
Letters to Oscar Tyverovsky in Moscow from Charles Dirba (Sept. 3, 1921) and John Ballam (Sept. 2, 1921).†

A document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 39, ll. 104-105.

I — Dirba to Tyverovsky.

Sept. 3, 1921.

Dear Cd. B. [“Baldwin” = Tyverovsky]:—

As you can see from the enclosed information about the latest acts of our headmen [the CEC], things are going from bad to worse and we are confronted with an acute crisis in our affairs. When I give way to my pessimism, it looks to me that our concern [the CPA] is heading for complete bankruptcy, complete breaking up, and I don't know how it could be averted.

They have decided for the formation of a parallel law concern [a Legal Political Party] side by side with the present concern of ours [the underground party]; and the arguments that our understructure upon which the upperstructure must be based and upon which it must absolutely depend for working forces and guidance, is *at the present moment* entirely not in condition, not ready for the great change, that the change at this moment will disorganize the understructure, that the present headmen have no authority to take such a step without a meeting of the general board of directors here [a party convention];

to all the arguments they have one answer, and that is, that they are proceeding upon the direct and explicit instructions from Main Office [the Executive Committee of the Communist International] brought over by Marshall [Max Bedacht].

We deny the possibility of Main Office [ECCI] giving such direct and explicit instructions. We know that the Main Office urges upper [legal] activities on the widest possible scale, but we are also convinced that they would not give direct and specific instructions as to when and how the various section offices [national communist parties] should proceed in this general direction; that would be against the general policies of the Main Office. Then it is absolutely clear to us that the great change *at this moment*, and in the way that they propose to bring it about, heading the entire business to ruin. And why? — Because due to general conditions, and still more to the inside developments, to the acts of their against opposition and against feder-s [federations] the financial bankruptcy and their incapacities and unfitness to do any real work, the understructure is absolutely not ready for the change.

Although they are in the majority in the Section office here, 7 to 3, the Lithuanian having gone over to

†- Both letters are signed with obscure pseudonyms in the original. The first, signed “Joseph,” is conclusively attributed to Charles Dirba based upon its precise quotation in a definite Dirba letter (f. 515, op. 1, d. 39, l. 240). The second letter, signed “X.S.,” is attributed with somewhat less certainty to “Executive Secretary” of the Central Caucus faction John Ballam. It is also possible that reference could also be to the former “Executive Secretary” of the regular CPA Charles Dirba — who resigned his post on July 27, 1921. It seems unlikely that Dirba would have been representing himself as any sort of “Executive Secretary” in September, however.

‡- At the time of shotgun wedding of the old CPA with the United Communist Party at the May 1921 Woodstock Unity Convention, the CEC of the unified organization was intentionally divided 5-5 along former party lines. In July 1921, former member of the old CPA J. Wilenkin began to vote with the former UCP members, and a working majority of the CEC emerged. Shortly thereafter, the Lithuanian Federationist “Ray”/“Riley” (still unidentified as of this writing) likewise went over to the majority group, leaving former CPAers Charles Dirba, John Ballam, and George Ashkenudzie an embittered minority of 3. This became the center of the “Central Caucus” — several thousand former members of the old CPA which bolted the regular party in late November and December of 1921. This group established itself as a parallel “Communist Party of America” at an Emergency Convention held in Jan. 1922.

them too,‡ they do not have, and they do not do anything to gain, the confidence of the majority of the membership. In fact they are doing everything to further antagonize the majority of the membership and to disorganize the whole concern. They have removed DOs [District Organizers] and SDOs [Subdistrict Organizers] for no special reasons, they have been meddling in the internal affairs of feds [federations], removing their editors, and putting their own men [i.e. former members of the UCP] in place of them (which is contrary to constitution), officially disconnecting the former C. Fed. head offices [Communist Federation Executive Committees] from their branches, deciding even upon the names of their papers, etc. They have manipulated elections to fed conferences in the most brazen manner. They have gone ahead creating new paid positions for their adherents, although we have not funds enough to pay the current salaries. They have proved themselves incapable and unfit to do any real work. They start on one scheme, and when it does not go, they start another; they switch around and around, as if by changing the places of musicians they could improve their orchestra.

