
The Socialist Party Convention

[events of June 25-29, 1921]

by James Oneal

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An analysis of the decisions of the national convention of the Socialist Party, which ended its sessions last Wednesday [June 29, 1921], reveals a remarkable list of positive actions taken. They are so numerous that they completely obscure the few negative actions and emphasize that in spite of differences that appeared the delegates were agreed upon one question. They were determined to begin an era of reorganization and education such as that which characterized the party in its pre-war history.

I am not certain whether the following list is complete and, in fact, believe that it is not, for there were a number of items on the agenda to which the reports to *The Call* have no reference. These include immigration, the franchise, and possibly a few minor matters. We will have to wait for the official minutes to obtain knowledge on these questions.

Of the actions that may be listed as of a negative character may be cited the following: Repudiating the idea of expulsions because of divergent opinions within the party; rejecting unreserved affiliation with the Third International, reserved affiliation, or affiliation with Vienna; tabling a resolution defining sabotage, another defining direct action, and still another defining mass action.

The delegates undoubtedly reflected in the actions taken a determination by the membership to rebuild, educate, and organize. This is evident even in the one resolution which was adopted regarding international affiliation, which emphasized our "paramount duty" to first "build a powerful, revolutionary, Socialist organization in this

country.” This appears to be the dominant motive of all the actions of the convention.

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Of the other positive actions in this direction may be cited the following, certainly a formidable list: The decision to organize a national drive with the aim of raising \$20,000 within 30 days for organizational purposes; publication of leaflets for education of members in Socialist fundamentals; election of a committee of 9 members to report to the next convention the possibilities of establishing more Socialist dailies; special effort to reach women voters; arranging of lecture districts by the national office regardless of state lines; urging the organized workers to study the technique of administration of industry; adoption of rules for the guidance of Socialist administrations in municipalities; declaration of party control of elected Socialist officials; maintaining dues at the present rate but more clearly defining their apportionment among the party divisions; voting down a proposal to call a congress of various organizations to unite in one organization and instructing the National Executive Committee to “survey” such organizations and report its findings at the next conventions; defining what is meant by the general strike, showing its limitations and the conditions for its success as well as its remoteness as a weapon without a highly organized and intelligent working class; expressing opposition to militarism and military appropriations; a vigorous resolution in behalf of revolutionary Russia; another congratulating the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers for their splendid battles against the open shop; a resolution against the anti-Jewish propaganda in the United States and anti-Jewish massacres abroad; a strong resolution of protest against the Harding administration’s delay in acting upon amnesty for political prisoners; calling a conference of the Young People’s Socialist League, and leaving the federations intact under conditions that do not leave the weak organizations a drain upon the National Office finances.

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Another thing about the convention is the fact that its proceedings were for the first time conducted under the agenda system so long in vogue abroad. The method is in advance of the cumbersome, time-wasting, exhausting, and more disorderly methods of the American convention system, that as we become used to it our national conventions will become more expeditious and less tiresome than they were under the old system. While no expression has come from any of the delegates on this matter we are certain that if a vote was taken it would give a big majority in favor of the agenda.

The work assigned to the incoming National Executive Committee is important. Down to the recent date the activities of this body for nearly four years have been largely defensive, precluding much constructive work. It had to ward off, as best it could, the blows that came from the mercenary agents of the capitalist enemy, official and unofficial. It was besieged on all sides during this period. Our press was being strangled, our speakers mobbed and jailed, and hundreds of applications for aid were being received. Our mail of all kinds were being held up by postal officials. In Chicago it was no unusual experience to have thousands of letters held up for weeks and months, letters that had reference solely to the defense of victimized comrades and which sought to obtain financial relief.

Unfortunately, from the inside hostile elements also developed and joined in opposing our attempts to obtain relief. These elements wanted "revolutionary action" to release our jailed comrades. Agitation for amnesty and the gathering of funds for defense was stigmatized as "petit bourgeois." Between the two forces of opposition, one outside and the other operating inside, the National Executive Committee was hampered, thwarted, and checkmated. Attacked in the front and the rear, its activities were largely turned from a defense of our prisoners in the penitentiaries to a defense of the organization itself. The culmination of that struggle is an old story and need not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that those who were members of the committee in those trying days will never forget the spiritual agony suffered because of their helplessness to mobilize the full force of the organization for its most vital tasks.

This situation is happily ended except for the sporadic attacks of a cowardly capitalist reaction that is slowly subsiding. Like those who have spent some years in the torture chambers of the middle ages we now emerge weakened, yet determined to carry on the struggle anew. We cannot hope to satisfy either capitalist reaction or those who left us because they thought the “revolution” was at hand. We should not try. We will not try. We should no more care for what the one does than for what the other has already done.

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We may confidently expect that the convention that concluded its labors at Detroit ended one historical epoch in the Socialist movement of the United States and that it marks the beginning of another one. This convention marks the 21st anniversary of that little group of delegates that met in a German hall in Indianapolis in 1900 and united upon a national Socialist ticket for that year. Many enthusiastic propagandists, after that event, entered the field and spoke with no assurance of any material reward for their labors. They went into unknown fields. They slept in miners’ huts and ate of their meager fare. They faced their class in little groups in the open air. They were often misunderstood, sometimes threatened, and even attacked by workmen whose knowledge had been warped against their own best interests. Sometimes they ended a week’s labor without a coin in their pocket and walked to the next town to which they were assigned.

Thus the Socialist Party grew, slowly developed, and secured a place in the affection of increasing numbers of the working class. Controversies came and controversies went and still we grew stronger until we numbered over 100,000 within the organization. Then the war came with its devastating blight. The numbers within the organization dwindled. Whole series of organizations disappeared overnight by assaults of vocal 100 Percenters. The Socialist movement went through its Gethsemane and on the eve of its martyrdom it met in St. Louis and passed its prophetic resolution.

What happened is too well known. That resolution forecasted events and today it stands as a vindication of the Socialist analysis of capitalist society and the imperialist wars it breeds. It reads today like

a transcript written after the war. Never has the pre-vision of any movement been subjected to such a test and never has it been so justified by the outcome.

In this 21st anniversary year it remains for the Socialists of the nation, those who were not deceived by the imperialist powers of darkness; those who were never lured by the specious pleas of apostates; those who were never swerved by the emotional hysteria and morbid expectations within our own ranks, to register the will to rebuild the Socialist movement. To build it stronger, more powerful, than ever before. The future belongs to the working class conscious of its class mission, and the Socialist movement points the way. Devoted service like that of 20 years ago will reorganize the Socialist Party and make it a commanding power in abolishing the capitalist regime, a regime now in its dotage and ready for the scrap pile of history. To your tasks, comrades, and work with a will.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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