
Benson on Majority Report: Letter to the Editor of the *New York Call*, May 6, 1917.

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Editor of the Forum:

Allan L. Benson was speaking before the St. Louis Convention [April 7-14, 1917]. The chairman dropped his gavel as a signal that under the rules the speaker's time had elapsed. Benson protested



vehemently. A motion to extend was declared unanimously by the "intolerant" convention which entirely disagreed with him. Benson continued, exploding, "You are a lot of frauds, frauds—" and, tailing off into

inconsequential sputterings, left the platform.

It was not the members of the majority of the convention who were intolerant. The majority elected John Spargo a member of the Committee on War and Militarism, knowing in advance what his vies were. The majority listened patiently during the reading of Comrade Spargo's lengthy treatise on nationalism, gave a courteous hearing to his 20 minute speech in support of the report, although only 5 delegates voted for it in

the final test. The convention respected Spargo for his courageous presentation of his views, even though it was bitterly hostile to them.

The intolerance was shown by a group of so-called "leaders" who found themselves without followers or worshippers, because the party had left them behind, and who, because of this fact, sulked in the lobby of the hotel, in place of participating in the work of the convention.

It is easy to shout "pro-German." Any declaration which the party might make which did not endorse the government was bound to be called pro-German by those who advocated such a course. The majority of the delegates, however, preferred to risk the inevitable charge of "pro-German," which Benson makes, and which those who desired the party to throw its principles to the winds were bound to make, rather than prove themselves traitors to the ideals and principles of Socialism.

In specifically charging the delegates of German birth who voted for the majority report with German leanings, Comrade Benson resorts to the cheap argument with which the capitalist press is damning everything of German origin. A glance at the roster of the convention shows how little weight this argument has. The delegates of German birth who sat in the convention were not over 15 in number. Most of these 15 comrades have been engaged in party work for many years. They have shown in their many years of party

activity that they are *Socialists first*. Yet Comrade Benson is unable to even entertain the idea that they may have supported the majority report because they found it a sound statement of the Socialist principles, to the advancement of which they had dedicated their lives.

Benson endeavors to damn the majority report by giving the impression that it is a compromise, a result arrived at by a series of trades between certain "elements." "But in the game of give and take the radicals soon had their innings," he says.

Nothing of the kind took place. There were no deals, no compromises, no give and take between "elements" in the convention. A glance at the machinery through which the report was drafted completely smashes Comrade Benson's picture of trades and compromises between hostile groups.

A committee of 15 was elected by the convention. This committee listened to the views of every delegate and non-delegate who wished to talk. It then elected a subcommittee, made up of Morris Hillquit, Algernon Lee, and the writer, to draft a declaration. Which of the 3 members of the subcommittee was the ultra-radical, the pro-German, and the harmonizer, I leave for Comrade Benson to say. However that may be, the subcommittee was able to come to a unanimous agreement of what should go into the declaration. It did not reach its conclusions through a series of trades and compromises. The members of the subcommittee found, after a brief discussion, that they were in entire accord as to the kind of statement they believed the party should make.

The members of the committee asked, What do we want to say and how shall we say it? They agreed that the opening statement should deal with the present war, that this should be followed by a statement of the principles on which opposition to war in general and the war this country is engaged in was based. To this Comrade Benson objects. He says that the statement of the causes of

wars has been made before, that it could be found in any encyclopedia. But he admits that the statement is true. If we had said it before and it was true, why should we not state our position again, now that war had come?

This question quickly brings to light the basis of Comrade Benson's objection. From the theoretical statement that the capitalist mode of production was responsible for wars only one logical conclusion was possible. If wars are the result of the capitalist system, then working class opposition to such wars follows as a logical sequence. This conclusion was not palatable to Comrade Benson, hence his opposition. His desire is that we forget what we have said before the war began and now say something entirely different. In a word, he desired that the Socialists of the United States follow along the path that, unfortunately, the European Socialists took. Because the reaffirmation of the Socialist principles, which we had reiterated again and again before the war, is the basis of contrary action, he sneeringly asserts that the majority "devoted the first half of their report to matters that could be found in any encyclopedia."

Comrade Benson's true position is made more clear later in his attack on the majority report. He first confesses that the statement of principles is true, but in his closing paragraphs he comes back to it and calls it "impotent wrangling about the vexed questions of the war." He is, after all, not so sure of the truth of the principles enunciated in the majority report. If he were more frank, we might have more light on the basis of his opposition.

The report drafted by the subcommittee was not changed in principle by the full committee nor by the convention. The changes made were verbal, not in the meaning. In this record of the method through which the majority report was drafted we have the best proof that Comrade Benson's charge that 4 elements compromised and traded to write a declaration upon which these

elements might agree is the sheerest nonsense.

In place of being a compromise, the declaration is an uncompromising adherence to Socialist principles, to which the convention gave support by an overwhelming vote. It was not an intolerant spirit which secured support for the majority report. It was the firm determination of the majority of the delegates that the Socialist Party of the United States should not prove traitor to its ideals.

The convention dealt with realities. It wrote a program which can be acted upon. It did not offer the party phrases with no practical meaning, because we have no power to carry them into effect.

That is the kind of thing Comrade Benson would have liked. His generous proposals that we insist that Germany be given back her colonies, that her territory be left alone, that no indemnities be claimed, etc., are the purest utopianism, so far as we are concerned. Our influence in carrying into effect such a program is nil. We haven't any influence or power in regard to these matters.

On the contrary, we can continue our opposition to the war; we can fight against conscription; we can resist attempts to take away our liberties, as the program adopted by the convention proposes.

In urging that these statements may have serious results for those who stood sponsor for them, Comrade Benson puts himself in a pitiful position. He asks the party to sacrifice its principles because of fear of the consequences of strict adherence to those principles. What great movement has ever achieved success which showed this craven spirit? Had the pioneers in our movement been made of such stuff, we would have no inspiring memories of men like Marx, the older Liebknecht, and Bebel. It needs only the mention of the name of Karl Liebknecht to bring a Socialist audience to its feet cheering. Would we have had a Karl Liebknecht if he had followed the counsels of a Benson?

The majority report is a sound statement of Socialist principles with a program of action in harmony with those principles. If the convention and the hundreds of resolutions and telegrams received by the convention are any indication, it will be supported as overwhelmingly in the party referendum as it was in the convention.

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