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# The Split in the Socialist Party.

by Joseph B. Stilson †

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The history of the split in the Socialist Party really begins in 1916, when Allan Benson was named as standard-bearer for the party. This man, as candidate for President of the United States, travelling through the country agitating for his election, never in his speeches mentioned by as much as a half word the class struggle. On the contrary, his advocacy had nothing in common with Socialism. I remember the newspaper report of his speech in Cleveland, Ohio, where to the question “why does he not speak about the class struggle instead of talking only about votes of the citizens and the whole lot of ‘good’ he is going to do when he is elected President?” he answered, “The present is no time to talk of such things as the class struggle.”

The elections, as we know, gave sad results, the number of Socialist votes declining to half the number cast for Comrade Debs in 1912. At the same time the party members whose brains were not filled with such “socialism” as that which was “established” by Berger and his friends in Milwaukee, began to look for means whereby the party could be set on a better foundation, giving it class character cleared of the petty bourgeois hash which was flourished not only in the party’s platform, but in all of its literature and at all of its meetings. But how was it to be done?

Everyone interested in the earlier part of the American labor movement remembers well the “order” that prevailed in the party: in every nook there was a “boss,” every “boss” had his own organ, and every organ advocated new “socialism.” The new “edu-

cation” was spread both among the party members and the working masses in general. The party itself hardly printed any literature at all. It was satisfied with the distribution of “private” literature, which often elucidated questions in such manner that the European socialist (even the “centrist” German!), after coming to this country and learning its language, would read a pamphlet on the possibilities of Ford “Socialism,” or a pamphlet urging that the capitalist government must become the owner of the trusts (as if it were not already a tool of the trusts), or a pamphlet proving that the party candidates, when elected to the City Council will “ease the life of the working class” by decreasing the prices of food, clothing, transportation, through city ownership of water works, milk depots, electric plants, street car systems, etc., the immigrant Socialist would cry out: “In the country of dollars the Socialists are of the dollar kind also! Their party will never rise if it continues to follow to these old tracks.”

## Capitalism Breeds Revolutionists.

Of course, the capitalistic system itself is breeding the revolutionists. To fence the Socialist Party so that the revolutionists could not enter was the task which the party officers could not quite accomplish. And on account of the party’s dilapidated machinery and steadily declining influence among the working class, not only was dissatisfaction growing among the members, but the revolutionary elements in the fall of

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1916 became so bold that they openly dared to raise their voices against such persons as Benson, Berger, Goebel, and others who spoke the name of the Socialist Party to advocate the “Socialism” of Bismarck. But these revolutionary elements of the party confronted a quite delicate question. Something had to be done immediately if the party was to be saved not only from the clutches of persons who have nothing in common with the political action (in the real sense of the word) of the working class, but from its complete dilapidation as well.

The entire political machinery of the party was in the hands of the opportunists: the entire press was also in their hands. They held not only the party reins, but the means of communication as well. Then what could be done by the members who saw in the activity of the leaders, in the party tactics, and even in its principles only peril to the labor movement, only the useless waste of energy and money for the “agitation and propaganda” for offices in government institutions for the benefit of individual persons? The hope still entertained by some that Socialist “representatives” in the government had some importance disappeared like a dream during the term in which Meyer London sat in the Congress and blew the horn of “democracy.” At that time somewhat sharper criticism had appeared also against the German “socialism” — that “socialism” which for years and years had inspired all opportunists.

Knowing that the party would never renounce its opportunistic, petty-bourgeois position while the reins remained in the hands of the persons who advertised in their papers (for money) the candidates of the corrupt capitalist parties (as Berger did in the Milwaukee Leader), or such who were showing their “loyalty” to the “working class” by having their photographs taken in soldier’s uniform and printing them in the campaign leaflets (as former Socialist Mayor of Minneapolis Van Lear did) — the revolutionary elements realized that it was possible to fight against such reactionary rule in the party *only by organizing the revolutionary forces for the benefit of revolutionary Socialism*. The beginning of this work was made by Boston Comrades who organized the Socialist Propaganda League, out of which the present Left Wing Section of the Socialist Party grew. And through this Propaganda League issued a program, which from the standpoint

of the opportunists is “treason of the party,” yet the “socialists” of the Berger kind *did not suspend* the creators of this League, or their members, or those who accepted the program of this League, thinking, probably, that the creators of this League were but a few “fanatics” and “strutters” whose shoutings would not last. But these “modern socialists” have “divined” the sentiment of the rank and file just as Wilhelm II did his fate... The initiators of the League not only did not lose their “spirit,” but on the contrary the revolutionary thought in the party kept growing and growing.

