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# Why I Joined the Social Democratic League

by Allan L. Benson

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The editor of *The New Appeal* [Emanuel Haldeman-Julius] asks me to write an article telling why I joined the Social Democratic League.

Primarily, I joined the League for the same reason that years ago I joined the Socialist Party — because I am a Socialist. I am not aware that my allegiance to International Socialism has ever wavered. I am in as hearty agreement today with the Socialist Party, so far as its economic philosophy is concerned, as ever I was. I left the Socialist Party and joined the Social Democratic League because I do not agree with the party in its attitude toward the war and do agree with the League.

When I joined the Socialist Party I entered into no engagement in the event of war with Germany to do what I could to weaken the striking power of the United States while the German Socialists were doing all they could to increase the striking power of Germany.

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The Social Democratic League believes in increasing the striking power of the United States. We who are members of the League share the view of [Karl] Liebknecht that the war was launched by the militarists and the imperialists of Germany. The Socialist Party, however, shares the view of [Philipp] Scheidemann and his followers that all of the belligerents were and are equally guilty. I regard this as nonsense. The former German

ambassador to England has certified that England did her best to avert strife and that Germany did all she could to bring war.

Germany started out with a lie on her lips to raid the world. With her bloody arms full of booty she still refuses to give up her stolen goods, pay for the damage she has done, and go home. The Socialist Party of the United States declares it is in favor of peace without annexations, but it makes no effective move to prevent Germany from compelling annexations. Morris Hillquit refused to buy a Liberty bond, yet without money there could be no fighting, and without fighting there could be no peace without annexations. [Victor] Berger demanded the withdrawal of the American army in Europe, yet without an American army in Europe, there would be a smashing German victory that would drive the United States into the very jaws of militarism in self-defense.



I am a Socialist, but I cannot stand for these things. I am so much interested in Socialism that I want this war to end in such a manner that a Socialist government when established can exist. What would be the use of working for Socialism in the United States if the bloody boots of the Kaiser, von Hindenberg, and von Tirpitz were upon the necks of France, England, and Germany? Everybody knows what the Kaiser thinks of Socialists. He hates them, of course, and has said so again and again. If he had conquered Europe and taken over the French and English fleets, he would hardly be expected to tolerate a Socialist Republic in the United States, even if the Socialist Party could establish one. I want the war to end in such a manner that when people anywhere shall see fit to establish Socialist governments they will not be set upon by brutal autocracies.

Regardless of all that the Germans and the pro-Germans may say against England, I should not be afraid to trust her. England, without the slightest protest, has permitted Australia and New Zealand to establish working class governments. England is as democratic as the United States and in some respects

more so. Socialists need not fear England — or France. But a world-conquering Germany would sound the death-knell of the present Socialist movement throughout the world. It might rise again in five hundred or a thousand years, but for centuries there would be no such thing in the world as self-government. Let it be established that democratic government cannot successfully defend itself against autocratic government and there will be no more democratic government for a long while.

The Social Democratic League looks at these matters as I do. The League is a Socialist league, with the interests of Socialism at heart. The Socialist Party of the United States appears to be neutral in this war, and sometimes the effect of its neutrality has a tendency to help Germany. The League is not neutral. It is American. Its greatest desire is that the war shall end in such a manner that the world will be safe, not only for democracy but for social democracy.



Another reason why I joined the Social Democratic League is because I wish to take part in organized Socialist propaganda without being compelled to carry the handicap of the Socialist Party's bad reputation.

I can work as a member of the Social Democratic League without first being required to answer questions as to whether I agree with Hillquit that no one should buy Liberty bonds, or with Berger that the American army should be withdrawn from Europe.

The mere fact that I am a member of the Social Democratic League is notice to all and sundry that, while I am a Socialist, I do not agree with Hillquit and Berger with regard to the war.

Inasmuch as Hillquit and Berger are very cordially hated throughout the United States, the task of advocating Socialism is much simplified by separating it from Hillquit and Berger.

And why should there not be such a separation? Hillquit and Berger are not Socialism. I do not have to endorse them to endorse it. Each of them has strayed far from the field of Social-

ism. I do not know that even Scheidemann ever demanded withdrawal of the German army from France or refused to buy a German war bond. On the contrary, Scheidemann has voted for every bond issue, knowing that each bond issue was intended to provide the funds with which to keep the German armies in France.

