for the United Front was lost for the CEC of the Workers Party when Pepper was the leader of the majority. Everything that was done in Chicago was done under the direct supervision of the CEC. The CEC knew absolutely everything that went on in Chicago, and it is fully responsible for whatever happened there. I was with others in Chicago and saw the situation from this standpoint.

It is true that I was somewhat inexperienced in Communist tactics, but Pepper, who allowed everyone to assume that he was representing the Comintern in America, was so enthusiastic that he voted 100% for everything that was undertaken in Chicago, and those of us who do not enjoy an international reputation were disposed to accept as correct Communist tactics everything to which Pepper said *yes* and *Amen*. After this had gone on for a time, a division arose within our committee and it was necessary to

find some means or other to discredit the minority — the Chicago group which had been unfortunate enough to take on the question of the FFLP a position different from the Party. Therefore Pepper and the former majority undertook to place upon them the responsibility for certain mistakes which we had made during the time of the United Front in Chicago.

They said that we did not sufficiently criticize the Fitzpatrick group. That is true. We admitted that that was a mistake. But we are not responsible for it. Our policy was approved by the CEC of the Communist Party and we protested at our convention and we protest here today against the attempt to lay the blame on our shoulders. I answer Pepper that if no criticism was made in Chicago, your majority is responsible for it, because it did not instruct the people in Chicago to make such criticism. For this was no local circumstance — it was a national matter and touched the most vital interests of the Workers Party.

Concerning this split, which took place in Chicago, I must say that I was against it. I considered it impossible. I said that the split was an artificial split. We broke with one group of so-called progressive trade unionists in order to ally ourselves with another group just as bad, if not worse. With the following difference: When we broke with the Chicago group, we lost contact with the trade unionists and when we allied ourselves with the Minnesota group we established contact with the farmers. Our United Front in Minnesota is a united front with the farmers; our United Front in Chicago was a united front with the industrial workers.

At our convention, when Pepper made the attempt to hold the Chicago group responsible for what had happened in Chicago, we said that the CEC must take the censure upon itself. When we reported on our activity to the CEC, the CEC supported and approved it. For we acted diligently and the CEC was of the same opinion that we acted well, and only after the division came did people begin to censure us.

There is still another circumstance which illustrates the opportunist policies of the former majority. That was the split of the Fitzpatrick group away from the Conference for Progressive Political Action. Pepper has pointed out in his speech what a hopeless group the trade union bureaucracy presents in the United States and then: when the group of the Farmer-Labor

Party broke with the CPPA, his majority, the former majority, raised objections and fought against it, while our group was in favor of the split. We said that this Farmer-Labor group, which mirrors the sentiment of a section of the workers in regard to a Farmer-Labor Party in America, was the basis for the formation of a Labor Party movement in the United States. But Pepper, upon the basis of the opportunist policy which he was following, which he designates an opposition to opportunism, was anxiously considering putting through the unification of the organization with the reactionary trade union leaders. We were nevertheless in favor of the split, which could give us a basis for a Left Wing movement in the United States.

Pepper says he was in favor of the split in the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota. Allow me to say something about this split. This is a good illustration of the factional methods which are now breaking up our Party. The question arose over the adjournment of our Congress of May 30. It was desired that we give up altogether our Congress of May 30 and to mobilize all our forces for the July 4 convention — a suggestion which we fought bitterly, for we said that in this way everything would be confused with the Third Party movement. On the 12th of March we arranged for a convention in St. Paul, and they wanted to put that Congress off to July 4, in order to blast this convention, and if we were to blast this convention, we would split the whole Farmer-Labor movement.

Pepper was in favor of splitting the convention, in case we could obtain an important minority in Minnesota. Our policy was not to split the conference, if we were in a majority in Minnesota. We pointed out that we had the trade union elements with us in the formation of the Labor Party. Ruthenberg made a very bitter attack upon our policy, but shortly afterward he took over our policy and was one of the most active in carrying this policy out at the March 12 conference, which decided this question. We represented the view that in order to avoid isolation in Minnesota we would decide on June 20 for our convention. Pepper said No, we must break away first.