### **War Makes Socialists Turn to the Left.**

In the meanwhile the war came. The masses became restless. Individual members of the party and entire branches began to demand from the party officers an answer to the question raised by “democracy.” Something had to be done, because silence on the part of the opportunists would take the party machinery out of their hands. In order to save their “authority” from going into bankruptcy, the opportunists convoked the famous convention at St. Louis and there betrayed the members of the Socialist Party by feigning that they had become radical. Their fear was that the party might turn still more radical (read Berger’s confession in Judge Landis’ Court at Chicago), and they secretly hoped to turn the party back again into the old ruts as soon as the “heat” of the “fanatics” was gone. They accomplished this splendidly during the time of greatest reaction by announcing that the party members should read the St. Louis platform “according to their views.” But they made a mistake again. It is true, there were many members who acted indeed according to their own personal “views.” However, the “spirit” of the radicals not only did not evaporate, but on the contrary, it captured still greater numbers of the party members than before.

Then the Russian, German, and Hungarian Revolutions placed squarely before the party the clear question: *will the party go with the reactionary elements, which during the entire period of the war have so earnestly worked for the bourgeoisie, or will it go with that Socialist movement, which the worst reaction of the four years has failed to destroy?* To answer this question a party convention was necessary. But the National Executive Committee did not see any reason for calling

the convention, explaining through the mouth of Germer that the “regular” convention is coming next year (for the election of candidates to the governmental offices) and it will be possible to solve there “all such” questions; and if the convention should be called now, it would be a hard thing even to cover the expenses....

What is the secret of this refusal to call the convention? It is this: *The Left Wing in the party might send to the convention the majority of delegates and put the party in a position as fearful to the opportunistic “modernists” as it is the hell to the believer. The Left elements would unite the party with the European Communists, so hateful to Victor Berger & Co., and still worse, this convention might arrive at the conclusion that no place could be spared in the party to the brothers of Phillip Scheidemann. In order to fool the party members the National Executive Committee planned the “Amnesty” convention instead of the party convention, and “found” money to pay Mahlon Barnes \$50.00 a week and his wife an additional \$25.00 a week for the “preliminary arrangements” of the convention. They thought everything would be smoothed out in this way.* In their scheme to call the “amnesty” convention, the party officers *renounced even its class character*, they decided to call the convention not in the name of the party but in the name of some colorless league and they invited for its organizers even such elements as officers of the American Federation of Labor (who never answered the invitation) and of the People’s Council (which but recently refused to allow Comrade Debs to make a speech, which adopted the Wilsonian “Fourteen Points”), etc. — yet the party members earnestly desiring to free the prisoners, in the absence of the opportunity to discuss the question of an “Amnesty” Convention more fully, at first did not oppose such decision of the NEC, at least to any extent.

### **Protest Sending Delegates to Berne.**

Entirely different, however, was the sending of delegates to the conference of social-traitors at Berne. The National Executive Committee was vigorously denounced in this instance even while in session in January. At the time this decision was made, I myself participated in the session and strongly protested against such conduct of the NEC, pointing out that our party,

if not in fact then at least in theory, held a somewhat cleaner position than the traitors of working class interests — Scheidemann, Ebert, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Henderson, Thomas, Guesde, and other “socialists” of this kind. I stated that the Russian and German Communist parties are calling their conference at Moscow for the purpose of creating the Third International. Then National Secretary Germer proudly stated that no one knows about such a conference being called at Moscow and that Stilson is taking his news from the capitalistic papers (as if he was “taking” his news about the conference of social-traitors from any source other than the same capitalist papers!)

As soon as the party members learned that the National Executive Committee decided to join the American Socialist Party to the yellow socialists in Europe, they began to send from everywhere the strongest protests against this decision of the Committee — not only against the wasting of money on the pleasure ride of a couple of opportunists but also because it would bring the greatest shame upon the Socialist movement in this country; they demanded not only the recall of this decision of the committee, but at the same time to help the real Socialists of Europe to establish the Third International. But the NEC, consisting in the majority of people who understand Socialism not a bit better than does William Jennings Bryan, having in its hands the party machinery and understanding well its power, again decided to ignore the demands of the membership, still hoping that the revolutionary spirit would disappear and all would soon be well.

### **Officialdom Beaten in Elections.**

It is true it took some time for that spirit to assert itself. But it did assert itself. The returns of the elections of the officers of the party have shown that the opportunists were beaten into the dust, that the party management was taken away from them. And, mark you, they are “grown men,” as Goebel says, and know that they can dictate the party’s position just so long as the party management is in their hands. *Therefore they decided to oppose the will of the membership at any cost.* And for that purpose there was but one means — force. Immediately after incidents in New York became known, where the opportunists asked the po-

lice to throw all the Left Socialists out of a meeting — a *Socialist* meeting. Secretary Germer went to New York on a “visit”... The results of this “visit” were that immediately after his return to Chicago, reports came that both English and foreign language branches which had joined the Left Wing were thrown out of the New York state organization....