When Hillquit and Berger out Scheidmann Scheidemann I decline to accept their pronouncements on Socialism. I turn to the Social Democratic League in its agreement with Liebknecht that the Kaiser and what he stands for should be put down.

I am interested in the success of the League because I fear that unless the League shall become firmly established during the war, there will be nothing left after the war to represent Socialism in the United States.



All except the blind can see what is happening to the Socialist Party. last year there was a little flush of fever that was mistaken for health, but the flush lasted no longer than it was necessary for the new "Socialists" to realize that the party could not stop the war, and now the party is as pale as a ghost. The party organ [*The American Socialist*] has all but faded away, and the New York Call is rapidly following in its wake.<sup>1</sup> Party meetings in New York are very poorly attended. Party members expect a poor vote this fall, though of this I am not so sure, although Hillquit's ridiculous vote in New York will not of course be approximated. But i believe the vote will decline to the end of the war and then collapse. It can hardly do otherwise. The party is hopelessly discredited before the American people. Moreover, it has lost nearly all of the agencies it once had for reaching the people. Of all the writers who once urged the cause of the Socialist Party and reckoned millions, not one remans. The Socialist Party has not a writer left who has or ever had an audience of respectable size. Even Lucien Sanial, the gray-haired old patri-

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<sup>1</sup> Owing to the Wilson administration's banning of both these newspapers from the mails, it must be added.

arch who always used to sit on the stage at Madison Square Garden, New York, at Socialist meetings and receive the plaudits of the younger generation, has resigned from the party, not because he is no longer a Socialist, but because he is too much of a Socialist to remain in a party dominated by Hillquit and Berger.



I went out of the Socialist Party and into the Social Democratic League for the same general reason that 20 years ago Debs and others went out of the Socialist Labor Party and into the present Socialist Party.<sup>2</sup> Debs felt that the old organization was not well adapted to the propagation of Socialism, because of certain shortcomings and inefficiencies. I feel that the Socialist Party is not well adapted to the propagation of Socialism for reasons that I have here and elsewhere tried to make plain. I go into the Social Democratic League because, so far as its Socialist faith is concerned, it stands for what I have always stood and still stand. In addition the League takes what I conceive to be the proper position toward the war. The League takes a position that enables a member of it to advocate Socialism not only with self-respect, but with the respect of the public.

And there is little use of trying to do anything in this world without the respect of the public. It is easy enough to point to William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, and Wendell Phillips as unpopular exponents of a cause that afterward became popular. An unpopular cause becomes popular only when it becomes generally apparent that the cause is right. Who hopes to live long enough to see the people of this country declare that Berger and Hillquit and the Socialist Party of America were right in their views as to the world war? Whoever has such hopes but deceives himself when he indulges them. So long as Berger, Hillquit, and the present American Socialist Party are remem-

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene V. Debs was never a member of the Socialist Labor Party. He was first a Democrat, then a member of the People's Party, then a member of the Social Democracy of America, a faction of which split to become the Social Democratic Party of America. It was this organization that was one of the principles in the formation of the Socialist Party of America in 1901.

bered they will be remembered as having gone wrong in the great war. I am willing to rest the case of the Socialists who left the Socialist Party and launched the Social Democratic League to the judgment of history. Form the first moments at St. Louis we tried to keep the party right as we saw the right. Never then nor since have we recanted our beliefs in Socialism as we have always understood and still understand it. Nor have we ever for a moment been guilty of maintaining an attitude of neutrality during this war. Regarding Germany as the aggressor we have been [and to the] shall be end against her.<sup>3</sup>

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[We have] not the remotest idea what the Social Democratic League is destined to [amount] to.<sup>4</sup> It is an attempt to organize the Socialist sentiment of the United States upon a self-respecting basis. If we have not the wit to organize it, others will do so. The sentiment covers the land as the sunshine mantles the earth. Organized it will become effective. But it can never be organized by those who, because of their war attitude, are so despised that the truth, uttered by them, is received as if it were a lie. When the administration is compelled to take steps against what it calls the “mob spirit,” even the present leaders of the Socialist Party should be able to perceive that the people of the United States have only unutterable hatred of anything and everything in this country at this time that is mild to Germany and harsh to America.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*  
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<sup>3</sup> Text on original document obscured by mailing label, best guess in brackets.

<sup>4</sup> Text on original document obscured by mailing label, best guess in brackets.