The Finnish Federation

by Leo Leino

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Editorial Note: *In order than our readers may know something of the disturbing forces at work in the most remarkable of all the branches of the Socialist Party of this country, the Finnish, the following statement, embodying the report of the special committee appointed by the Finnish convention held some months ago in Chicago [Extraordinary 4th: November 22-2x, 1914], is printed in* ***The Herald*** *by request. The article is not published for the sake of controversy but information. It will be concluded in the next issue of* ***The Herald.***

The deplorable controversy and disruption in the Finnish Socialist movement, which has smouldered for some time and which caused a split in the Finnish organization a little over a year ago, is of such interest that it is worthwhile to the American comrades to become thoroughly acquainted with all the circumstances and conditions involved and related thereto. In addition, owing to the fact that one-third of the party membership in this state [Washington] is Finnish, it can be readily seen that this disruption is no trivial matter.

All over the country the American comrades who are thoroughly conversant with the principles and methods of the Socialist Party, and who have taken the trouble to study the Finnish controversy have invariably lined up with the Finnish Socialist Federation, which is in entire accord with the respective positions of the national and international movements in matters of principles and tactics.

But others — and there are many party members who, because they do not understand the issues involved and the tremendous consequences that would ensue if the tactics of the disruptive faction were to triumph, side with the aforesaid disruptive faction. These comrades believe that this split was caused by the alleged arbitrary, censorious Finnish Federation. The chief points over which these comrades argue in favor of the disruptive faction are as follows:

1. That the organization censored the reading matter of the members.

2. Forbade its members the support of industrial unionism.

3. The action of the Executive Committee of December 5-6, 1914, which, it is alleged, prevents the foreign-born workers from mixing with the workers in the American movement.

4. The action of the Executive Committee, which declared language federation autonomy.

Let us analyze these important arguments more closely. The Finnish Federation never abridged the freedom of its members by forbidding them to read whatever they wished to read, but it is true that it does forbid the membership from supporting a paper [*Socialisti*] that has been established with the intention of destroying the means of education, the party papers, and also the oldest and strongest language organization of the American Socialist Party.

We know the attitude of many of the American comrades toward a party-owned press, but let it be stated here, openly, that these comrades do not as yet realize the importance of the party-owned and party-controlled press... <*illegible line*> ...comrades seem to be very negligent in the support of their party-owned press. They regard the matter, so it seems, very much in this light: "The party press is all right, the party is all right, but business is business, and we must not abridge the rights of the individual to run a business enterprise in the name of the party, regardless of whether it injures the party or not."

We Finnish Socialists look at this matter in this

manner: we place the best interests of the party always before and above the interests of any individual or group, and whenever individuals in our organization attempt to place their interests in the way of the party, we deal with them in as stern and forbidding a manner as the case may warrant. For instance, if the majority of the stock of *The Herald* is owned, and the contents of the paper determined, by the majority of the locals of the party in the county, then it is controlled in somewhat the same manner as the Finnish Socialist press in this country, and who shall say this is not the best and most democratic method to pursue in the establishment and maintenance of a revolutionary press. It is exactly this kind of party-owned and controlled press that the so-called "radicals" attempted to destroy by their paper, *Socialisti.* We would inquire what action the county organization and *The Herald* would take if, after determining that one English Socialist paper was all that the county could support, a group of individuals started one and made a bid for the support of the membership.

Would the county organization use the discipline of the party to prevent waste of the resources of the movement and consequent disruption? We are quite sure the county would take such action, and in doing so it would thus find itself in the same identical position in relation to its own insurgents that the Finnish Federation finds itself in relative to the "radicals." We believe that the county organization would be forced to expel such elements of destruction, if they were not amenable to party discipline, no matter how "red" they might seem to be, and no matter how revolutionary their phraseology.

Comrades, bear this in mind, we Finnish Socialists have three big daily newspapers, four weeklies, and monthlies in this country that have been established with the proceeds of our sweat and blood for the purpose of expanding the revolutionary propaganda and education of the working class. We have been trying to inculcate into the minds of the Finnish working people an understanding of their position, together with all the rest of the workers in the worldwide class struggle, and we have been successful beyond that of any other group in this country. Our strongest and most efficient weapon has always been our party-owned and controlled press, which is not run for the benefit of private individuals at the expense of the party. And we look upon all attempts that are started within the movement, as business enterprises, as instruments to hamper and destroy the party-owned papers. We hold that these ventures are misdemeanors, to be punished under the laws of our language federation.

