
Socialist Convention Held at Chicago

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Chicago, Sept. 1 [1919].— At 11:30 am Saturday, August 30, 1919, at Machinists' Hall, 110 South Ashland Boulevard, Chicago, the gavel tapped, and National Secretary Adolph Germer stepped to the front of the platform to open the Emergency Convention of the Socialist Party of the United States.

The stage setting for this epochal event was singularly appropriate. The hall is wide, facing a small stage evidently designed for amateur theatricals.

On this stage were arranged the tables and chairs for the officers of the convention; and it so happened that the light, somewhat bleak, falling from the only windows, in the eastern wall, cast the stage into shadow, and chairmen and others coming forward to the extinguished footlights to speak were as apparitions suddenly forming out of darkness.

Where the orchestra is posted usually in a theater, below the stage and facing it, were the long tables and chairs for reporters; and here was a tightly jammed line; the dictatorship of the profiteers is far more alive to the importance of the Socialist war councils than the short press dispatches which pass the censorship would cause the unwary to believe.

The hall, wider than long, was garnished with chairs and stretched boards to serve as seats and desks for the delegates; printed placards announced the locations of the various states; Wisconsin was conspicuous in the right rear, with bulky Victor Berger conspicuous in his shirt-sleeves, that peculiar Italian semi-smile on spectacled Teutonic features which suggest, too, a faint admixture of the blood of God's chosen people. New York was even more conspicuous in the right front, where [U.] Solomon, [John] Block, [August] Claessens, and Jacob Panken were among the familiar faces. There was no seat nor card for Ohio.

Along the left-hand side of the room ran a railing, and out beyond this railing were the seats for the spectators. Here the "Lefts" were packed, pressed, crammed, suffocating; while inside, although the big hall was full, there was comfortable elbow-room.

Policemen stood here and there about the hall, the blue uniforms and metal badges staring out among the throngs, through the tobacco smoke which dimmed the air.

There was heat and flame, too, in the atmosphere of the hall. Germer had spoken but a little time, alluding passionately to the criticisms and accusations flung at him and the National [Executive] Committee, when a sudden fierce handclapping and cheering came like an electric shock. Germer's speech was at once a defense and a defiance.

Stedman Elected Chairman.

Seymour Stedman of Illinois was elected chairman for the day. He spoke rapidly and brilliantly of the record made by the Socialist Party of the United States, and particularly the national administration of the party during the war. He evoked cheers repeatedly when he insisted that the party had maintained unflinchingly its principles of international revolutionary Socialism, refusing to yield its St. Louis program against the capitalist pressure, as no Socialist party in any other country in the world had done.

Julius Gerber of New York, a swarthy undersized workingman with Jewish nose and big black mustache, was elected secretary of the convention.

On the reading of the rules to govern the convention, when the rule was read for the "report of the National Executive Committee," suddenly and sharply

came the first test of strength. A delegate arose and moved that the reports of "both" National Executive Committees be read. The chair ruled there was but one, the one which called this convention. An appeal was taken and the chair decisively sustained.

Machine Dominates.

Thereafter, although there were innumerable evidences of deep discontent among delegates, much oratory, noise, and crash of conflicting opinions, it was apparent the "machine" heavily dominated the convention as then constituted.

Overshadowing all else was the question what would be done with the contested delegates. The contest committee was the center of interest. A flock of nominations came from the floor.

Suddenly comes a dramatic interlude. A man in a gray coat at the railing shouts in a passionate voice that compels instant attention. He demands to know by what right the policeman stationed at the head of the stairs is insulting comrades there; he says this cop, pointing his finger in the fleshy face of the offender, who responds with a calm grin, half sneer, had just told a comrade to shut up or he would throw him out so hard he wouldn't know whether he was on the street or in an airship.

Delegate Oliver C. Wilson of Indiana demands an investigation; Chairman Stedman instantly appoints Wilson to investigate.

Then springs up an inflamed discussion as to who is responsible for bringing in the police. Germer, accused, vehemently denies that he had anything to do either with paying the police or bringing them.

The session recesses to 3:30 pm, having sat long past lunch time. At the afternoon session the vote on contest committee shows the "machine" in control; Judge Jacob Panken of New York, chairman; with [Oscar] Ameringer, Wisconsin; [Bob] Howe, Illinois; [George] Roewer, Massachusetts; [J.S.] Nagel, Oklahoma; [Martin] Plunkett, Connecticut; and Van Essen, Pennsylvania, elected.

