

---

# Left or Right?

by Ludwig Lore

Published in *The Class Struggle* [New York], v. 3, no. 3 (Aug. 1919), pp. 257-264.

In discussing the situation that prevails in the Socialist Party of the United States at the present time it is hardly accurate to refer to the two parties to the controversy as Left and Right, at least in the European sense of those terms. The American Socialist movement has had, in the crisis through which it has just passed, no large and decisive group that would correspond to the European Right Wing, to the Schneidemanns and Davids and Suedekums in Germany, to the Plekhanovs and Breshkovskayas in Russia, to the Renaudels and Thomases in France, and the Hyndmans in England. The small group of bona-fide social-patriots that our movement harbored have either left it voluntarily or have been expelled from membership in the Socialist Party. The few who remain are, so far as influence in the party is concerned, a negligible quantity.

The political sins of the American "Right Wing" have been sins of omission rather than of commission. Its great fault lay in its failure to act at a time when action meant life and growth to the party, in failing to crystallize the tremendous anti-war sentiment that existed in the country at the time of our entrance into the European war into a great mass movement for political and economic liberation. It failed, miserably, to live up to its tenets. It was theoretically in opposition to the war, and yet allowed Meyer London again and again to vote in direct opposition to the avowed stand of the party when war-measures came up in Congress — nay more, it vehemently insisted upon his renomination for office against the more determined element in the party, on the principle that even a rotten Socialist Congressman is better than none. It greeted the first Russian revolution with a tremendous demonstration and remained discreetly silent when a socialist government was established in Russia, until

sentiment in Washington seemed so friendly to the Bolshevik regime that our leaders on the Executive Committee felt constrained to drop their attitude of "watchful waiting" and to adopt an open declaration of allegiance to the Soviet government.

When the Allied governments dropped their first friendly overtures and came out openly for Russian intervention, the membership of the Socialist Party seethed with indignation and even the bourgeois liberal press adopted a policy of open opposition. But our Executive Committee contented itself with a few perfunctory protests.

The cessation of hostilities has in no wise changed the situation. The party has made no attempt to arouse public opinion against the fraud of the Peace Conference in Paris. There has been no concerted move to restore free speech and free press and to prevent the passage of new and even more stringent repressive legislation. The nation is on the eve of a permanent compulsory military service — and as yet no definite policy has been adopted, no plan of action decided upon.

Our friends of the "Right" have called attention to the fact that hundreds of Socialist Party members are in jail, that almost the whole National Executive Committee is under indictment. Undoubtedly, there has been no lack of personal courage. Our leaders have delivered splendid speeches of protest and denunciation in the face of the Espionage Law. But these sacrifices were like slaps on the water, ineffectual because there was no organized movement behind them. The members of the NEC were ready to risk their own persons in the fray; but they placed the party organization in a defensive position, fearing to sacrifice its prestige and its opportunities as a political party by radical action.

Where state organizations possessing the cour-

age of their convictions took up the fight against American militarism openly, as, for instance, in Ohio, the attitude of the party leaders was, to say the least, frankly discouraging.

Their policy, throughout the critical period through which we are passing, has been the typical "Centrist" position. Compromise everywhere, condoning the outrages committed by social patriots, on one hand, making occasional concessions to the party membership which clamored for more revolutionary methods on the other.

• • • • •

The conflict that is now raging within the party is not a local, or even a national, matter. The Socialist movement of the world has split asunder. There are two international Socialist organizations representing two irreconcilable extremes in socialist philosophy. Between the International at Berne and the International of Moscow there can be no compromise and no understanding. The former represents a policy of State Socialism, of gradual growth and evolution into a socialist commonwealth, of "democratic cooperation" with capitalism until the time shall have arrived when the actual majority of the people shall have become converted to socialist ideals and shall place political supremacy into the hands of the Socialist Party. The latter is founded upon the dictatorship of the proletariat. It insists that to the proletariat which fights the battles of the revolution belong the fruits thereof, that the class-conscious working class must wrest the political power out of the hands of the capitalist class in order to establish an economic democracy under the actual control of those who produce. It believes that socialism can not be realized by purely political methods; that the masses must be trained to appreciate and understand the necessity of decisive action at the critical moment. It openly disavows the accepted capitalist notion of "democracy" in political institutions and insists that socialism is possible only when the rule of the capitalist and his power to influence the thoughts and actions of large masses of the people has been destroyed.

Between these two points of view there can be no compromise. Between them the Socialist must choose — and his choice must determine, once and

for all, his course of action. Yet that is exactly what our party as an organization has refused to do. It was prevented from sending delegates to Berne, not by its own patriots who controlled it, but by a merciful fate in the shape of the US Government. It is equally ready to cooperate with the more radical wing of the international movement; rejoices in the success of the Soviets of Russia and mourns the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.