Our attitude toward the party and the party press is as follows: The best weapon of the workers is a strong class-conscious press. The party papers must be edited according to the party's principles and its program. Different opinions of the working class movement have their place also in the columns of the party press, but the party principles, the majority of the party, must determine. Our press must not be a monkey to dance to any music; on the contrary, it must express the materialistic conception of the revolutionary class struggle, based upon the experience, progress, victories, and defeats of the working class. This is the stand of the majority of the Finnish Socialists, and we contend it is a reasonable, consistent, and just stand.

The second argument made against us by the "radicals" is that we are opposed to industrial unionism as a plan of labor organization. The absurdity of this charge must be apparent to any American comrade who understands the Socialist philosophy, but some of the comrades have swallowed the bait whole. It is true we do not agree with the "radicals" in their contention that the IWW is the only industrial union that is worthy of working class consideration. We contend that the AF of L is being modified by the process of industrial evolution into an industrial union, and that this change in the nature of the organization is taking place just as fast as this new form of organization becomes more beneficent to the workers than the old form of trade unionism.

Our stand in regard to the industrial plan was expressed very plainly at the last convention of the Finnish Federation in Chicago last November, and the decision of the convention has been endorsed unanimously by the party membership through a referendum vote, as follows:

> The cause of the controversy is this: A certain element within our organization, mainly the teachers and pupils of the Work People's College, have attempted to use our party press for syndicalist and other agitation. The burden of their method is to belittle political action in opposition to the position of the Socialist Party, as set forth in the national

constitution.

Syndicalist agitation first appeared by openly advocating sabotage and other syndicalist tactics. After the general sentiment of the organization had crushed the most brazen appearance of this propaganda, and the general convention of the Federation condemned it and had taken a firm stand against it, the propaganda then confined itself mainly to a relentless fight against all economic organizations that do not embrace syndicalist principles. This pernicious agitation, by introducing confusion into our movement, has perceptibly retarded the movement of the Finnish people into economic organizations. There... <illegible line> ...attitude toward constructive political action, which has been a hindrance to our political activity.

The disruptive element has gone so far in its wrecking tactics as to advise our branches to withdraw from the party (in case this or that person who may be happen to be distasteful to the disrupters should be elected to some position in the organization), and they have also opposed voting for party candidates on the same grounds.

Whenever this disruptive element has been successful in controlling a branch, the branch has degenerated and been disrupted, and such members as have remained loyal have been held back from activity; property belonging to the branch, and consequently to the party, has been transferred to individuals and groups in such a manner as to deprive the party control over its own property.

One of the main objects of the disruptive faction is to destroy the Finnish Federation by causing the branches not to conform to the convention and referendum decisions, by slandering and blackguarding the party officials and organizing a dual Finnish organization, thus breaking the rules of Article 14 of our party constitution.

The disruptionists systematically try to destroy the Finnish Socialist organization press by spreading false and vicious rumors about the financial condition of our publishing houses, advising persons who have loaned money to withdraw it, and establish a competitive paper without the consent of the party organization, and without any valid reason. They slander and misrepresent the party papers, attempting to get the readers to believe the papers are controlled by a few party bosses, who arbitrarily prevent the workers from expressing their opinions, and these charges are made regardless of the fact that the Finnish Socialist papers are run more democratically than any of the rest of the American Socialist press, for the branches own the majority of the stock, and the number of shares owned by each branch represents proportionately the number of members in each branch. The managing editors are elected by the stockholders' referendum, the yearly stockholders' meetings are usually held in the same place and at the same time as the district conventions, and are always under the dictation of the conventions (both meetings being made up of the same persons, usually).

In no case have writings been denied publication, all things being equal, except where these writings advocated un-Socialist methods, or in any other way represented a menace to party activity and the working class movement in general.