Left Wing Active.

Suddenly occurs another of those flaming outbursts which denote the angry passions of the factions.

The "Left Wing" have been distributing mimeographed bulletins; for they have rented the room downstairs and from this *coign* of vantage take the delegates in flank, as it were, firing sharp bulletins into them. One bulletin refers to a "police" incident in the morning, before the convention opened; it claims, it seems, although we did not read it, that Julius Gerber called in the police to eject Left Wingers from the hall and Germer told the police to "treat 'em rough." Gerber, who lacks not a dramatic touch in his own way, gives his story; how he was helping the janitor prepare the hall, how a number of people, unhindered, came in and sat in the seats of delegates, how at last John Reed and others who Gerber recognized as not entitled to sit, came to the rail and were halted by Gerber, how Reed tried to apply a college rush to the situation and was repelled by an arm hardened at the hammer; how then the police came up, summoned by no one knows whom, and took a hand. Then Germer, accused equally, denied that he had told the police to "treat 'em rough," that he had several times politely asked those in the seats to clear the hall so that admission might be by delegate card, and at last, on their refusal, said he would have to ask the police to clear the hall; that John Reed cunningly retorted, "Make the police clear the hall!" and this was all a scheme to give color to a pretext of the Left Wingers, plotted beforehand in the Ohio convention, to make it appear that the majority expelled the Left Wingers by calling in the police; that the persons refused to leave and Germer at last requested the police to clear the hall; and they did, but without being rough. Shrill female voices inside and outside the rail disputed with Germer, but the awkward affair finally died.

The convention adjourns till 2 pm Sunday [Aug. 31, 1919] for the contest committee to hear evidence and report.

Then in the committee room there is a series of trials, a hearing of evidence, furious dialogues, lasting till far into the night.

Contest Committee Reports.

At 2:00 the next day Algernon Lee is elected chairman. The contest committee reports on a few minor contests, in Iowa and elsewhere, deciding on questions on length of membership, proper notice of

elections, etc.

Not until the Minnesota case is reached does the factional question clearly emerge again. The "Left Wing" affiliations of the elected delegation headed by Jack Carney, cause them to be rejected in favor of a delegation selected on emergency by the Minnesota State Executive Committee after State Secretary Jack Carney and his somewhat irregular method of announcing elections had been repudiated and the state reorganized. The decisive factor however seemed to be the report of the contest committee that Carney had told them to go to hell, that he and his delegation would not sit if allowed.

Left Wing Convention.

While these discussions were raging upstairs comes an ominous sound from downstairs, the singing of songs, sharp outbursts of applause. The Left Wingers have started their rival convention without waiting the action of the old organization on the contests.

William Bross Lloyd's case comes up in the midst of the noise; and it is angrily urged, for his exclusion, that he is already a member of a new party, the Communist Party. This is positively asserted to be the fact; and the editor of the *MVS* [Sharts], doubtful still, slips downstairs and personally interrogates William Bross Lloyd and C.E. Ruthenberg, whom he finds sitting in

the rival convention crowded in the billiard hall; and these two assure him they are not organizing a new party but holding what they claim is the Socialist convention, called by the newly elected [National] Executive Committee.

Writing this statement on a slip of paper, the editor of the *MVS* [Sharts], in the forlorn hope of removing a misunderstanding, handed it to Algernon Lee, the chairman upstairs; and Ross Brown, the colored delegate from Indiana, presently asked him to read it aloud. It is read just as the convention is in the act of adjourning for the night.

The third day's session opens Monday morning [Sept. 1, 1919] with Mayor Dan Hoan of Milwaukee in the chair.

Again the long wrangle over partial reports of the contest committee, upstairs, while downstairs the Left Wing Convention is laboring just as stormily, threatening to split 3 ways.

The day wears, the time expires which the editor of the *MVS* [Sharts] can devote to reporting the convention; and the final outcome must be left to subsequent issues.

Our prophetic sight reveals to us that there will come a sharp split for the present in the Socialist forces; angry passions are too aroused now to permit coalition; but in the not distant morrow we see these dynamic forces fusing again for the social revolution.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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