

**Statement of Presidential Candidate
on J. Mahlon Barnes as Campaign Manager
(circa July 10, 1912)**

To the Members of the Socialist Party.

Comrades:—

This statement is issued with great reluctance and only after long and serious deliberation. It relates to the selection of Comrade J. Mahlon Barnes as campaign manager. The protests which have come to me from every section of the country and which continue by every mail cannot be ignored without giving rise to serious complications in the impending campaign and threatening grave results to the party.

These protests do not involve the incompetency of Comrade Barnes to serve as campaign manager, but grow entirely out of the charges, with which party members are familiar, which resulted in his retirement as national secretary.¹

Concerning the merits of that unfortunate affair I have nothing to say. It is not for me to review the record and pronounce judgment. The proceedings were given wide publicity at the time and members of the party had ample opportunity to hear both sides and form their own conclusions.

But since the selection of Comrade Barnes as campaign manager has revived the whole unpleasant issue with all its attending animosity, setting comrades against each other in bitter strife at the time above all others when they should be working together in union and concord, there is but one safe course to pursue and that is to face the issue calmly and dispose of it, so far as the party is concerned, with the least possible delay.

It is to the rank and file of the party that I issue this statement and make this appeal. They have always had my unqualified confidence and I go before them now with implicit faith that they will appreciate my position and understand my purpose in claiming their attention at this time.

Since my nomination the time which I should have given to the campaign has been largely occupied with this affair. Some well-meaning comrades have advised me not to attempt to answer all these protesting communications, but I cannot agree with them. I have always made it a rule to answer every communication that comes to me, unless there is

good reason for not doing so. When a comrade, or anyone, addresses a proper letter to me it is my duty to answer it.

But it is not possible to settle this matter by personal communication, and the longer it is permitted to continue the more serious and complicated it will become for all concerned.

Some of the protesting comrades and locals are very angry and threatening, declaring that they will contribute no funds to the campaign; others that they will not vote the ticket; still others that they will work and vote against the ticket. There are yet others who demand my withdrawal as a candidate. To all of these communications I have made a reply, but I realize how inadequate these replies have been. My time has been consumed, but practically nothing has been done to meet the demands of the campaign, while through it all the cries of protest have steadily increased.

The questions which have been most frequently and insistently pressed upon me and my answers thereto are now given here for the information of the party members and to avoid their endless repetition by personal communication:

First. Did you know that Barnes was to be made campaign manager?

I did not.

Second. Were you consulted about his selection?

I was not.

Third. Do you approve of it?

I do not. I frankly told Barnes so and I stated the reason for my disapproval before the joint meeting of the National Executive Committee and the campaign committee, at which meeting Comrades Hillquit and Spargo² declared that all those who protested against Barnes were not socialists at all and the quicker the party was rid of them the better for the party.³

I did not question the capability of Comrade Barnes — no one has — objected to him solely on the ground that the affair which resulted in his official retirement and which provoked the bitterest feeling at the time would be revived and divide the membership into angry and warring elements at the very time the party needed most of all a united and harmonious membership; I objected on account of the party as a whole and because I clearly foresaw the state of angry protest and agitation which has now forced upon me the necessity for issuing this statement.

Fourth. Did the National Executive Committee and the committee on constitution recommend Barnes's election as campaign manager?

They did not. The matter was never before either committee. The committee on constitution recommended the election of a campaign manager, but the name of Barnes in that connection was not mentioned.

I have the information from members of the National Executive Committee and the committee on constitution that not only was Barnes not recommended by these committees, but that his name was not at any time mentioned in any meeting of those committees.

Fifth. Did Hillquit in placing Barnes in nomination for campaign manager state that Barnes was unanimously recommended for that position by the National Executive Committee and the committee on constitution?

This question, being in controversy, will have to be answered by the official record of the convention proceedings which is here quoted as follows:

The Chairman: We have a motion that has been carried, as I understand it, for the nomination and election of a campaign committee of five and a campaign manager. In what order shall we take them? Campaign manager first, if there is no objection.

Del. Hillquit: I desire to place in nomination for this position Comrade J. Mahlon Barnes. (*Seconded*). In doing so I wish to state to the comrades that I have been on the National Executive Committee a number of years, and I have had opportunity and occasion to observe the work of Comrade Barnes, and while I have no more personal attachment to Barnes or interest in the matter than any other delegate, I wish to say that my colleagues on the National Executive Committee and on the several committees are unanimous in the opinion that the party has very few men, if any men, as efficient, as painstaking, as devoted, and, on the whole, as fit for the position as Comrade Barnes. I wish to state also — speaking now personally for myself, and I am very frank in this matter — I think this convention and this party owes a reparation to Comrade Barnes because of the campaign of slander instituted against him and the hunting up of matters dead and buried years ago and their publication in socialist papers.⁴ I think this was one of the most disgraceful things ever suffered in the Socialist Party. (*Applause.*) I think, as far as I myself am concerned — I do not care whether it is wise, whether it is politic — I think every man among us is entitled to justice, and I speak for Comrade Barnes because I know a great injustice has been done him. (*Applause.*)

Del. Merrick (PA): A point of information. Do I understand this recommendation, that this is the action of the National Executive Committee?

Del. Hillquit: No; it is the nomination of Delegate Hillquit from New York.

Del. Merrick: Not the nomination of Barnes; that isn't what I refer to. It is the recommendation of the committee?

* * *

Del. Hillquit: This comes from the committee on constitution and also comes from the National Executive Committee.

Del. Merrick: With the endorsement of the National Executive Committee?

Del. Hillquit: A general recommendation, yes.⁵

After reading this report copied from the official record members will be able to answer this question for themselves.

