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# The Danger of Centralized Power

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The man on the road finds himself questioned as to the danger of officialdom in the event of our party's triumph. Thousands of clean men can be secured for our organization within the next year if steps are taken that will remove or minimize the danger of bureaucracy. One of the first steps toward that end should be the prompt retirement of our National Committee and its subordinate body, the NEC [National Executive Committee].

On the night after last election day the National Committee of the Republican Party met and adjourned subject to the call of the chair, which will in all probability be about the 10th of April, 1912. Is there any good reason why our party can not do the same? But one tenable objection can be offered, and that is that there are four unorganized states. By turning some active organizers into that field they can be organized within the next few months. Then the rank and file of the party, with National Constitution in hand, can read Section 4, and ask them: "Gentlemen, what reason can you give us for the continuation of your committee?"

The committee assumes the attitude of "direction" over the purely clerical work of the National Secretary. Not having daily oversight of the details of his work, they meet semi-occasionally and get him to instruct them in what they must instruct him to do, or by their ignorance of current necessities, prescribe procedure that merely interferes with the efficient performance of his duties.

The powers of the committee are merely "executive," yet we see them arrogating to themselves the power of direction over the thought and expression of a majority of the party in such self-imposed rules as National Committee Rule No. 7.

When called upon to enforce protection of state autonomy they are impotent. When called upon to choose between two factions in a state, their indecision and vacillation only complexes the situation. They are a nonentity in interstate law and in the political structure of the nation.

The curse of the movement in the past has been centralized power in the hands of the National Committee. The history of the SLP is a history of blighted hope, smashed aspiration, and pessimism for the suffering working class who looked to that organization for protection. Hundreds of thousands of workmen went to their graves in despair when the once magnificent K of L [Knights of Labor] went on the rocks of centralized power; the ST&LA [Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance] is another case in point.

If there is one less more than another that our past experience can teach us, it is this: That centralization spells autocracy, and obviously decentralization spells democracy. The Romanov dynasty, the religious hierarchies, the powers of kings, the New York Life Insurance Companies, in short everywhere that despotism lives it is based on centralized power.

If we follow the example of the Republicans and adjourn our National Committee, it would not be the first time that the Socialist movement has taken a leaf out of an old party book and prospered accordingly. When our party kicked over the centralization of the SLP and established the state autonomy program of the old parties, we found the movement making an immense advance for the first time. When the rank and file found the deadly effects of centralized power removed, their individual initiative immediately asserted itself and growth was the order of the day. This plan must be followed if we are to win. All attempts to increase national dues and strengthen the "powers that be" nationally must be relentlessly fought. Rather should the national dues be reduced to a minimum, the funds remain in the state until all counties are organized, then the maximum amount accrue to the County Central Committee. The spectacle of a state handing over for the support of the National Office an amount equal to what it retains for its own work of agitation and organization, and then accomplishing practically the same amount of work as does the national organization thus supported by the funds of 40 states is an anomaly.

Steps should be taken also to abolish conventions and thus place absolute power once and for all in the hands of the men and women

who comprise the rank and file of the party. A fraction of the membership, in convention, never truly represents the majority. Their work is done usually only to be undone by referendum after they adjourn. Caucusing and bargaining “support for support” run rife in old party style by this and that “clique” and time that cost sweating bleeding hands of toil an enormous price per minute is consumed in senseless jargon for the sake of “getting into print.”

Before closing I desire to call the attention of the membership to the fact that already in the labor movement a great labor organization has abolished conventions for all time, has done so for a number of years with tremendous success. I refer to the Cigar Makers’ International Union, of which our present National Secretary [Mahlon Barnes] is a member. This is the record: On the 4th of July, 1896, they held their last national convention in Detroit, Michigan. After wrangling for three weeks at the expense of \$20,000 to the rank and file, they adjourned never to meet again in national convention. The election of their national officers, the question of their dues, their grievances, strikes, etc., etc., have all been settled by referendum. They have even developed a national telegraphic referendum whereby at a reduced night rate the entire membership, over 40,000 strong, can settle important questions in 36 hours. We, as fighters for a Social Democracy, should do likewise — develop the initiative in the rank and file and place all responsibilities on their shoulders and reduce the menace of officialdom to the vanishing point.

I expect to be sharply criticized for this position, but stand ready to defend it against all comers, confident that I am walking in the light of advanced democracy.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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