These persons, with well defined anarchistic principles, being in the minority, believe that they, the "enlightened minority," have a right to relentlessly wage war against the fulfillment of the decisions of the party. They will cause disruption in any working class movement. They resort to secret plotting in their attempts to get control of the organization, regardless of their minority. They have a boundless disregard for the truth and they are entirely lacking in the spirit of comradeship. They will demoralize any working class movement they happen to be in, and force the majority to unrelaxing vigilance and extraordinary means to prevent the success of their secret plots against the organization. This disturbs our activity and through us the whole Socialist Party, and large sums of money needed for waging the class war are diverted into the fight to prevent our organization from being wrecked. During the last two years we have been forced to spend at least $30,000 in holding various special conventions, and to make up for financial losses incurred as a result of the machinations of our enemies.

The majority of our members have always opposed the tactics of the disruptive element; whenever persons belonging to this element have been unwittingly been elected to party positions, they have been recalled as soon as the members discovered their methods. In some instances they have been compelled by general discontent to resign their offices. This proves conclusively the general opposition of our members to anarchistic elements within the Socialist Party.

The branches that, for some reason or other still uphold the doings of the wrecking element, do not represent, estimating generously, more than two thousand members. Against them are 10,000 loyal members. Of the said 2,000 only a small part, probably a few hundred people, really know what the principles and objects of the leaders are. The majority of the disruptionists, being in rebellion against the regular organization simply because they believe unquestioningly the lies that their unscrupulous adventuresome leaders spread, based upon false stories of "boss rule" and other sentimental reasons. The leaders have bolstered up their position by spreading the ridiculous story that their actions have

received the sanction of the National Executive Committee.

In the face of these facts we believe the majority of the members trailing after the disruptionist leaders are sincere but misguided comrades. We believe they should have the opportunity to rejoin the party through our organization as soon as they sever their relations with disruptionists. We believe they will eventually desert, and unmask the persons whom, they have blindly followed, and we extend to them a comradely invitation to return to their movement, and resume their activity in harmony with the policy of the international movement. The party can never countenance the damaging tactics which these persons have unknowingly supported. At the same time we insist that there can be no consideration of any compromise with the avowed disruptionists, who refuse to obey the will of the majority, who actively oppose our organization and tactics, as set forth in the constitution and party decisions. These persons have been insisting, and they are still insisting, that there can be no settlement with them unless the majority bows down to the whims of the minority.

All over the country there have occurred cases where State Committees, on account of language difficulties, have not been able to acquaint themselves with the controversies raging in the Finnish Federation. This has had the effect of furthering the plans of the disruptionists by enabling them to wield the power of the committees over the Finnish branches.

Without in any way wanting to change the present system, whereby every branch is an inseparable part of the state organization, and subject to the rules, the convention is of the opinion that without changing this situation, the constitution should be amended so as to give the language federations exclusive jurisdiction within their federations to carry on Socialist propaganda in their own language, and recognize the right of a language organization to expel any branch or member for cause. The State Committee should not have the power to overrule in such matters. To this end the convention advises the branches to make motions in conformity with the usages made, and provided in the law of the party for the purpose of bringing this matter before the membership. These motions should embody the ideas expressed by this convention and by the National Committee in their statement regarding the judicial power of language federations.

Based on the aforesaid, the convention expresses it stern condemnation of the disruptionists, who strive and plot to destroy the movement. The convention also endorsed the means and methods which were inevitable in order to prevent the success of disruption. The convention further advises the loyal branches to vigilantly watch new attempts, and frustrate them, to the end that our important work, which is to further the cause of the American Socialist movement, and the whole revolutionary working class movement, may go on.

The convention hopes that our organization may vigorously renew its activity after being hampered by internal dissensions. The convention is of the opinion that the methods destructive to the American labor movement, against which we have been compelled to fight energetically, are largely based upon the fact that the Finnish Socialist movement thus far has not closely followed the American working class movement, and for this reason misconceptions and false criticism have taken root in our organization and led to wrong methods. The convention wants the members and our party officers to bear in mind that the present economic situation in this country, as in other countries, and the rise of the masses in consequence, depressive unemployment, great strikes, their support, making use of the lessons they teach, relieving and explaining unemployment, together with the ever growing political power of the Socialist Party, gives the party press, officers, our spoken agitation, and all our activities generally, ample opportunity to support the rise of the masses, and to lead their power into the channels of the international Socialist movement. The result of which will be the final triumph of the international proletariat, and this kind of rational and carefully thought-out activity, carried out in conformity with Socialist principles, is the best method against all internal controversies.