Now, comrades, there is but one way to remove this obstruction from the track and that is by a national referendum of the party. The resignation of Barnes would not overcome the difficulty. He has his partisans as well as his opponents.

Let the party decide the issue and let us all abide by that decision, at least until the close of the campaign. The party is not to blame for this affair, but the party alone can settle it, and the sooner the better. We may indulge in vain regrets but we cannot escape the issue. It will not down and its demoralizing effect is already but too apparent upon the national campaign.

This is a different statement than the one I first intended. Calm reflection and the counsel of comrades have modified what I have had to say. I am not seeking to fix responsibility. That is for the party and not for me. I am endeavoring to keep conscious of the position I occupy as one of the presidential candidates and of the trust that for the time has been committed to me by the confidence of my comrades. It is not for me to take sides and provoke resentment at this time. I shall be drawn into no controversy. Rather it is for me to use such influence as I may have to clear the way for an understanding and minimize the harm that may be done.

I appeal to the members of the party. Let angry passions subside and calm reason have sway. We have encountered many difficulties and overcome them, and we shall overcome this.

We stand upon the threshold of the greatest campaign in American history. The Socialist Party's entrance upon the political stage is the event of the epoch. The supreme opportunity has come for the master stroke. Shall we now permit ourselves to be diverted by a minor issue of personal concern, or shall we rise triumphant to the occasion and vindi-

cate the character and capacity of the Socialist Party as the champion of the working class and the hope and promise of the better day?

There is nothing else in the way of unity and success. The campaign committee and the candidates are united and working together as one. Let this matter be adjusted and the road is clear to victory.

I believe that all are agreed; the campaign committee, the campaign manager, and the candidates, that the matter should be settled by a national referendum of the party, and the sooner the better. Several motions are pending at the national office and I am informed that from three to a dozen seconds are being received to these motions by the national secretary every day. As soon as the required number of seconds is received the matter will go to the party membership for settlement. I venture to suggest that all locals favoring a national referendum promptly second the motions now pending at the national office so that the matter may be determined and over with with the least possible delay. In sending in their seconds local secretaries should not fail to state the number of members in good standing. If the necessary number of seconds is not received within the prescribed time the matter goes by default and will drag through and demoralize the entire campaign.

Prompt and decisive action by the party membership will dispose of the matter, silence protest, reunite the comrades, inspire enthusiasm, and insure victory.

Yours fraternally,

Eugene V. Debs.

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¹ John Mahlon Barnes (1866-1934) was a Philadelphia cigarmaker and leader of the Socialist Labor Party in Pennsylvania who broke with that party along with Morris Hillquit in the bitter 1899 revolt against Daniel DeLeon and the hardline National Executive Committee. Barnes was elected executive secretary of the Socialist Party of America in 1905 and remained in that roll until 1911, when he was forced out for fathering a child out of wedlock with a secretary. Barnes was responsible for the successful "Socialist Red Special" campaign train of 1908 and was nominated for the position of campaign manager by his friend Hillquit at the 1912 convention. Barnes was one of seven individuals nominated. Ironically, Barnes declared that he already had a job and did not want to become campaign manager, but offered to serve if called. Six declinations followed in rapid succession, leaving only Barnes available to take on the job; he was therefore elected by acclamation. Debs was temperamentally ill at ease with intraparty fisticuffs and rarely participated in party conventions; he therefore only learned of the controversial election of Barnes to the high profile role of campaign chair after the fact.

² John Spargo (1876-1966) was an English-born socialist intellectual who authored a biography of Karl Marx and a healthy stack of semi-popular works on socialist themes during the first two decades of the twentieth century. With the coming of the World War, Spargo turned into an outspoken social patriot, leaving the Socialist Party to help found the Social Democratic League of America and playing an active part in the pro-war American Alliance for Labor and Democracy. He became a militant anti-communist in the years after the war, retreating to his beloved Vermont and evolving into a conservative Republican.

³ The joint meeting of the National Executive Committee and the SP campaign committee took place at the club room of the Briggs House in Chicago on June 15-17, 1912. Candidate Debs was in attendance all three days. On the second day the matter of letters protesting Mahlon Barnes's election as campaign manager was raised. NEC members Bill Haywood and Kate O'Hare both took exception to Hillquit's intimation at the convention that Barnes had received the NEC's endorsement; Hillquit responded that he had no intention of representing Haywood's views but that support of Barnes among the NEC over the years had been general. There is no indication in the official minutes of either Hillquit or Spargo making a declaration that "all those who protested against Barnes [e.g. Haywood] were not socialists at all and the quicker the party was rid of them the better for the party." See: *Socialist Party Monthly Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 10 (July 1912), pp. 2-3. Haywood would be recalled from the NEC by the party membership later that year.

⁴ The married Barnes had been involved fifteen years earlier in a love triangle involving the wife of Tom Hickey, then a top Socialist Labor Party organizer, later publisher and editor of a popular Socialist Party newspaper, *The Rebel*. See: Peter Buckingham, "*Red Tom*" Hickey: *The Uncrowned King of Texas Socialism*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2020; p. 68 and *passim*. Hickey was, it bears mentioning, a personal friend of Gene Debs, which may have colored his attitude towards Barnes. Barnes was also hammered for his womanizing in the pages of *The Provoker*, edited by another former SLP activist of long standing, Thomas J. Morgan.

⁵ John Spargo (ed.), *National Convention of the Socialist Party Held at Indianapolis, Indiana, May 12 to 18, 1912: Stenographic Report by Wilson E. McDurmut, Assisted by Charles W. Phillips*. Chicago: Socialist Party, [1912]; pp. 164-165.