
Regeneration of Party Depends on Convention: Dissension on Points Raised by World Events Must Be Ended by Clear Cut Stand before Real Work Can Be Resumed — New Split Seen Possible

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The convention of the Socialist Party that meets in Detroit on June 25 [1921] will be, in many ways, the most important gathering in the history of the movement since the Unity Convention at Indianapolis 20 years ago, when the Socialist Party was formed.

The questions that are to come before the convention are not only the problems that arise out of American conditions, but also those troubling Socialist Parties the world over. It is not true, as some assert, that enemies of the Socialist movement have conspired to keep the eager masses from the revolutionary position they are clamoring for; nor is it true that the clamor for such a revolutionary position is inspired solely by government agents and detective spies.

Everywhere in the world the fundamentals of the Socialist movement are being tested; masses of workers who up to very recently unhesitatingly followed the old-style leadership are now critically examining it and questioning whether it leads anywhere.

The convention will find a party face to face with serious questions that involve the very existence of a Socialist Party and a Socialist movement in the United States.

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The membership of the organization is lower than it has been in many years. The opinion is frequently expressed that tens of thou-

sands of members are waiting for the party to take one side or another of the various questions that workers everywhere are thinking of before becoming actively identified again with the party and its work.

That the disorganized state of the party is solely due to the critical attitude of masses of its members is not strictly true. Other agencies have been at work that have kept down the membership and the party's work. These will not be conquered by resolutions, but rather by resolution.

In 1920 the convention of the party [New York City: May 8-14, 1920] was an enthusiastic gathering that reached its highest pitch in the demonstration that followed the nomination of Eugene V. Debs. But that convention represented but the skeleton of a party. The 1919 Chicago convention [Aug. 30-Sept. 5, 1919], out of which the elements that called themselves Communists trooped so noisily, represented a party that was but a shell. The party in January 1919, when the books showed some 110,000 members, was not in a healthy condition. And the members of the party, the adherents of the movement, must understand what brought the party to its condition at that time before they can meet the problems that face them today.

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The cause was the war. When the war smote the world, decent and clean-minded people received a dreadful shock that resulted in a period of reaction, a reaction that lasted for a long time.

Then came the campaign of militarism, which the Socialist Party opposed. But the interests that created that movement for their wholly selfish ends controlled enough of the organs of publicity to make it appear as if their campaign was "patriotic," so to stigmatize every opponent as "unpatriotic."

Now the Socialist Party had "arrived." It had twice broken into Congress, it had legislators in many states, it controlled some cities, and was recognized as a growing power. The party had a growing press, it was permeating everywhere with its message. And when the whole strength of the party was thrown against the campaign of militarism, or "preparedness" as it was hypocritically called, its leading spokesmen knew that they were inviting prejudice, that they were looking for trouble for their members.

With the outbreak of the war and the party's position as enunciated at St. Louis [Emergency Convention: April 7-14, 1917], the

trouble was redoubled. Individual members of the party dropped out, but the party stood like a granite wall for the principles enunciated in St. Louis, and by Eugene V. Debs in that historic tour through Ohio in May and June, 1918.

But in addition to the scorn and hatred heaped upon the party by the organs of capitalism the persecution became official, and by the time of the armistice [Nov. 11, 1918] the party was practically wiped out in the smaller localities, only the larger cities being able to maintain their organizations more or less intact.

Hard to Keep Party Alive.

It was hard enough for members to hold their organization together in the face of four years of unremitting persecution, from 1914 to 1918, in the face of hatred and the unmeasured scorn poured upon them every day by the organs of the ruling class, in the face of official terrorism, of Wilsonism and Burlesonism and Palmerism, of Guy Empeyism. But it was not only hard — it was thoroughly impossible for little locals throughout the country to hold together and to function through that terrible time. As a matter of fact, the party organization in the interior of the country was wiped out, and the machinery kept running only by the fact that the larger locals continued to function.

With the armistice and the European revolutions, tens of thousands of Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Letts [Latvians], Slovenians, and others streamed into the party, strengthening it in numbers, but bringing into it the point of view of the European revolution, rather than the problems of America.

Out of that situation, the Left Wing movement and the Communist split developed.

That is recent enough not to require detailed retelling; but the effects of the incident are apparent even today. Because when 10,000 new members come in it looks like a great strengthening of the party, and consequent rejoicing follows. But when 8,000 go out it looks like a gloomy event, and twice 8,000 are discouraged and drop out. And that happened.

Reflect Russ Revolution.

The Slavic federations merely reflected the Russian revolution, and attempted to deal with American conditions by means of Russian phrases. They organized within the party, they split off, they organized two Communist parties, they left the party almost fatally weakened, and then they disappeared. Today there are not, in all the Communist parties and wings and winglings together, one-tenth of the membership that left the Socialist Party two years ago [1919]. The rest have become discouraged and dropped out and are no more in any radical movement.

The party, at the Chicago convention [1919], adopted resolutions and a manifesto that caused wide comment. Enemies of the party say that the leaders of the organization adopted ringing resolutions because the shadow of the Left Wing hung upon them. Organization leaders say that they were adopted, not because the party was afraid of what Louis Fraina and Nicholas Hourwich might say, but because that was what the party stood for, and what the party would have adopted, no matter what the situation had been outside the party.

Following the convention there was an amnesty campaign, and the campaign of the two Communist "parties" began. But they soon ended, the "red raids" of Palmer and of detective agencies breaking them up. Today there is no Communist party in the open. Camouflaged under innocent-sounding names, the members kept together, and in secret they go through the motions of obeying the statutes and theses of the Communist International. And that is all.

Dictatorship Is Issue.