They have removed you, too, and put Ballister [Robert Minor] in your place. For what reasons? — For no reason at all. — Just because they have the power now, and Ballister [Minor] is their man from the past. They removed Sullivan [A.S. Edwards] because the Dist. Conv. [District Convention] asked for his removal on the ground that he could not address meetings in English without foreign accent, and because the Dist. Conv. asked (that is enough, that the members are not satisfied with him, they said); and they

appointed in his place — whom? — An American with perfect English? No, they appointed another Lett, Frank, their man from the past.† But when the DEC [District Executive Committee] of D2 protested against the appointment of Funk [Hyman Costrell] (in place of Henry [Ashkenudzie], removed for being in the Section office [that is, a member of the CEC]), you know Funk [Costrell] — Raphael's [Bittelman's] tail, then they tabled the protests, and that is all. Their policy is not merely a “crushing policy,” but a crushing policy by sheer force and manipulations. They are manipulating the elections to fed. conf. [federation conferences] in the most shameless manner. Russ. fed. is practically broken up by their manipulations; the Lith. fed. has internal fights, although their conv. was pretty solid — but the CC has not yet approved their Bureau.

The only thing that could save the concern [party] is a meeting of the general board of directors [seemingly a reference to a commission of the ECCI], and emergency meeting [party convention], and that is what we are trying to bring about now.

In the meantime we urge you and Stepan [identity undetermined], and, if possible, Andrew [Nicholas Hourwich], too, to come back just as soon as you can.◊ We need all the forces that we can get on our side, and we need full information from the Main Office [Comintern], especially as to the instructions reported by Marshall [Bedacht].

Yours for C. [Communism],

Joseph [Charles Dirba].

†- Allusion to “man from the past” means a former member of the United Communist Party. Dirba, Ballam, Tyverovsky, Ashkenudzie, and virtually all of the Central Caucus faction hailed from the old Communist Party of America. With regards to the Boston District Organizer A.S. Edwards — the Latvian about whose accent complaints were launched — there was actually an interim DO with roots in the old CPA (pseudonyms “D. Collins” and “Morgan”) installed temporarily in July 1921. It was this second Boston DO who was sacked in the factional scrum, replaced by Boston city SDO “R. Robins” [Boodman] — like Edwards a member of the Latvian Federation, but unlike the two previous Boston DOs, a former member of the UCP. Parenthetically, A.S. Edwards wound up as the leading figure in a tiny radical faction of the United Toilers Party that refused reunification with the regular CPA in 1922 and continued an isolated existence as an independent sect throughout the 1920s.

‡- Alexander Bittelman was the leading figure of the Jewish Communist Federation and Hyman Costrell another leading member of that group — both clearly anathema to the members of the old CPA who were the core of the Central Caucus faction.

◊- Tyverovsky returned to the United States shortly thereafter, presumably also with “Stepan.” Hourwich remained in Soviet Russia.

II — Ballam [?] to Factional Allies, copied to Tyverovsky in Moscow by Dirba.

Sept. 2, 1921.

Dear Comrades:—

They are pushing their insane policies and disorganization work beyond all limits.

Claiming instructions from “over there” they have decided to change the A [American Labor Alliance for Trade Relations with Russia] into a LPP, defeating an amendment to call a convention to decide upon such a question of the greatest importance and of an absolute departure from the policies decided upon by the U-convention [May 1921 Woodstock Unity Convention].

