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# What's Wrong with the Socialist Party?

by Allan L. Benson

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The Socialist Party has passed through a year of torment — a year in which applied Socialism has made such strides throughout this country and the world as few men expected to witness in so short a period.

This amazing world war has produced no greater contrast than the low ebb of the Socialist Party in the United States and the flood tide of practical Socialism. What is the matter with the Socialist Party?

Most persons believe that the troubles of the Socialist Party began at the ill-fated convention held in St. Louis 14 months ago.

I do not share this view. I regard St. Louis as a culmination rather than a cause. The forces that all but wrecked the party a year ago were in operation long before the war began, and they will kill the party unless they be destroyed.

The Socialist Party is being destroyed by a canker within itself. That canker is not pro-Germanism so much as it is anarchism. I do not believe the Socialist Party, man for man and woman for woman, is any more pro-German than the Democrat or the Republican party. I believe that all American parties are essentially American, in the sense that their members are loyal to America in this war. I believe there is an occasional traitor in each of the parties, but I do not believe the Socialist Party has any more of them, in proportion to its numbers, than has any other party.

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What has passed for pro-Germanism in the Socialist Party has usually been anarchism. The Socialist Party has always contained a minority that had no right in it. That minority has bedeviled the

party from the beginning. Scorning political action, these anarchists came out boldly for “direct action.” The ballot was of no value — sabotage was the thing. They finally became so vociferous that the party was compelled to take measures against them. Therefore, by direct vote of the party membership, the practice of sabotage and every other unlawful measure was specifically placed under the ban, and violation of the prohibition was made punishable by expulsion from the party.

Stick a pin here. Date from this moment the disaster that broke on the Socialist Party at the St. Louis convention in 1917!

At the time the prohibition against sabotage was adopted, the party had a dues-paying membership of about 125,000.

Immediately thereafter, the IWWs within the party began to sabotage the party. They did not do their sabotaging by resigning — they were too small a minority to have left many vacant places, and furthermore their resignations would have strengthened the party.

They remained in the party. But they remained in, not to help but to hurt. they stayed in, not to fight the opposition, but to fight the party from the inside. So deadly was their work that the Socialist Party, which in April 1912 had a membership of 135,000, went into the 1916 campaign with only about 65,000 dues-paying members — a number that was increased slightly as the campaign proceeded.<sup>1</sup>

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I was about to say that I had heard from a thousand locals how these IWWs within the party proceeded in their work of party destruction. During the campaign, as I traveled about the country, it was my invariable custom to inquire in each city and town as to the welfare of the local. Almost invariably, the reply was the same. There seemed to be marked increase of Socialist sentiment, but the condition of the local was bad. The membership had greatly fallen off, as compared with a few years ago. Always when I asked why, the answer was: “Well, the hell-raisers in our local made the meetings so unpleas-

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from Benson’s bizarre assertion that the *victims* of the 1912 Socialist Party purge were the ones who caused the organization to careen rightward, run off energetic new members, and atrophy, it should be noted that these membership counts are tendentious. Average paid membership in 1912 was 118,045; in 1916 the same statistic tallied 83,285. Membership in 1916 topped 103,400 in *March*, before plummeting in the second half of the year as Benson’s milquetoast Presidential campaign ground to its inevitable disheartening conclusion.

ant that the decent members wouldn't attend and finally became so far behind in heir dues that they were dropped."

I heard this story, not one time but scores of times, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Coast. And, scores of times in the preceding years, I had seen the "hell-raisers" at work in my own local. I knew their methods to a "t." I can now recall an anarchist who, years ago, was a member of my local who was typical of his kind. Quiet himself, he had a singular faculty for fomenting trouble. Like most of the IWW gentlemen, he was "long" on parliamentary law. If he could do nothing else, he could at least tangle up a meeting so that nobody else could do anything. He was also deft and deadly in interspersing proceedings with a remark here and there which led to bad feelings between others. As long as he was a member, I do not recall that the local gained a recruit.