On May 24 of this year there was a session of the NEC in Chicago. The secretary of local New York and member of the state executive committee came to it “without invitation” as he said himself and as Germer confirmed. Now, what did he come for? He came to vindicate the conduct of New York local and the New York state Executive Committee in eliminating from the party several thousand members. Everybody knows that only the State itself has a constitutional right to expel members, no one has given such right to the NEC, and therefore the purpose of Gerber’s coming was something else.

For one thing, he said *that one member of the Executive Committee of local New York always attended the meetings of various branches where the elections of any party officers were in progress and saw to it that the branches were voting “properly”! In other words, he put on the branches the usual reactionary paw of the corrupt politicians of Tammany Hall.* But notwithstanding the fact that the “election boss” at the meeting was watching the branch so that it would vote “properly,” *many branches unanimously voted for the candidates of the Left Wing and the opportunists were defeated even in such a center of social-patriotism as New York!* Then what could be expected from places where the votes were not “sure?” All this was explained by Gerber in his hour and a half speech. He called the attention of the NEC especially to the fact that the most ballots for the Left Wing candidates were cast by foreign speaking branches; that they had “steering committees” to indicate how to vote (he almost forgot his “report” of just a few minutes before that he was sending his “representatives” to the branches to “watch” that they should vote “properly”).

Then followed the report of National Secretary Germer. He remarked at the outset that the Russian, Lithuanian, and some other foreign language Federations during the last few months were growing so rapidly that it was simply awful, a growth very “unnatural”; the Russian Federation had grown from a couple

of thousand members to eight thousand; Lithuanian, from three and a half to over six thousand, etc. And this meant nothing else but a desire on the part of the leaders of these Federations to drive into the party numbers of “heads” by the help of whom “they could seize the Socialist Party of America.” Therefore he asked the committee to do something “to prevent the Left Wingers from taking possession of the party.”

### **Michigan Expelled Without Trial.**

After some time he presented to the NEC the charge against the Michigan organization because it allowed the membership to have the referendum vote of the decision of the convention to repeal all reformistic demands in the State platform. In that charge and in supplement to it (everything in the official report!) Germer chided the Left-wingers so much that even Shiplacoff, the King of the Avanturists, advised omission of some parts as “not pertaining to the report.” But the main point was this: Michigan state voted for the Left Wing candidates — several thousand votes. Therefore, without any ceremony, without paying any attention to the fact that the motion to repeal the reformistic demands in the platform of Michigan state organization was under process of a referendum vote in the State and that it might be rejected yet, which was plainly pointed out by the members of the NEC Comrades Wagenknecht and Katterfeld — this did not stop the reactionaries bent on holding the reins of the party’s management in their hands at any price. They refused even to give a chance to the Comrades of Michigan state to explain or vindicate themselves — *they eliminated the entire organization by a single stroke of the pen. And only the fool can fail to understand that this elimination was directed not for the protection of the party Constitution but for the purpose of throwing out the votes undesirable to the opportunists, because the members of the NEC had admitted themselves that they had no knowledge whether the Michigan state organization would accept this amendment or not.*

But this is not all.

Seven members of the NEC, having disposed of the Michigan organization, with a chance to “be close” to the election returns, learned in some mysterious way that the elimination of Michigan state alone *was not*

*sufficient to change the results of the voting. They decided to suspend all elections on the supposed ground that some frauds had been practiced in balloting. Where was the evidence of these "frauds"? Do you suppose they were in local New York, where Gerber, the "election boss," or his "representative" attended the branch meetings and watched to see that they did not vote for the candidates opposed to the reactionary machine? Not at all! The "frauds" appeared in the fact that the Left Wing branches paid no attention to the "election bosses" and voted as a unit for the Left candidates and the master-opportunists were left without a single vote in some places and in locals even right under their own noses!*

### **Cry of "Fraud" Only a Cloak.**

And this is the whole secret of the "frauds." In reality these "frauds" were the cloak of the hideous purpose of the officials: *to remain in power beyond the time allowed by the Constitution* (July 1st). And for the solution of the "great crisis in the party" they decided to call the National convention which will "decide the truthfulness" of the charges. This "truthfulness" will be reported to the convention by Opportunists appointed by Opportunists — "the investigation committee," as they call it. But even this is not the end of the dirty work of the seven reactionists.

When they suspended the party election, they noticed that plenty of Left elements were in the party who might *seriously* examine the *truthfulness* of the elections *even at the party convention*. This was evident to them from election returns, which were nearly complete. Suppose the branches sent to the convention a majority of delegates who did not belong to the machine of the master-officials? Would it not be necessary for the seven reactionary members of the NEC to suspend themselves?