This same policy of straddling, of begging every question until circumstances force a decision has dominated the party ever since it has become a recognized force in this country. And that is particularly true of its treatment of organized labor. For decades the Socialist Party has realized that the policy of the American Federation of Labor condemns the organized working class to economic ineffectuality. It has seen that the failure — nay, the refusal — of the AF of L leaders to organize the unskilled laborers must eventually cut the throat of organized labor itself. It supported, in theory, a system of industrial unionism to replace the system of craft unions that was keeping Mr. Gompers and other clever demagogues in power at the head of the American labor movement. It adopted a policy of boring from within, of educating the membership of the labor union movement without attacking its leaders. It refused to take sides in labor disputes, fearing to support radical insurgents against the domination of AF of L leaders, lest by so doing it alienate the membership.

What has this policy accomplished? The element to which we have catered for years, the progressive leaders who were to become a force for socialism in the labor movement, flocked to the support of American militarism as soon as the war broke out, and today are the mainstay of the new Labor Party. After more than 20 years of "boring from within," Gompers was re-elected at the Atlantic City convention with one dissenting vote — that of a Westerner who stood in no connection with the radical or socialist labor movement.

Undoubtedly the propaganda work of the socialist movement has had its effect upon the working class of the country. The determined language in which organized labor speaks today, the astonishing demands that are being made of the government by the railroad workers, the most conservative of all organizations, are

the fruits of the seed that were sown by our speakers and our literature in the past. But we have been so completely out of touch with the revolution that has been going on within the AF of L that we are as astounded by the new turn affairs have taken as the capitalist class itself. The Socialist Party which should have led and directed a movement of such enormous promise, is condemned to impotence because it stood idly by allowing the ferment of discontent to break its own channels through the wall of conservatism that surrounded the American labor movement. With the cooperation and leadership of a determined and aggressive Socialist Party, the step that has just been taken by the railway workers could become the beginning of a great class-conscious movement of the masses. Without its leadership it lacks driving and directing force and will peter out into a thousand channels of capitalist politics.

We have all of us heard the argument that elected Socialist officials will be no better than the others, once they are in power. It seemed an easy question to answer and yet in it lies the secret of our lack of success among the American working class. The American workingman is not interested in politics. To him it is a game of chance, in which the winner collects the spoils. Generations of political corruption have engrafted upon his mind the idea that it is useless to hope for reform from the elected lawmaking bodies. He meets all political parties with a skepticism that has become so much a part of his nature that it is almost impossible to overcome it. By our insistence upon the purely political character of the socialist movement we have put ourselves in his eyes on a level with the other parties. By our refusal to become a driving and directing force in his struggle for economic betterment, the only movement whose aims and purposes he appreciates and understands, we have alienated ourselves completely from the actual class struggle between capital and labor.

• • • • •

These things are not new. But the upheaval of the Socialist International, and the price the European movements have paid for their failure to grow with the times in which they live, make rigid self-examination at this time imperative. Capitalist society stands

on the brink of ruin. The mad havoc that the last years have wrought depleted the world of its resources. Capitalist methods of production are powerless to meet the situation. High prices and wanton profiteering are arousing the people in every country of the world to a blind fury. Strikes are breaking out everywhere and are being fought out with a tenacity of purpose and a degree of determination that bodes ill for the master class. The young men who have returned from the front have little patience with pleas for moderation and compromise. They have learned their lesson well, and are ready to get what they want, fearlessly, without regard to consequences.

Is the Socialist Party ready to meet the new situation? Is it prepared to satisfy the need of the dissatisfied masses for self-expression? Can it crystallize this dissatisfaction, this spirit of unrest, into a class-conscious, purposeful movement?

For decades the socialist movement of the world has predicted the coming of a great world war. Yet when it came, five years ago, it found the international socialist movement totally unprepared. The leaders of socialist thought in Europe and in this country as well had always side-stepped a discussion of the problems that such a war would bring. They had sworn opposition to warfare, and yet failed to determine what form this opposition should take. They had decried nationalism and yet built up their movements on an essentially nationalistic basis. The demands of a small revolutionary minority for clearness of purpose and a definite program of action were discouraged and derided, because it was feared that the integrity and oneness of the socialist movement might be shattered upon the rocks of such a discussion.

Just as opposition to national wars, as the culmination and expression of capitalist international competition, is one of the fundamental principles of modern socialism, so the overthrow of the capitalist class has been its final aim. Toward this aim the socialist movement has been working with the same delightful vagueness of purpose that characterized its opposition to war. Questions as to the methods by which capitalist society was to be overthrown were answered by evasions. We were preparing to fight out the social revolution at the ballot box. There were those who insisted upon the necessity of training the proletariat in the use of more powerful weapons, who favored the

propagation of the political general strike and political mass action. But they were decried as irresponsible agitators who were bent on wrecking the party.

