
Some of the Theories of Party Organization: Before the Form of an Instrument is Decided There Must be a Clear Conception of the Use to be Made of It.

by Margaret Haile †

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Now that the general convention of organized socialists called by our party is assured, it is well that we begin to discuss the important matters which are to come before it and make up our minds as to what we want to see accomplished. We want no miscarriage this time. Conventions are luxuries too costly for a working class organization to indulge in indiscriminately, unless some very substantial benefit results from them. Let us see that we get from the approaching one all possible benefit to the general socialist movement of the country. Any further rhapsodizing on the beauties of abstract unity is mere heroics. Let us get down to business and consider practical steps which will secure to the American socialist movement all the advantages that can possibly be derived from a union of the various organizations, with the minimum of disadvantage.

The other day a comrade here was expatiating on the necessity for unity, when another interposed: "Why, what are you talking about? We have unity now. All your papers proclaimed some time ago that unity

is accomplished. For God's sake, let us have something different now." This sentiment will meet a general and hearty endorsement. To avoid the mistake of the previous attempt, what we need now is a definite plan of



reorganization, laid before the membership and discussed, criticized, and amended by them, so that they instruct their delegates accordingly. We have already taken the wise precaution of reserving the right to pass upon the actions of the convention by referendum before they become final. Matters of such importance as the disposal of an entire organization should not be left to small committees nor entirely to conventions. Committees can betray the trust reposed in them, and conventions can be

packed, manipulated, and captured by politicians. It is true that our comrades in some European countries accept the action of their conventions as final, but only because notice of the measures to be acted upon has been given beforehand, and the measures fully discussed by the membership, and the delegates instructed

†- Massachusetts resident Margaret Haile was a member of the 9 member Executive Board of the Social Democratic Party of America in 1901, one of two women elected to the group.

specifically how to vote on each one. This plan would answer very well where all the delegates at a convention belonged to the same organization, but where several bodies are represented, as a matter of course each body should have the right separately to pass upon the actions of the joint convention and make its own decision as to their adoption. This point having been attended to already, it remains for us to decide upon what form we desire to see the reorganization take, as far as we are concerned.

So many new theories of party organization have been advanced during the past year that it is necessary to go into this matter at some length. Some have advocated “no National Executive Board,” only separate and independent state organizations. Carried to its logical conclusion the underlying principle of this theory would abolish State Committees, and finally branches, leaving “separate and independent” individuals to carry on the work as each saw fit. This is the individualist or anarchist principle as opposed to the socialist principle of cooperation and independence.

There are others who want to spiritualize the movement. From my point of view it needs rather to be rationalized.

Others again are anxious to “launch upon the sea of American politics” and adopt American political methods — do away with our branch system and our dues-paying membership, and raise all funds necessary by voluntary contribution. This may be “American politics” all right, but what connection has it with socialism? I want rather to see a strong, compact socialist organization built up, adapted to the work we have to do, and conducted upon socialist principles. Such an organization could safely go into politics and be a factor in the game without losing its character as a socialist body.

The plain truth is that, in view of the advanced stage of capitalism in America, and the consequent widespread and newly awakened interest in socialism,

the organized socialist movement of the country needs to gather up all its strength and take a giant stride forward, if it would come up with it opportunities and its duties. How is this to be done?

The New Jersey plan for “real unity,” which is now being widely circulated, is very well as a compromise measure, if we cannot have something better. I am afraid, however, that it will not pan out any better than the other kind of unity. In my opinion, its major premise is not correct. The difficulties in the socialist movement in the past have not been due to our system of organization. They were due, rather, to the necessary limitations of our early stage of development, and to our lack of a proper conception of the scope of the movement and the necessities of the situation. Even now our horizon is but little broader. We still labor under an exaggerated idea of the importance of our own respective localities — and personalities. We talk about International Socialism, and yet cannot see anything on the map except our native Smithville or Jones’ Corners. We have not yet grasped the idea of a national movement, in its full significance, nor the nature and magnitude of the work it implies.