Think of it! These men have brains! They reason coolly! All this was said most plainly by George Goebel — the Thirty Year Socialist — when the time came for so-called discussion of the protest of seven language Federations against the elimination from the party of the branches belonging to those Federations by the New York local and state executive committees because they adopted the program of the Left Wing. Instead of discussing what was to be done to the New York reactionaries, committeeman Krafft — that man

"who has done nothing and was imprisoned" as was truly stated by his friends. James Oneal made a motion to suspend the seven Federations "until further notice." And when Comrades Wagenknecht and Katterfeld pointed out the silliness of such "procedure," Goebel said: "I would feel far better if at the present moment...I were not a member of the NEC. But if we do not suspend them [the Federations] *they will crowd the convention with their delegates and seize the Socialist Party of America....*"

### **Suspension of Seven Socialist Federations.**

And therefore, in order that their "glorious work" of "protecting the party from ruin and disintegration" should not be in vain; in order that the coming convention might surely adopt their resolution by which they eliminated the Michigan State organization and suspend the entire election of the party; *in order to arrange matters before hand so that the convention might be attended by a majority of the kind of delegates desired by the reactionaries — they suspended seven Federations with over thirty thousand membership because they favored the Left Wing.*

That these politicians knew that the Left Wing had been in existence for over two years was frankly admitted by Goebel, who said that he kept on his files a copy of each manifesto, program, and paper of the Left wingers. It was evident therefore that the Left Wing was tolerated as long as it did not threaten the control of the reactionary machine; so long as their programs were not considered as "offense" against the party law. *Only when the Left Wing touched the nest of the Opportunists did it become a "violation of the party Constitution."*

In connection with the suspension of the language federations let me say that the National Constitution says that the language branches *under no circumstances* shall act contrary to the platforms and constitutions of local and state organizations. I asked this reactionary committee: how do they know that the branches of language federations concur with the resolution of the Michigan state convention to repeal the reformistic demands in the platform of the state? They may be obeying it under COMPULSION because the National Constitution compels them to obey. Are these branches to be eliminated because they OBEY the

National Constitution?

### So-Called “Protectors” Split the Party.

Thus the “protectors of the unity of the party” have split the party. But are they sure that they will be able to dominate in the coming convention? No. After the session was over, I chanced to speak with Goebel, Holt, and Germer. To my question: “What are they going to do with those locals of the Left Wing which they ‘forgot’ to eliminate,” *they replied that they would see about it; they intended to eliminate the Boston and Cleveland locals and if necessary all the Left-wingers. Therefore one thing is sure: they will keep on eliminating until there will be no one in the party to oppose them.*

Shiplacoff, who “believes in left wing socialism” (so he said), was continually repeating the question: “If there is any other way out.... if there is any.... show it to us!” I did show it to him: *“keep your noses out of the party’s affairs, which can be solved ONLY by the convention and the referendum vote, and that will be the best way out. But if that is unpleasant for you, there is another way: go to the Labor Party, which Stedman said he was not afraid to join, and leave the Socialist Party in peace. It will take care of its own interests and will find the way out.”*

These gentlemen evidently intend to do this. Because they decided to incorporate even the party’s building so that in case the “fanatics” should win at the convention that building *“should not come into the hands of the party of one of its factions but it should be a socialist institution for the benefit of American Socialism”* (!) (statement by Goebel). And for this “benefit

of American Socialism” the building bought for the party with money donated by the membership is given by these seven persons to nine directors (three of whom are appointed for nine years) *who cannot be controlled by the party membership at all; even the NEC itself will have no power to recall the majority of the board directorate during a period of two years!* Why has the NEC abridged their own “rights?” Was this also “in the interest of the party?” No. It is evident that they fear that in case they lose their “ground” at the coming convention it will not be possible for them to regain control of the party machinery for at least two years!

This shows that the *Right Wing* is bent on controlling also the party’s property. And if the membership of the party is not quick enough to expel these dictators of the Kolchak type, we may expect the realization of Stedman’s plan: The “Socialist” Party will unite with the “Labor Party.”

The Left Wing Socialists must organize, gather their forces for the final battle, *to take the party machinery from the hands of the reactionaries and place it in the ranks of the Communist parties of Europe, or to organize a new party in which there will be no place for the yellow friends of Scheidemann and Martov!*

Down with the fakers of the working class, the pseudo-socialists, misleaders! Long live the Left Wing!

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(Editor’s Note: The *Ohio Socialist* and the Socialist Party of Ohio firmly believe that the Left Wing will capture the Socialist Party at the coming National Convention, August 30, and that there will be no need of organizing a new party).

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

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