Multiply this gentleman by some hundreds and this local by some thousands and a light begins to break as to the cause of the present condition of the Socialist Party. I was amazed when I went into the campaign of 1916. Until that year I had made it a practice to keep out of party activities, and though I knew in a general way what had followed the prohibition against sabotage, I was dumbfounded when I began to get my eyes open to the activities of the "reds." I knew they had voted solidly against me for the nomination, but I was unprepared to believe that they would carry their enmity toward me into the campaign. But they did carry it into the campaign, as I soon had reason to know.

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The "reds" determined that I should not be permitted to speak in Boston, where they happened to control the party machinery. When the National Office was making up my speaking tour the Boston gentlemen coldly declined to arrange a meeting. It so happened, however, that the state machinery was in control of Socialists, and they went over the heads of the local "reds" and arranged a meeting for me in Tremont Temple on a certain date. The reds, as soon as they learned the date, hastened to arrange a meeting of their own a few days earlier, thereby hoping to kill my meeting. It so happened that their meeting was several times too small to fill Tremont Temple, while the Temple was too small to hold the latter meeting, which indicated the

extend to which these gentlemen were willing to go to gratify their own hatred at the expense of the party.

One night as I was going to the hall where I was to speak in one of the largest cities on the Pacific Coast, George H. Goebel of New Jersey, who was traveling with me, met me almost breathlessly on the street and said: "The IWWS have a man on each street corner in the vicinity of the hall telling people not to go to our meeting. Furthermore, I have seen the program of our meeting and the IWWS who arranged it don't intend that you shall have an opportunity to be heard. they have put you on last and preceded you with so many singing societies, elocutionists, and local Socialists that you will not be put on until the crowd is ready to go home."

I would give the name of this city if I might not do injustice to somebody who was innocent enough and yet happened to be a member of the committee that arranged the meeting. At any rate, I went to the hall where the meeting was already in progress and hunted up the chairman, looked at his program, and saw that all Goebel had told me was true. Then I pulled my watch out of my pocket and told the chairman that I would be in the hall five minutes longer, during which time he would be at liberty to introduce me; otherwise at the end of five minutes I should leave. That put an end to another attempted bit of sabotage against the party. I spoke.

So much for one feature of the penalty that the Socialist Party has had to pay for defying the anarchists within its membership. I shall now speak of another phase of the anarchist taint. These gentlemen have been so vigorous and persistent in pushing their propaganda under the guise of Socialism that they have misled a good many Socialists. How often have we heard that "A workingman has no country," the idea being that in the event of war he cannot possibly care whether the country in which he lives is defeated or not. A good many men and women who believe they are good Socialists are of the opinion that they "have no country."

Now what is the origin of this belief? It did not originate with Marx. He did not believe that workingmen had no interest in the result of wars. Marx believed that the workingmen of the North and the whole world had a vital interest in the defeat of the Southern slaveholding Confederacy. Again and again Marx expressed his admiration for the work of Lincoln, and wrote to Lincoln thanking him for what he was doing in the cause of liberty. Yet if the wheels of time were suddenly to be turned 57 years backward we should see our

present-day anarchists who are masquerading as Socialists — we should see them snarling at Lincoln and, if they were consistent (which we should hardly expect them to be) declaring that Karl Marx was a scoundrel and a traitor to the working class. Yet, in the poor opinion of some of us the working class of the world has vastly more at stake in this war than it had in the Civil War of the '60s.

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I say that men and women who ought to have known better have parroted the remark that workingmen should not be concerned with the outcome of any war “except the class war.” I sometimes wonder if these gentlemen would know a class war if they were to see one. They always harp about political and industrial democracy, yet they are sulking in their tents while they might be doing something to bring it about. Surely the cause for which all real Socialists have worked is coming about with almost blinding speed. Yet because it is not coming about in the method laid down by these doctrinaires they seem unable to perceive that it is coming about and that other men are working to hasten the process while they are doing nothing — or worse than nothing.