At the present juncture we are in danger of tinkering too much with the form of organization, without reference to the work that has to be done. An organization is simply an instrument to perform a certain work. An army is a gigantic sword. If you would improve it you must keep in view the use it is to perform, so that the changes you make add to its effectiveness for that particular work. So with our organization. We are not striving after an association which shall exemplify the principles of pure democracy, as the primary object of its existence; nor yet a political party whose first object shall be to boost men with political hankerings into their desired haven. We cannot improve upon it on general abstract principles. Before we can decide upon the form of the instrument we must have a very clear conception of what

†- The “New Jersey plan” refers to an idea developed by G.H. Strobell of Newark, NJ, which was circularized to party activists and published on the front page of the June 8, 1901 edition of *Social Democratic Herald*. Strobell’s plan included (1) election of a National Committee consisting of one member from each state; (2) Multiple parties in each state each to be entitled to one National Committee member; (3) Each state to have one vote, with fractional votes cast by delegates from states having more than one representative; (4) An initial meeting of the National Committee to be held as soon as 20 delegates were elected; (5) National Committee to call National Conventions, maintain headquarters, maintain a newspaper; (6) Special meetings of National Committee to be held subject to the call of 5 states; (7) Independent national Socialist parties to be dissolved and merged into this new organization; (8) Complete autonomy of state organizations. The “National Committee” aspect of this plan, with various modifications over the years, wound up being a fundamental part of the Socialist Party of Americas form of organization from its 1901 origins until about 1915.

that instrument is to be used for.

What, then, is the work to be performed? Let us start from a point on which we all agree. We all want the Cooperative Commonwealth. We all agree that capitalism is preparing the industrial running machinery thereof with marvelous rapidity and skill. We don't need to trouble ourselves about that part of it. Our part is to get control of the political power of the nation, in order to complete the transition to the socialist state peacefully and systematically. Recognizing that when it comes to the tug of war there will be but two political parties in this country, the capitalist and the socialist, we see at once we must have 7 million socialist voters, more or less. In whatever way socialism comes, we must have a majority of the people in favor of it. I am not a believer in the "small, well-disciplined minority" theory. And I do believe in facing the situation squarely, staggering as the facts may be, and directing our efforts accordingly. Of course, we realize that the logic of events is making socialists faster than any other kind of propaganda can, but that does not relieve us from doing our share. It is our work to clarify and educate the vast amount of vague, undeveloped socialist sentiment existing in this country today, and crystallize and organize it into something palpable and definite.

Were are these 7 million voters that must be converted to socialism? In the mines, on the railroads, in the factories, workshops, and offices, and on the farms in every state in the union. Even such a gigantic task as this can be accomplished with energy and system. But we need both. System without energy stagnates. Energy without system and wise direction dissipates itself fruitlessly. No more random firing, hit or miss; but every shot directed at the point where it will accomplish most.

Just as a scientific farmer analyzes his soil and supplies in fertilizers the constituents it lacks for raising the particular crop he wants, we must study our great field of labor — the United States — analyze the soil and intelligently apply whatever is needed to raise a bountiful crop of socialists. We should familiarize ourselves with the particular industrial and social conditions in every state, its advantages and its needs, the nationality of its workers, and the best way to reach their intelligence. We should have special literature for the farmers, special pamphlets and leaflets for miners,

for railroad men, and for factory workers, presenting the socialist argument from the particular standpoint of each group. These should be written by scientific socialists, with special reference to the needs and the readiest comprehension of the group to whom it is addressed. The somewhat abstruse doctrines of scientific socialism must be popularized and put into such simple form and language that he who runs may read. This is the most difficult of all arts, and the task should tempt the ambitious.

Then ways must be devised of getting this specially prepared literature into the hands of all these different sub-classes of workers — for, unless it gets into the hands of the readers, the writer writeth but in vain.

The work of education by means of literature must be supplemented by speakers who can best adapt the message of socialism to the readiest comprehension of each different group — speakers who, knowing the life of their specific grievances, can most readily get their attention and confidence.

Very rarely indeed are the qualities of an organizer united with those of the speaker and writer in equal proportions. The work of organizing should be in charge of men specially chosen for their fitness for this most important work — men who have a thorough grasp of the whole general program of work and the basic theory of such an organization, as well as the general principles of scientific socialism. Each branch should understand that it is expected to assist in carrying out the work of the general organization in its particular locality — to cooperate with other branches in its own state, to work up the cities and towns that have not yet been organized — and, finally, in conjunction with all the other branches in its state, to work for the education and organization of other states which have not yet been organized or which need assistance in their work.

So much for the general program of educational work. In addition to this we must keep in view another purpose of socialist organization. We must remember that socialism is not inevitable unless we do our part, and that promptly and wisely. The chick develops inside the shell, but unless he has life in him and ability to peck the shell open he remains inside it and dies. We must have a socialist organization that can peck its way through the enclosing shell of capi-

talism when the proper time comes.†

With this broad and comprehensive view of the work to be done, the form of organization naturally and easily suggests itself.

