
Party Principles and Discipline:

A Letter Authorized by the Central Executive Committee Directing the Reinstatement of an Expelled Comrade.

[April 29, 1924]

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Dear Comrade:

Political Action.

The Central Executive Committee of the Party has carefully considered all the documents sent to it in regard to the expulsion of Otto Newman as a member of the Party. It has also had before it a statement by Comrade Newman in regard to his expulsion.

It appears from these documents that he was expelled from the Party for presenting at a public meeting, on the subject "Can the Workers Gain Their Freedom by Political Action Alone?" the part which force played in the class struggle through reading [from] the *Thesis of the Third Congress of the Communist International* and *The Strategy of the Communists* and the *Communist Manifesto of 1847* excerpts dealing with this question. It appears further that the City Central Committee of Portland [Oregon] had forbidden any Party member to raise the question before an open meeting.

1. The first point which the Central Executive Committee desires to bring to your attention is the complete misapprehension of the term "political action" as indicated in both your letter and also on the part of Comrade Newman. Both you and he use the term "political action" as if it were synonymous with "parliamentary action." As Communists, we do not believe that to be true. For us, political action means any form of action through which a class struggle for political power is manifested, that is for control of the state power. Political action for us does not mean merely voting and electing representatives to legislative bodies and other public offices. Mass meetings intended to exert pressure upon the capitalist government may be a form of political action. Similarly a strike with political aims is a form of political action. A civil war such as recently took place

†- Otto Newman was expelled from Local Portland, WPA in March 1924 because he "deliberately advocated forcible overthrow of the government after having been instructed by the City Central Committee not to do so." He is said to have read from various Communist publications at open meetings, highlighting passages which asserted the "violent methods which must be used to accomplish the revolution." He was regarded as a provocateur by the membership of his branch, charges were preferred against him, and he was found guilty and ordered expelled. [Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 324, l. 22] Newman appealed his case to higher authority, and Executive Secretary Ruthenberg queried the officials of Local Portland as to the situation. Ruthenberg expressed surprise that a member would be expelled for reading passages from pamphlet literature published by the Comintern, noting "Our Party does not advocate use of force by the workers in the present situation. On the other hand, we believe that the class conflict which capitalism produces will in the future produce those conditions which will bring about a use of force by the contending classes." More documents were requested in the Newman case. [d. 324, l. 27] On April 29, 1924, this letter to the Portland City Central Committee announced that the Central Executive Committee of the WPA had ruled in favor of Newman's appeal and ordered him reinstated [original located in Comintern Archive, d. 324, l. 53].

Despite this assertion of central authority, it seems that the English Branch of Local Portland had the final say in this matter, as District Organizer Norman Tallentire noted in a September 19, 1924 letter to Ruthenberg that while the original CEC reinstatement had been met with "quite a bad reaction," Otto Newman had "finally been expelled," presumably on charges stemming from a subsequent incident of a similar nature [d. 324, l. 128].

in Mexico between the Obregon and De La Huerta forces is as much a form of political action as going to the ballot box to vote for certain candidates for public office.

Understanding political action in this, the Communist sense, the answer to the question propounded at the Forum meeting should have been unhesitatingly on the part of all Communists that the workers will achieve their freedom by political action. It is exactly this which is the essential thing about our Communist principles. We say that the workers must enter into political actions against the capitalist state and achieve control of the state power and use this as a class in their interests, and that this is the only road to the social revolution and the abolishing of the capitalist system.

A Centralized Party.

2. In a letter from Comrade King, the Secretary of the English Branch [of Local Portland] bearing on the expulsion of Comrade Newman, the question of the jurisdiction of the Central Executive Committee and its right to intervene are raised. This letter we believe requires a statement from the Central Executive Committee. Our Party is a centralized Communist Party. The constitution of the Party therefore gives the Central Executive Committee full power to carry on the work of the Party between its conventions. In a centralized Communist Party, the Central Executive Committee must have full authority to review any act of any unit of the Party and to modify or change this act. It must have full power to mobilize every unit of the Party policies or Party work. There are no autonomous groups in a Communist Party. The Party is and must be one unit. It must act and fight as a unit and it must have a leading body, the Central Executive Committee, with full power to direct the activities of the organization as a whole, which means to direct the activity of any unit of the Party. It is only by establishing a leading organ and maintaining a firm

discipline in the Party that a Communist Party can fit itself for struggles and conflicts which it must mass through in order to lead the workers victoriously to the proletarian revolution.

Force and the Class Struggle.

3. The Central Executive Committee is of the opinion that the attitude of the City Central Committee on the question of the part which force plays in the class struggle is incorrect. We cannot as a Communist Party hide our views on this question from the working masses. We must, where the issue is raised, frankly present our viewpoint. We cannot stultify ourselves because of the pressure of the capitalist state power. What then, is our viewpoint on the question of the part that force will play in the class struggle between the workers and the capitalists?

Our Party does not advocate the use of force by the workers today. The whole strength of our Party is being given to the campaign to build a mass political party, that is a Farmer-Labor Party, through which the workers and farmers will enter into the political struggle against the capitalist ruling parties. We believe that it is through the formation of such a mass Farmer-Labor Party that the cause of the revolutionary movement in the United States can best be served. Does this mean that we believe that the workers and farmers of this country will through such a Farmer-Labor Party elect their representatives to public office and then win control of the governmental power and proceed by legislative action of the parliamentary institutions of the capitalist government to the abolition of the Capitalist System?

Such a viewpoint is an illusion. The history of the past shows that such a viewpoint is an illusion. No privileged class in past history has given up its privileged position upon the demand of the exploited class without resorting to force to maintain its privileged position and its right to exploit the oppressed class. Even American history shows

that when a privileged class is attacked it resorts to force in order to protect its privileged position. The Southern slave-owners resorted to civil war in order to prevent their right to profit from the labor of slaves from being taken from them.

As Communists, we therefore frankly declare our viewpoint that the class struggle between workers and capitalists will inevitably in its future development take the form of a struggle in which force will be used. The exact form of this struggle is a matter of historical development which we cannot predict today. All that we can say is that it will be a struggle between the organs of the state power of the workers and the organs of capitalist state power. We have seen in Russia, in Hungary, and in Bavaria that the forms which expressed the workers' struggle for state power are the Soviets and that the struggle takes the form of a struggle between a capitalist parliamentary government and the Soviets which are the expression of the workers' government. It is this fact which we believe that Comrade Newman tried to bring out in reading from the various pamphlets at the forum meeting.

The Central Executive Committee believes that the rule laid down by the City Central Committee of Portland forbidding the branches discussion of the whole question with such a subject as "Can the Workers Gain Their Freedom Through

Political Action Alone?" was wrong. While it is the duty of Party members to carry out the decisions of the governing body of the Party, when the body is wrong the Central Executive Committee cannot sustain the action of the City Central Committee in expelling Comrade Newman for endeavoring to present the Communist position by reading from Communist literature at the forum meeting in question. The effect of sustaining this expulsion would be to support an erroneous position of the question discussed above, and it is more important that the question of principle be clear than the issue of discipline involved in this case.

In view of all the foregoing, the Central Executive Committee instructs the CCC and the English Branch of Portland to reinstate Comrade Newman as a member of the Party.

The Central Executive Committee further instructs that this letter be read in full both at the City Central Committee meeting and at the meeting of the English branch so that the principle set forth may be understood by all the Party members of Portland. We feel certain that the result of this incident will be to greatly strengthen the Portland Party organization through a clear grasp of the underlying principles of a Communist Party.

C.E. Ruthenberg,
Executive Secretary.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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