I have shown, I believe, that these gentlemen cannot truthfully quote Marx as their authority for the statement that workingmen have no interest in any war “except the class war.” But if Marx cannot be quoted as an authority, they can truthfully quote Bakunin and Proudhon. Unfortunately for their purpose, however, Bakunin and Proudhon were anarchists.

We are now prepared to consider with some understanding the St. Louis convention [April 7-14, 1917] and to behold the eruption of the anarchist taint that had been working havoc in the party's blood since the adoption of the prohibition against sabotage. I was a delegate to that convention. I had never before attended a Socialist National Convention, but I had seen a good many national conventions of the other parties.

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Let me here and now, more than a year after the event, say that I never before saw so ugly a body of men. They met at a very trying time, it is true, but not even the time can excuse their attitude. They

acted like a lot of wild men bent upon running amuck. the anarchist faction was in the saddle, minority though it was, by result of a combination of certain foreign groups.<sup>2</sup> They seemed actually to believe that they could take this government by the throat and throw it backward. And they were openly insulting to those whom they knew differed from them. As the recent head of the national ticket I presume I might have expected in any ordinary assemblage some measure of common courtesy such as one decent man will willingly give to another, but I did not get it at St. Louis. In the hotel corridors I frequently heard unpleasant remarks. I was defeated for membership on the only important committee — the Committee on War and Militarism. And having [remained silent] for the first 4 days of the convention, when I wished to read a brief statement [which] afterwards formed the basis of the minority report, I was called sharply to order [by the chairman] under the 5-minute rule. [Technically], of course, he was right, but I [might note] that he is now in prison for obstruction [of the] draft, though he swore at his trial [that it] had been farthest from his mind to violate the law.<sup>3</sup>

As I have said, I was defeated for membership on the War Committee, yet as a delegate I often exercised the common privilege of listening to the committee's deliberations. As bearing upon the anarchist propaganda that had long been conducted within the party, I shall now relate an incident that occurred before the committee.

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A sub-committee of, I believe, three members was appointed to draft a resolution stating the party's position toward the war.<sup>4</sup> The sub-committee's report included a phrase containing the words "our country." As soon as the words were read, the anarchists on the committee moved to change "our" to "this" so that the phrase would read "this country," and followed the motion with the usual anarchist ar-

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<sup>2</sup> Exactly how this "anarchist minority" managed to obtain ratification by a margin of nearly 9-to-1 in a membership referendum of their staunchly anti-militarist resolution on the war is not explained by Benson.

<sup>3</sup> Text on original document obscured by a mailing label, best guess at missing words appears in square brackets.

<sup>4</sup> This subcommittee consisted of Morris Hillquit and Algernon Lee of the Center faction, and C.E. Ruthenberg of the Left.

guments with regard to the inability of a workingman to have a country. The suggestion was not readily accepted, and the committee actually debated for more than an hour whether the phrase should read "our country" or "this country," the anarchists finally carrying the day and making it read "this country." but in so doing they followed Proudhon the anarchist rather than Marx the Socialist. I relate the incident only to show that the disaster from which the Socialist Party is suffering did not have its beginning in St. Louis in April 1917.

At the invitation of *The New Appeal*, I shall continue in future articles consideration of the present plight of the Socialist Party. I have not written anything about the party for a year and I have considerable on my mind. For the moment I care to say only that if the Socialist Party desires to bear an honorable and an important part in the great work that for many years will go on in the world it must be a party that is and deserves to be respected.

In order to be respected, the party must be respectable. In my humble opinion it is not now respectable, nor has it been since the adoption of the St. Louis resolution. Yet the whole world is turning with increasing respect to the principles upon which the party is founded. More shame to the party that it is taking no part in the great work in which it once led all others. And the shame is the shame of the anarchists, falsely regarded as Socialists, aided and abetted by certain foreigners whose naturalization papers should be cancelled while they themselves are deported to the countries from which they came.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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