Committee Elected by the
Convention to Explain the Controversy,
Leo Leino,
F.V. Tukhanen,
Arvid Nelson,
S. Nuorteva,
V. Annala.

This statement of the committee was unanimously adopted by the convention.

As we do not adhere to the impossiblistic attitude toward economic organizations imported from Canada, nor to the French syndicalism disguised under the name of the IWW, or any other name, we advise our members not to support any attempts that may be made to destroy existing working class organizations that may be undergoing a change to the industrial plan, as we believe the AF of L to be. **To sum up, these are the reasons we are branded as reactionary "conservatives" and opponents of industrial unionism. We, who are class-conscious political actionists, are branded as being merely craft-conscious on**

the economic battlefield. We have the consolation, however, of knowing that those of the American comrades who understand the issues involved, do not agree in their estimate of us with the so-called "radicals."

The third argument made against us is that we want to keep our members from getting into closer touch with the American Socialist party by demanding certain rights for our language organization, namely language federation autonomy. The "radicals" are using this as an argument, whatever its dubious value to them as an argument. They seem to be having some success with the Americans, of whom some do not understand our attitude toward the American labor movement, especially among the so-called nationalists.

The fact of the matter is, our attitude toward the American Socialist and labor movement is just the opposite of that which the "radicals" contend. We endeavor to make the Finnish workers understand that in this country we do not count very much as Finns in the labor movement, therefore we must thoroughly acquaint ourselves with it and become a part of it and take it as it is.

We know that always when there has been an attempt to lead the American labor movement into foreign channels it has been disastrous. What else is the reason to be found for the many controversies, splits, competing organizations, and the general weakness of the political and economic organizations except in the peculiar situation under which the working class movement of this country developed, and its different traditions from the old countries?

But the reason most apparent is that the working class "leaders" that came from the older countries have proceeded to mold the working class movement according to their own model. That is the real reason for splits and the weakness of the movement. And we are opposed to the introduction of these models to the American movement, as we see in these nothing but the breeding of competing organizations, who invariably adopt the motto: "Let us destroy the rotten class movement." Those who would have the American comrades believe that this is our doctrine are preaching this very thing.

It is true that a very large percentage of our members do not know the English language, and for this reason we are trying to connect up our movement with the Americans so that we may have class unity. Our language difficulties prevent us from mixing socially with our American comrades, but we are one of them in the class struggle, as our activities in the past abundantly prove, and if our record means disgracing the American movement and tearing away from it we would like to have someone come forward and prove it.

Our language isolation makes it necessary for us to have language federations. No organization can exist without discipline, because in organization the individual must be subordinate to the interests of the organization if it is to live. Human nature being what it is, cases must arise in the course of events where individuals ignore or deliberately conspire against the welfare of the organization; then the will of the majority must be imposed through the machinery of discipline. How can the Americans who do not know our language discipline our recalcitrant members? How shall we conserve and advance our movement if we do not have autonomy within our own sphere?

We are certain that if the Americans had understood all the circumstances of this Finnish controversy — and they were prevented by the difference in language — they would not have permitted the damage that has been done to the Finnish Federation, and consequently to the entire American Socialist movement. The "radicals" have always been very anxious to get the ear of the American membership, advertise their cause, and misrepresent ours. We trusted to the sanity and the loyalty of the American comrades, and we do not blame them for what has happened. We are positive that if all of the matter pertaining to the controversy had been translated by an impartial board of translators, and then spread over the pages of the American Socialist press, the outcome would have been very different. This, however, would have cost many thousands of dollars, a greater cost than the Finnish Federation could bear.

In conclusion, let it be stated that we bear no ill-feeling toward the American comrades. What they did they no doubt did for what they believed to be the party's good, although they have not always been right. That they have made mistakes does not prove that they are not Socialists. They did not have adequate information from which to base their attitude. This misunderstanding had the effect of demoralizing the

movement in Minnesota, Michigan, and to a large extent in Washington and other states. But the lesson that these experiences teach — no matter what the cost — gives us the hope that the other nationalities besides those that speak the English language know what is in the best interest of the party and what is not.

Edited by Tim Davenport.
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