Ruthenberg went with us to Minnesota, and there we saw ourselves in exactly the same relationship to the split in exactly the same way we had seen it before. Our committee voted for June 17 and was opposed to the split in the labor movement, for we

knew our splitting would be a serious mistake. We returned to Chicago and reported that we would not split and Pepper voted that we had acted correctly. Pepper voted, along with the entire committee, that we had acted correctly in refusing to split. Now he comes here and says that he voted for the splitting away of the Farmer-Labor Party, whereas he voted for not splitting in the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota.

(Comrade Pepper: Not splitting of the Farmer-Labor Federation — remember that there is a great deal of difference.)

This question was never raised in our party. It was a question of splitting the Farmer-Labor Party alone. Then the former majority in all of these questions [adopted] a policy which in every case in its [relationship] to ours was purely opportunistic.

And now in the present question, the question of a Third Party, the standpoint of the Pepper group is different from ours. Which of our positions is more nearly correct? The November Thesis said that we must keep to the Third Party, and that is all that was said about that in it. These theses held at least a reservation. We say that under certain circumstances we cannot go along with the Third Party. The former majority shows itself very ready to go along with this part, a willingness not to be found among the present majority, and if we reach for the correct conclusion at this congress, we will not go along with the Third Party.

I should now like to say a few words concerning our theses. According to my judgment, we must stick to the principles outlined in this thesis, which take the stand that we must above all put up our Communist candidates. In that we are all agreed. If we get no results from this, we must try to treat a candidate who will be able to sway the trade union section of the convention. We hope that it would be possible to find in Debs the candidate of the proposed FFLP. Should we be successful in getting Debs as a candidate, then we could make a split in the June 17 convention which would place us in a position to get together a large enough group from this convention to build a Farmer-Labor Party.

I doubt that this could have been done. I am convinced that whenever we arrange a policy which will tolerate such a situation, we will be forced to accept their candidates or else we shall be face to face with a split which will mean the loss of the majority of

the trade unions elements in the congress, for only a small group of Communists and Communist sympathizers will stay with us. I am of the opinion that if we want to place the Party in America in a healthy position, we must instruct them to accept the alternatives based upon the conditions of the thesis. Otherwise we shall isolate our movement not only politically, but also industrially. It would be discredited in the entire trade union movement in the United States. We were the champions of the Labor Party idea. We split the Farmer-Labor congress in Chicago, and this split, in my eyes, hurt the Party. If we now carry through this second split, it will hurt our Party still more. For this is a much more important congress than the congress in Chicago and its influence is far greater.

There is still another important matter which you must discuss. We have undertaken a campaign against the Gompers bureaucracy, which represents one of the enemies which we in America have to fight. The Pepper group censures us because we are fighting the Gompers bureaucracy. They seem to be of the opinion that that is incorrect. In my opinion the Gompers bureaucracy is one of the chief obstacles in the path of

any kind of political or industrial progress in the United States. Our majority is absolutely in favor of the most bitter fight to wipe out the Gompers bureaucracy. We say that if we are forced at the June 17 convention to make a Left Wing split, which is unavoidable if Olgin's theses are realized, that means that we lose a wonderful clue [aid] to fight the Gompers machine. Gompers possesses no political organization. If we can take part in a labor party, that means that we can play that against Gompers in a fight and not only on the political field but also on the industrial field. Gompers will be inimical to this Farmer-Labor Party movement. And we dare not estrange ourselves from such an organization. We could very easily play a good part of its strength against the Gompers machine.

In closing I will say that you must be very careful before you prescribe for us at the June 17 Convention a program of splitting by a Left Wing move. If you do that, then the Communist Party of America will be hurled backwards upon its path, it will be isolated from the masses and its work will be very much hampered — and not only for a few months, as Olgin said, but for a long time.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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