Then came the war. It wrecked the socialist movement of the International more effectively than this could have been done by a thousand irresponsible agitators. In Russia, in Germany, in Austria, and in Hungary the war was followed by a revolution. These revolutions were not political in character, i.e., they were not directly precipitated by political oppression. They were, essentially, a protest against unbearable economic conditions, the outgrowth of the bankruptcy of capitalism in these countries. These revolutions placed the socialist movement, which had everywhere assumed the leadership, abruptly before the alternative it had so sedulously refused to consider. It was forced to choose between a system of socialized capitalism, under a "democratic" form of government from which is to evolve, by a gradual process, the socialist state, or immediate expropriation of capital by a dictatorship of the proletariat. And at that moment, when the socialist movement most needed unity and harmony, it was torn by dissension and internal strife. Thousands of comrades in Russia, in Hungary, and in Germany have been forced to pay with their lives for the refusal of the socialist movement to determine its position before the great crisis had arrived. Meanwhile, we here in America, instead of learning from these tragedies, would go calmly on, legislating socialism into existence, electing Congressmen and Aldermen, who barter socialist principles for capitalist reforms, appealing for justice to capitalist courts. The protests of those who have learned from happenings in Europe were crushed under the weight of the prestige of our party leaders and the consistent opposition of the party press. They felt the need for reorientation within the party, but found all avenues of approach to the rank and file of the organization closed. Their principles were often confused, their conceptions vague; they had no definite program to offer the party membership in opposition to the hitherto generally accepted standards. An organization of these revolutionary elements within the party, for the sole purpose of conducting the propaganda of their principles, had become essential. There is nothing in the constitution of the Socialist Party that forbids such an organization. In Switzerland, where the revolutionary element in the party

organized so-called Communist groups within the organization, these groups were expressly permitted by the National Party Executive Committee, so long as they did not affiliate with elements outside the party organization; and the same holds true for the parties in France, Italy, Great Britain. In the Socialist Party of America the insurgent element was suspended by a ruthless party autocracy. As soon as the first steps toward the formation of Left Wing groups within the party were taken, the entire machinery of the party went into action. Local New York suspended whole branches for support of the Left Wing. The State Executive Committee decided to suspend, and did suspend, all locals that supported the Left Wing. An appeal coming from Local Kings County, the largest of the suspended locals, for a referendum was ignored for months. In the interests of party harmony it seemed necessary to the party authorities of the state of New York to prevent these Left Wing locals from sending their delegates to the National Convention that is to take place at the end of August. To this end the demand of an excluded local to demand a referendum of the party membership of the state was taken up for consideration only after the elections for the National Convention were already under way. When the referendum that will settle the fate of the suspended locals has been taken, the convention will be a thing of the past, and the possibility of influencing its decisions by revolutionary delegations frustrated. With the same laudable purpose in view, our National Executive Committee has suspended entire Language Federations and state organizations. The leaders of the party, state, local, and national have precipitated a breach in the party that might have been avoided.

For, as a matter of fact, the rank and file of the party is completely in sympathy with the purposes and aims of the Left Wing movement. Those who are more closely in touch with the American working class sense the mental revolution it has undergone. The party membership, from the start, has shown an instinctive loyalty to and sympathy with the Bolshevik revolution and the Spartan uprisings. Even the leaders of the "Right Wing" feel this and are setting all sails to catch the wind of popular opinion. They are preparing to adopt a declaration promising open support to the movement for industrial unionism. The NEC recently sent Comrade Shiplacoff to the National Con-

vention of the WIIU, promising this offspring and ward of the SLP the active support of the SP and confessing that the party had seen the error of its ways.

At the National Convention, which has been carefully expurgated of all uncomfortably revolutionary elements by these wholesale exclusions and suspensions, a revolutionary-sounding program will be drawn up, full of promises of brotherhood and affection for our comrades in Russia, in Hungary, and in Germany. But they will refuse to break with their old policy of “purely political” propaganda. They will continue to discourage everything that looks like mass action. They will refuse to support the program of revolutionary action based upon the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is the content and essence of these proletarian revolutionary movements. They will allow themselves to become enthusiastic over the achievements and the heroism of the Communist Parties in Europe without committing the party in this country to a course that will enable us to emulate their example. And the methods which are the basis of communist activity in Europe will still be condemned by the same Socialist Party of America as anarchistic, syndicalistic, and un-socialistic.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

*Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.*