The Socialist Party met in May 1920 and nominated Eugene V. Debs for President. The convention marked a struggle between two elements, one headed by J. Louis Engdahl, the other by Morris Hillquit. There was a bitter struggle on the party's declaration of principles and over the party's international affiliation.

The Engdahl or "Left" elements insisted upon committing the party to a plank declaring for the dictatorship of the proletariat. They assailed the majority for a "reformist" platform, taking particular exception to the fact that the platform and declaration of principles called for work for Socialism at the ballot box and a confidence in democracy.

The same group wanted an immediate affiliation with the Communist International on the basis of the conditions that had been laid down, conditions that presaged the "21 Points," enunciated a month or two later by the 2nd World Congress in Moscow [July 19-Aug. 7, 1920].

They were beaten on both issues, and likewise beaten in a referendum of the party membership, the smallest vote ever cast in a party referendum backing up the convention's actions.

Hillquit's Stand Endorsed.

An attempt was likewise made at the [1920 New York] convention to take a stand against the conduct of the defense of the Socialist Assemblymen in Albany by Morris Hillquit and Seymour Stedman. The resolutions as presented to the convention contained a bitter attack upon the defense, and was expunged from the record after a warm speech by Meyer London, resulting in a wonderful demonstration of affection for Morris Hillquit.

The convention adjourned amicably enough, the party leaders hoping to rebuild the party by means of a whirlwind campaign for the Debs ticket. The hope that Wilson would release Debs did not die until the very day of voting. Plans were made for a triumphal tour of the country by Debs, should he be released. The feeling was everywhere manifest that all that was needed for a growing organization was a fine campaign.

"What we need," said party officials everywhere, "is to get to the people. Then we will rebuild."

Party in Blind Alley.

But Debs didn't repent, the campaign was carried on by the locals that hadn't been disrupted by terrorism, and only a small part of the territory was covered.

That is, the party found itself in a blind alley. The organization could not make a propaganda campaign because it wasn't strong enough. The organization wasn't strong enough because it was unable to get out to the people with its propaganda, outside of a few of the larger cities.

With election over, the party's activity was largely devoted to keeping itself alive, to the amnesty campaign, and to planning for organization work — if it could ever get the means.

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Then violent dissension arose over a number of points, matters that had remained in abeyance during the campaign.

The first was the matter of affiliation. The advocates of unconditional affiliation [with the Comintern], with the famous “21 Points” before them, still persisted in their campaign. The party was made the subject of bitter attacks because it could not find its way clear to apply for unconditional affiliation.

Charge Reaction.

Those who advocated such affiliation denounce the party officials and the NEC as being reactionaries, as being allies of Noske and Scheidemann, as being counterrevolutionary, as keeping the masses from what they eagerly desire.

Those who oppose not infrequently charge the other side with being enemies of the party, and of being desirous of seeing it wrecked.

With that question, many others are bound up. With the ousting of the 5 Assemblymen, with the gag on free speech, with the continued imprisonment of Debs, elements of the movement questioned the continued belief in democracy. Elements demanded a statement that the Socialist Party declare that the immediate object of the party is the establishment of a soviet state.

It is said that the organization of a neo-Communist party, the “legal” analog to the “illegal” Communist parties now in hiding, is either contemplated or already accomplished.

The matter of the Albany defense is still agitated, critics of the party asserting that when Morris Hillquit said that he would oppose the imposition of a Soviet system by force upon an unwilling American people, he betrayed international Socialism. The phrase “Albany Betrayal” is heard in many quarters among enemies of the party, the “betrayal” consisting principally of the remark of Hillquit's.

Made Reservations.

Within the past year, then, there has developed a distinct “wing” in the party for unconditional affiliation with Moscow, but making reservations in favor of “legality,” and for a policy toward the unions opposed to that of the Communist International, but different from the party’s.

The organization of a new party by this wing, in connection with German “educational leagues” — Communist organizations that conceal their Communist character — and a number of loose ends, elements, wings, winglings, and groups, is already prepared for. It is believed that they will attend the convention, demand the adoption of their plans, and in the event of their defeat, withdraw. The numerical strength they can enlist is an unknown quantity.

Party Has Agenda.

The party itself has an agenda before it, with such subjects as its relation with the Labor Party and the Non-Partisan League, Dictatorship and Democracy, the Soviet system, and the reorganization of the language federations. The members are debating the questions in their branches, and they intend to see an earnest convention earnestly taking up the matters upon which depends the regeneration of the party and the movement in the United States.

These questions have not arisen out of the air, nor did they germinate in the mischievous minds of disrupters. They are the inevitable outcome of European conditions, with a world revolutionary situation undermining the faith of the masses in democracy, in the older methods.

Parties everywhere in the world have discarded the old methods, or they have subjected them to close scrutiny. The birth and growth of a labor party here, the organization of the Vienna Working Union of Socialist parties, with which the NEC has been in communication, the changing policies of the Russian Soviet Government, all have had their effects in the violent discussions within the Socialist Party.

The wave of reaction is ebbing. It is growing easier to get to the people. It is certain that tens of thousands of old members are waiting for a definite decision by the party on the disputed points to get back into harness.

New Era After Convention.

This may be a poor forecast, but it appears today that the convention will either reject all affiliation or affiliate with the Vienna “working union”; reject the position that Dictatorship and the Soviet form are the only means of achieving Socialism; declare for a belief in democracy, and for the building up of political power by the organizations of the workers in their party and in the unions, and that, with these clear-cut statements the party will spurt upward, countless members joining who have been discouraged by constant bickering and uncertainty as to the nature of the party they were asked to join.

The party will take a stand. That is certain.

That is what the convention is likely to bring forth. The period of doubt as to which of two conflicting positions to take is just about over.

And, whatever the stand, the party will begin a new era the day after the convention adjourns.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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