To carry on the work of education nationally and to institute a national Cooperative Commonwealth we must have a national organization. A heap of separate and independent grains of sand is not an organization, nor is a heap of stones. To move and act, there must be a body, with different members performing different functions, but actuated by one will and moved by one muscular system.

In the task of such magnitude, we must, of course, introduce division of labor. To study the national field from the standpoint of a socialist educator, a National Committee is needed, composed of representatives from each state, which shall not fall into innocuous desuetude forthwith upon election, but be an active and vigorous body, keeping in constant communication and meeting at least once a year, and making frequent reports to a Central Executive Board, who shall be charged with the duty of carrying out the decisions of the National Committee.‡ The members of this National Committee should work locally in conjunction with their respective state propaganda committees, as they could be mutually helpful in mapping out the work within the state. How these various officials are to be elected is of less importance than what they should do when they are elected.

To carry on this vast work funds, of course, must be raised — and “plenty of ’em.” To be democratic, we must have a system of dues, so that, all paying equally, each may feel that he has as much voice in the conduct of affairs as every other. This will give an assured revenue, which will increase with the membership. Voluntary contributions for special phases of the work could be made by anyone who can afford it.

In order that our extensive field may be worked systematically and to the best advantage, the center of operations must be as near the center of the field as possible; that is, near the center of population as well as the geographical center, which fortunately are not

widely separated, in proportion to the size of the field.§

The necessity for the formation of branches to carry on the local work is as self-evident as is the necessity for a system of dues.

The raising of funds will give opportunity to those having a genius for finance to exercise it, and those who are natural organizers, and those who have ability as speakers and writers, will quickly find their place. When people have shown any kind of ability, instead of seeking to pull them down or bury them or erase them, we will rejoice in their ability and value them for the work they can do for the advancement of the work we have in hand.

In the running of such an organization, socialist principles of government must of course be applied. The initiative and referendum, the recall of representatives, and equal rights for women are cardinal principles and must be observed in every possible way. The attainment of pure democracy, however, must be subsidiary to the effective performance of the necessary work of the association.

This view of the object of our corporate existence throws a flood of light upon our proper relation to the political side of the movement. We must keep clearly in mind the distinction between the socialist organization and the political party. This educated, disciplined, coherent body should be the real entity, the voluntary association of socialists, bot nationally and locally; and as such, go into politics for the furtherance of its great object. The socialist organization should itself run the political machinery, for the purpose of furthering the cause of socialism and to prevent it from falling into the hands of professional politicians.

The election of a socialist to office here and there is not so important as new recruits in our ranks are apt to imagine, except for its educational effect. What kind of a benefit has socialism received from having a socialist may here and there or a socialist representative or two in the state house? Principally the advertising it gives the movement and the strength and courage imparted to us by success. These elected socialists,

†- For another example of the “Socialism is like a chicken inside an egg” metaphor, see “The Story of the Egg,” by Morris Hillquit, published in the *Milwaukee Leader*, Nov. 28, 1919, and available as a downloadable file from www.marxisthistory.org

‡- The National Committee was one of the principle innovations advocated by George H. Stobell in his “New Jersey plan.”

§- Here we have the thinking behind the peculiar choices for Socialist Party headquarters — St. Louis, Missouri (from Aug. 1901), followed by Omaha, Nebraska (from Feb. 1903). The SPA did not move to Chicago until about May 1904.

unless they have more help than they have yet had, are not able to take any practical steps in constructive socialism. Probably a hundred cities and towns in the United States have made more progress in municipalizing their public services, for instance, during the last couple of years than have either Haverhill or Brockton — but they have not advertised the cause of socialism as the latter have, nor made it felt that it has at last become an appreciable force. These successes have been valuable, but they have attendant disadvantages in a party so young as ours. They have infected many of us with the political fever, to the detriment of the great work of national education. It is possible for a new party to carry too much political sail for the depth of its educational keel and the weight of its numerical ballast. Socialism must not be cramped into ward politics any more than into colonies.

I am not disparaging the political work nor the political successes. Let us first get a strong, coherent, well-disciplined, national organization, working actively and systematically to convert a majority of the people of the country to socialism and the political work will come in as one of the chief educational factors, and, finally, after a sufficient amount of education has been accomplished, it will become the chief emancipating factor.

This article has spun out much longer than I intended — but it is a prolific theme. I ask you, comrades, to consider the matter carefully, criticize the plan, suggest any additions or improvements that occur to you, or suggest some plan that is altogether different, which will better meet the needs of the situation. Let us freely discuss it and try and arrive at a definite conclusion as to what our party should stand for in the approaching convention.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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