
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by M. Golos:

Excerpt from an Interview

Conducted by Oakley C. Johnson

and Ann Rivington, 1940

Handwritten notes in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Box 9, Folder 3, microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

I met C.E. for the first time at the end of 1918 in Harlem at a meeting. He spoke in the name of the Left Wing of the Socialist Party.

The second time I met him was in June 1919 when the first big convention took place organizing the Communist Party in America.¹ It was held in Hungarian Hall on 81st Street. William Bross Lloyd, a millionaire, was the chairman. This was a pre-convention meeting. Louis Fraina was not present at this convention. After that the Letts [Latvian Federation] and Russian Federation also had a pre-convention convention.² After the conference they began to prepare and to elect delegates to the Chicago convention.³

I was a delegate to the Russian Federation convention in Detroit in August. The Chicago convention took place in September. C.E. was not at the Russian Convention. The Russian Federation had 12,000 dues-paying members at that time. In Detroit Nicholas Hourwich and Alexander Stoklitsky were the leaders. Jacob Golos was there.

The Russian Convention passed a resolution that all members who belonged to the American Federation of Labor should go out

¹ Reference is to the the National Conference of the Left Wing Section of the Socialist Party, held in New York City from June 21-24, 1919.

² Reference is to the 5th Convention of the Federation of Russian Branches of the Communist Party, held in Detroit from Aug. 20-28, 1919.

³ That is, the Founding Convention of the Communist Party of America, held in Chicago from Sept. 1-7, 1919.

and smash it and organize a new union — which was Zinoviev's position. I spoke against it. I was a new union member of printers' union 6 months earlier and had a hard time getting in. They branded me a Menshevik and completely wiped the floor with me. For that reason I was not a delegate to the Chicago Convention.

After the Chicago Convention they came back with a split — the organization of two parties. Alfred Wagenknecht was the Secretary of one and C.E. Ruthenberg the Secretary of the other. I lined up with C.E.'s group, the more American group. The Russian groups were only partly with C.E. The leadership and a majority went with C.E. When it went underground, it switched around.

The raids started.⁴ A few thousand were arrested and brought to New York. People were picked up in the streets, without anything. On January 2, 1920 I was arrested in Brownsville at a branch when I had to speak. They picked up everyone who came into the meeting. The Department of Justice questioned me. I had a union membership card, not a CP card with me. The police gave me a lecture about running around with those Russians.

Bail was set for each of \$300. There were about 600 or 700 held at Ellis Island. My bail was raised immediately and I was elected to transact business for the Defense Committee. I worked with Mr. Charles Recht, the lawyer, and Miss Weiss, his assistant. Many of those arrested couldn't sign their names. Recht raised the matter with C.E. and he sent me a note to remain a few days until they could get someone else there. That was my third contact with C.E. I wound up staying about 5 more weeks. The fellow who took my place was named Oblan. When he came in, I walked out.

Anybody who put up a fight wasn't actually deported. Only outstanding anarchists were deported whether they wanted to be or not. Many wanted to be deported, however. They wanted to go back. So when they were asked "Are you for the overthrow of the U.S. government?" they said, "Yes."

C.E. took an active part in the defense. Money was collected from all sorts of people. I put up my own bail — it was 2 years later before I got back the \$600 bail for my wife and myself because the money was later used for other people. It took a long time — cases kept dragging and dragging.

⁴ The first mass raid against Russian radicals in New York took place on November 7, 1919. This was followed by J. Edgar Hoover's mass operation of Jan. 2/3, 1920, somewhat erroneously remembered to history as the "Palmer Raids."

While we were there the CP was illegalized and everything was smashed. When I came out they had already established an illegal apparatus. It was March 1920. It was very hard to see people at that time.

The next object was to organize an illegal print shop. When I came in it was a practical operation. The other Golos [Jacob Golos] can tell more. Printing was done in two ways — one way in our plant, the other way in other plants.⁵ There were a number of printing plants in New York that used to do it — not the office of the CP.

I worked publishing a Russian paper that was legal. When everything was smash the company sued the Government for the machinery. It was machinery belonging to the company and not the CP. The Government paid for all necessary repairs to the machinery.

A funny story: I belonged to the Ruthenberg group of the Communist Party. The Russians went over [with Ruthenberg to the UCP] — practically the whole leadership went over. They wanted action, revolt in this country.⁶ I was the key man on the paper. One day a group of people came in and captured the paper, which was in a store on 10th Street. A few came in, locked the door from the inside, and there was no paper! Guards from both sides were around, ready to tear up the pages as they came out. We didn't want to compose the paper, another fellow and I, so there was no paper at all. Meanwhile they tried to persuade us to come over voluntarily [back to the CPA].

Bill Dunne [of the UCP] came up, knocked on the door, and said he was from the Department of Justice. A second person said he was a detective. Bill Dunne and his companion had phony badges. A crowd from C.E.'s faction followed them in and threw the "capturers" out!

In 1922 I was working at a good commercial job. The Secretary of the Russian Federation came to see me a a representative of the Communist Party. He was in very close touch with C.E. He can tell you a whole lot more — Kosta Radzin [???].

There was no Russian paper at all then, so I quit my job immediately to organize one.

⁵ This is a bit ambiguous in the notes, but the sense is that Golos worked at a legal Russian printing plant, while there were other, illegal, Russian printing plants scattered around New York City.

⁶ It is quite accurate that the Russian Federation was deeply divided at the time of the Ruthenberg split in April 1920. The bulk of the Federation ultimately remained with the old CPA.

The Russian paper was organized in two weeks. A few months later came the split in the Communist Party. In September or October 1922 the split appeared.⁷

In 1923 the Russian paper was established, the *Novyi Mir*, but the name was changed. I got tired of working with the Russian group and wanted to go with an English branch. The Party was growing into a large American movement. There was strenuous opposition to my leaving, I couldn't get released, so I carried the fight right up to the Central Committee. C.E. wrote a letter instructing them to release me. Those Russian fellows in those years used to make an issue of every little thing. A fellow from Chicago was brought over to take my place and then I left. And that was my last contact with Ruthenberg.

Once after Pepper came to this country — I don't remember the year, 1923 or 1924 — I was at a meeting where Pepper spoke in German. Ruthenberg was there. Almost every two weeks there was a mass meeting at the Star Casino and C.E. always spoke. As a speaker he was always plain in his language. He did not use high words.

All the people who did not agree with C.E. or did not belong to [his factions] had a high opinion of him. He was a boss, a business man, everything had to be just so when he was in the office.

After Ruthenberg's death I was in close touch with Lovestone. In 1927 I was taken off another job to take charge of printing the *Daily Worker*.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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⁷ The chronology and story is a bit garbled here. The split of the so-called "Central Caucus," which included prominently the bulk of the Russian Federation, came in the fall of 1921, not 1922. The main issue over which the split took place was the establishment of the "legal" Workers Party of America.