
Enter: The Labor Party

[events of Nov. 22-25, 1919]

by Charles Merz

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The birth of the Labor Party was no such spectacular affair as that other effort, seven years ago, to bring into American politics a new party of reconstruction. There was no Roosevelt to color the convention with his personality. There were no five-minute demonstrations, no red bandana handkerchiefs, and none of those psalms with which the Progressive delegates filled the gaps that came while Mr. Perkins and his fellow leaders were conferring in an anteroom to decide what the new party would do next. But despite their other differences there was a certain quality of temper that the Progressive and the Labor conventions had in common. Men and women in each convention talked of obligations that could not be shirked, saw in their opponents the forces of almost unbroken darkness, believed themselves crusaders in the search for a new and happier order of society.

It had been said by many people, and particularly by those hostile to the idea, that in America the agitation for a Labor Party was a hot-house movement. A few leaders were solicitous; the rank and file of labor, indifferent. A convention would disclose how completely indifferent. There would be delegates enough from Chicago — delegates already on the scene of action — but from far-away districts and from the great industrial trade unions there would come few delegates and fewer zealots.

Such calculations were upset by what actually happened when the convention met last week. For the roll-call showed a national representation that not many people would have expected, with the Chicago delegates outnumbered 10 to 1. There were delegates from 35 states — and what is more significant, so far as trade union sentiment is concerned, from every important craft union in the American Federation of Labor. In most cases, no doubt, the selection of delegates was made by a local rather than by a state organization; and the

popular authority which each delegate had behind his ballot is, of course, a matter still to be tested. But the range of the trade union representation was genuine. The Mine Workers had 179 delegates; the Machinists, 40; the Railway Brotherhoods, 65. There were Plasterers and Nurses and Glassblowers; Moulders and Waitresses and Bill Posters; Teachers and Blacksmiths and Lighter Captains. There were, in all, representatives of 55 national and international craft unions in the Federation of Labor.

Two days this mixed assembly took for the creation of a temporary organization and the consideration of resolutions. On the third day it was ready for the more difficult question of agreeing upon a party constitution.

The constitution which was reported to the convention by one of its committees is a brief document. It begins with a declaration that the object of the party is to unite, not the trade unions alone, or any other special "classes" alone, but "all" hand and brain workers in support of the principles of "political, social, and industrial democracy." With this broad purpose the constitution goes on to create a permanent party organization. The National Committee, as originally planned, consisted of one delegate from each state. but it was moved from the floor that the committee consist instead of two delegates — and that in each case one of them be a woman. This amendment was accepted. In theory it was admitted that women ought not receive special recognition on account of their sex. But in practice it was argued that if they were ever to attain political responsibility, women must first receive more substantial recognition than the different party organizations can give them by the creation of Honorary Ladies' Auxiliary Committees.

There are certain routine matters of state organization and democratic control of officers which the Labor Party constitution takes up next; then follows a section sharply at variance with the principles of traditional party politics: "Whenever five or more state Labor Party organizations request that any nationwide policy, amendments to the constitution, or recall of officers be submitted by referendum to the affiliated membership of the entire nation, it shall be the duty of the National Committee to direct each state organization to take a referendum of its members." It is possible that in this provision the delegates of the Labor Party were experimenting with something more fundamental than they realized at the moment. What has helped smother representative democracy in American politics is the fact that

seldom has it been possible for common rank and file members of the older parties to decide the issues upon which all-important elections are to be fought. Party chiefs and party editors usually make the issues. The turn of the common voter comes later. If he is an independent voter his only real freedom is often a choice between the lesser of two evils.

Discussion of the Labor Party's constitution raised a question which had been hanging fire since the opening of the convention — the question of possible alliance with the Farmers' Nonpartisan League and with other progressive political associations. The Nonpartisan League had sent no delegates to the convention. It had sent two "fraternal delegates," and both of these spokesmen had urged an alliance in the most explicit terms. There was no "bolt" of the farmers from the convention — as a number of the press reports asserted. The basis for that story was the action of several representatives of the Workers' Nonpartisan League in Minnesota. This League, like the League of Farmers, does not nominate an independent ticket, but uses the primary to elect its candidates, regardless of the string of emblems that runs across the top of the ballot. Representatives of the Workers' League did not leave the Labor Party convention because of any disagreement with its purposes. They remained at its sessions, simply withdrawing technically because their own political methods ran counter to a section in the original convention call which declared that the new party would nominate no candidates from the tickets of the old parties.

