
Fanaticism Means Failure

by Job Harriman

Published in *The Western Comrade* [Los Angeles], vol. 3, no. 6 (Oct. 1915), pg. 9.

What is the trouble with the Socialist Party membership?

Why are there fewer members by one-half today than in 1912? ¹

Is there a shortage of propaganda material? No, the fields are white with harvest.

Are we not in the midst of a world war?

Is not this fiendish struggle the ripe fruit of Capitalism? Are not the best men of the world being murdered in cold blood, by the powers, only for commercial supremacy? Is not the commissary of the world being impoverished? Is not starvation gripping the vitals of all Europe today?

A shortage in propaganda material! Have we not a panic in our own country? Has nature not blessed us with the largest crops in the history of our nation? Is not the price of wheat low and the price of flour high? Have we not millions of idle men willing and anxious to do work? Are their farms and homes not good security for money if they could borrow? Are they not told by the money powers that there is no money to lend? Are not the same bankers lending \$500 million to the Allies for war purposes while they foreclose the mortgages on the farms and homes of our country because there is no money to lend?

A shortage in propaganda material?

Are we not now in the act of entering into a war with Mexico?

Is our action not being forced by the land, mine, and oil field proprietors of that country? Has not the Commission on Industrial Relations uncovered an internal condition that is shaking our institu-

¹ In actual fact average monthly paid membership in the Socialist Party of America fell from about 118,000 at its high-water mark in 1912 to just under 79,400 in 1915 — a decline of 32.7%.

tions to their very foundations? Are we not shipping millions of tons of food to feed the European war while our children starve at home? Would it not be wiser to starve the war and feed our children?

Surely our membership in the Socialist Party is not in a state of lethargy because there is no new propaganda material. Then what is the trouble?

The trouble is with our methods.

We are not practical. We are doctrinaries. We are traveling the road of the old SLP. We are making a fetish of our movement, a religion of our theories. We are Puritans. We are “absolutely right.” “All others are wrong.” We are the guardians of a “sacred” organization. We are weeding out the heretics. Only those who are “clear” may remain. We are sincere, honest, and devoted. We are suspicious of others. “Those who are not with us are against us,” are wrong — are dangerous. We are developing a fanaticism that will be our downfall unless our course is changed.

We believe we are right, but that does not make us right nor does it say we are wrong. It only says we believe.

Believing a truth that we do not practice is as dangerous to the mind as believing a falsehood that we cannot practice. Belief alone leads to fanaticism. Abstract principles must be tested and sustained by practical, concrete experiences. These experiences are the ballast; without them the mind will flounder and sink.

Truth and honesty alone will not sustain the mind. Mental, like bodily development, depends on action.

Honest? Of course our people are honest, but that will not save them. Every fanatic is honest. If he were not honest he could not be a fanatic. An honest profound conviction is the essential element of fanaticism. Couple that conviction with sufficient experience to convert the energy to some practical purpose and your fanatic will be resolved into a man of judgement and power.

While our movement was small, practical operations were impossible, and hence fanatics developed, but now that the movement is powerful it will demand practical men and practical operations — or it will dissolve and reorganize in some practical form.

Nor must we deceive ourselves and insist that our course is right because we are happy in our belief. All people are happy in their belief

else they could not believe. When one becomes unhappy in his belief his belief changes. After all belief is a sort of resting place for the mind. Stimulate it and it becomes a conviction, put it to some practical purpose and it becomes a social passion, rob it of practicability and it leads to fanaticism.

Mob psychology is made up of the psychology of its members and will be sober, well poised, and determined if its work leads largely with practical affairs, but it will tend to fanaticism if it spends its energy in propaganda alone.

I submit that the Socialist Party spends the vast majority of its effort in propaganda and for this reason is moving toward fanaticism, as did the SLP. It will change its course. It will become more active in the labor movement and in cooperative enterprises or it will dissolve. Capitalism will be overthrown by an organization that can deliver more comforts to the people than Capitalism can deliver, or it will not be overthrown at all — talk, teach, preach, and argue as we may.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · June 2013 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.