To crush opposition they have removed DO1 Collins [Boston DO, unidentified as of this writing], replacing him by Robins [Boodman]. They removed DO4 Anders [Cleveland DO, unidentified], replacing him by Hoffman [Morris Kushinsky], in whose place as DO3 they appointed Mills [Philadelphia city SDO also using the pseudonym “Webber”].† They removed SDO2 in D2 [New Jersey Subdistrict Organizer “Lidock”], SDO1 in D5 [Chicago city SDO “A. Johnson”] was practically removed, changed to unpaid position, his work to be done by the DIO [District Industrial Organizer]. They have created three new districts, Upper NY [D10], Pittsburgh [D11], and the Middle West [D12 Minneapolis], thus disorganizing the DEC’s in Ds 2 [New York], 4 [Cleveland], and 5 [Chicago], and placing their man in charge of the new districts. Baldwin [Tyverovsky], on the ECCI, they have replaced by their man Ballister [Robert Minor]. They formed themselves here into an Organization

Committee and a Political Committee, who is to take complete charge of all work between the main meetings [of the party CEC], thus cutting off the minority even from the knowledge of what is being done. Where previously 4, 5, and 6 days were taken for each meeting, now many more decisions of much greater importance were rushed through in two days, and everything was left to the two committees.‡

They approved the manipulations by DO2 [Hyman Costrell] of the Russ. Dist. Conf. where the DO arbitrarily gave one section one delegate more than they were entitled and deprived one section of any representative. In order to give the section which he favored greater representation he counted in the “actual membership” of that section comrades who had actually left for Russia, and even persons who had been expelled from the Party; while in a subdistrict which he disfavored he insisted that the subdistrict on its total membership was entitled to only 2 delegates, although the elections as ordered by the CEC were not from subdistricts to the Dist. Conf., but from sections to Dist. Conf., and there were three sections in that subdistrict, each with sufficient membership to send one delegate.

Paper #2 [*The Voice of Labor* ???] they stopped with the next issue. Paper #3 [*The Toiler*, formerly *The Ohio Socialist*] will be brought here and issued alone. A monthly magazine will be issued.

These are actions which cannot be left to go. The membership must assert itself. They have here now (sorry to say) a majority of 7 against 3, but I firmly believe that the accidental majority here represents only a small minority of the membership. Their own crazy crushing policies and manipulations prove that.

Now the majority of the membership should assert itself immediately and in each particular subdi-

†- This game of musical DOs is confusing even for the initiated. At root was an unquestionable effort to replace DOs having roots in the old CPA with DOs having roots in the UCP or the Jewish Communist Federation. In D3 Philadelphia: the first DO was the JCFer Morris Kushinsky [“Hoffman”]. Documentary evidence in the Comintern Archive indicates he was actually replaced circa September by Lithuanian Federationist Antonas (Anthony) Bimba [“J. Mason”], also a loyalist of the CEC Majority group. Kushinsky returned to the district as DO replacing Bimba on March 10, 1922. These changes in Philadelphia do not seem to have been factionally driven but rather the by-product of having moved Kushinsky into another district or districts due to his unquestioned loyalty to the CEC majority (the former UCPers); Bimba filled the gap. Philadelphia was the home of the Lithuanian Federation — its Executive Committee and its press — and it doubtlessly made good sense to the CEC to have a Lithuanian in that particular post as well. In D4 Cleveland: the first DO was the ex-CPAer “Anders,” who according to this letter may have been replaced briefly by Kushinsky. Later in the Fall of 1921 the Cleveland DO was the former UCP member Abraham Jakira [“A. Dubner”], who was in turn replaced by Walter Brustor [“J. Milner”] as Acting DO not after Dec. 16, 1921.

‡- This launching of two working committees of the CEC has not been previously noted in the literature.

vision and circumstances must be decided by themselves, but one thing is absolutely necessary to save the Party from complete disorganization and ruin, and that is — there must be called an emergency convention with the least possible delay.

It is not so much the general principles and policies upon which they are proceeding that matters, as the way of going about it, their complete disregard of specific circumstances in which we must work, their complete inability and unfitness for the work. And this again only a convention can correct.

Yours for C. [Communism],

X.S. [John Ballam ?]

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.
Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2005. • Free reproduction permitted.*