What the convention now debated was the question of drawing a constitution sufficiently broad to permit a coalition with such groups as the Nonpartisan League — and yet strict enough to keep the local party branches from continually compromising with the Republicans and Democrats until the party's identity had gradually been shaved away. There were some delegates at the convention who had no fear of the Democrats and Republicans. They thought the rabbit would be able to turn in its tracks and swallow the boa constrictor. But the great majority dreaded amalgamation with the old parties as they dreaded death — and the effect of their warnings was the adoption of a clause (1) forbidding the endorsement of candidates of other parties, and (2) providing expulsion for any Labor Party member who accepted the nomination of another party — with the proviso that neither of these rules was to hinder the formation of "working alliances" with "farmers' leagues and other progressive organizations sup-

porting the Labor Party's program and accepting its ideals." These provisions, subject to the pressure of future events, may disappoint the delegates who drew them. But they were accepted as a good enough beginning — and the convention proceeded to the one task still before it, the adoption of a platform.

A short platform, consisting of but three planks — freedom of speech, nationalization of public utilities and natural resources, and taxation of unused land — had been carried in the call sent out to announce the convention. And upon such a short platform a new and experimental party might wisely have determined to stand in its first campaign. This was the advice given the convention by a representative of the British Labour Party. But the delegates were too aware of their obligations to accept it. They had ears for every voice crying in the wilderness. And the platform they adopted rests on 30 planks instead of 3. There is no attempt, in it, to build the structure of a new social order, as the British Labour Party built. Rather it consists of importations from Great Britain, legacies from the Bull Moose Party, and reforms for which the American Federation of Labor has long stood and never voted. Its principle items were repeal of the Espionage Act — freedom of speech and assemblage — a League of Nations built upon a treaty of the 14 Points — nationalization of "all basic industries which require large-scale production and are in reality upon a non-competitive basis," such as railways, mines, and forests — endorsement of the Plumb Plan — steeply graduated income and inheritance taxes — the banking business "to be placed in the hands of the federal government" — an executive budget in Congress — abolition of the Senate — nationalization of "unused land" — abolition or curtailment of the Supreme Court's right of veto over national legislation — popular election of federal judges — credit facilities for farmers "as cheap and available as those afforded any other legitimate and responsible industry" — guarantee of the right of workers to bargain collectively — prohibition of child labor under 16 years — and a wage "based upon the cost of living and the right to maintain a family and health and comfort without labor of mothers and children."

About the wisdom of individual planks in this long program — or about the bulk of them, for that matter — the voter who is not affiliated with the new Labor Party may be doubtful. But whatever its sins the program has one essential advantage over the campaign platforms of the two standing parties. It is politically honest. It does not attempt to substitute unreal issues for genuine ones. It does not, like

recent programs of the two old parties, attempt to lead the voter into thinking that his ballot can be used for no other purposes than the shifting up and down of tariffs, the framing of laws and more laws against the trusts, the reorganization of the army and navy, and the substitution of a Republican rivers and harbors bill for one framed by the Democrats. With such paraphernalia the old parties have kept out of American politics those very issues the Labor Party now introduces. And its reward, for having introduced them, is likely to be the charge that it is pandering to class sentiment. Editors and politicians will forget that it has been the old party organizations that have kept genuine economic and social issues so largely out of politics, and forced labor to seek by means of the strike many of those innovations that only the ballot can bring. If it is indeed class feeling to which a party of hand and brain workers appeals, it is at least not that minority class which profits from a stand-still order, but that larger class, not only of trade unionists, but of farmers, and professional men and small business agents whose interests demand a democratic reconstruction in America. Only with a new political party as a weapon is that reconstruction possible. And a new weapon, still rough and untried, was forged last week in Chicago.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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