
Rethinking the Labor Party.

by John M. Work

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Last spring the Intercollegiate Socialist Society published a symposium on the question as to whether or not the Socialist Party ought to cooperate with the labor parties, along the lines of the British Labour Party. My contribution to the symposium was as follows:

The labor parties will have to prove three things. First, they will have to prove that they are apparently permanent. Second, they will have to prove that they are not going to flirt with the foe. Third, they will have to prove that they do not exist merely for the purpose of seeking political pap for their members. If they prove these three things, I shall then be ready to consider the matter of cooperating with them along the lines of the British Labour Party. Meantime, I cordially hope that they will die speedily — and then be kind enough to stay dead. They should not have butted into the province of the Socialist Party.

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Since that time, the various labor parties got together in a national conference and decided to hold a national convention in November [1919]. They also formed a national organization and elected a National Executive Committee.

The chairman of the Executive Committee is Max Hayes — veteran Socialist and former member of the National Committee of the Socialist Party. I well remember that he was a delegate to the Unity Convention at Indianapolis in 1901, at which the Socialist Party was born.

Another member of the Executive Committee is William E. Rodriguez — also a veteran Socialist. He was the Socialist candidate for mayor of Chicago in 1911. Afterward he was twice elected Alderman from the 15th Ward on the Socialist ticket.

Duncan McDonald, President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor — also a veteran Socialist and former member of the National Committee of

the Socialist Party — is a prominent member of the Labor Party.

Likewise Christian Madsen — also a veteran Socialist and a former member of the Illinois state legislature, elected on the Socialist Party ticket.

And so on down the line. The Socialists are furnishing the brains of the Labor Party.

John Fitzpatrick is a prominent member of it also. I haven't any doubt that he is a socialist in principle, though he never has said so that I know of.

In short, the Labor Party has not obliged me by dying. In my opinion, it has already met the conditions I laid down in the symposium. It has proved that it is apparently permanent. It has not shown any disposition to flirt with the foe, but seems to be class-conscious. It has gone about its affairs in the attitude of standing for principles, not for spoils.

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Because of these developments I was anxious that our emergency convention [Aug. 30-Sept. 5, 1919] should pave the way for a working agreement with the Labor Party, and also with like organizations, such as the National Non-Partisan League. Accordingly, I wrote a letter of advice to the convention, a part of which I will quote, since it states my views on the subject:

It is highly necessary that the party constitution be so amended as to make it legal for a Socialist Party member to belong to the Labor Party or the National Non-Partisan League, without forfeiting his membership in the Socialist Party. You know what happened to Duncan McDonald. He was placed in a position where he was virtually compelled to either give up his influential position as President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor or resign from the Socialist Party. We lost a mighty good man by our narrow policy.

James H. Maurer, President of the Pennsylvania State Federation of Labor, will be forced to go the same route unless you act. He cannot help it — but you can. This danger faces us on all sides. It can be removed by a simple amendment of the constitution.

A working agreement should be made with the Labor Party and the National Non-Partisan League — an agreement which will keep our organization intact, but which will prevent the division of the class conscious workers at the ballot box. They should support our candidates where we are strong, and we should support their candidates where they are strong — and all three of these organizations should cooperate in building up a powerful working class press. Both the Labor Party and the Non-Partisan League are dominated by Socialists. The members of those organizations should have joined the Socialist Party, instead of forming dual organizations. But they did not do so — and we have to face the facts. They are working class organizations. They are headed straight for Socialism, and will duly arrive if we assist them. I favor instructing the Executive Committee to endeavor to make a working agreement with them. This will, of course, have to be conditioned upon the approval of the change of policy by referendum vote of the membership.

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I am told that when Comrade [Adolph] Germer read the above letter to the convention some of the delegates hooted it. Others were in favor of it. But, as no delegate took it upon himself to push the matter, nothing was done. This is to be regretted. But, as always, we face the future, and the question is what shall be done?

I am in favor of amending the national constitution of the party so as to place upon the National Executive Committee the duty to make a working agreement wherever feasible with other working class political organizations — and so as to enable Socialist Party members to belong to other working class political organizations also.

This ought, if possible, to be accomplished in time for the 1920 Presidential campaign, in order that the vote of the class conscious workers of the United States may not be divided in that election.

It would be useless to invite the Labor Party to

join the Socialist Party in a body.

Because the Labor Party does not yet stand for complete Socialism, it is equally out of the question for the Socialist Party to join it in a body.

But there should be some basis on which these parties could form a working agreement, each keeping its own organization intact. In places like Milwaukee, where the Labor Party hasn't a look in, no division of candidates would be in order — but such a division of candidates would be decidedly in order in most localities in the nation.

The Labor Party of Illinois, in state convention, invited the Socialist Party to cooperate with it. The Socialist Party, along with other organizations, is also invited to send a fraternal delegate to the Labor Party national convention. I have no doubt that the Labor Party would meet us halfway. In the case of the Non-Partisan League, it might be more difficult to work out a plan of cooperation, because of the nature of that organization — but where there's a will, there's a way.

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I know what some of the comrades will say. They are afraid we would be swallowed by these other organizations.

But we are not babies. We can enter into such an arrangement without losing our heads or our organization. Believe me, we are much more likely to be swallowed — piecemeal — if we don't do it.

Fundamental changes in the social system are going to be made one of these times. If we want to imprint our ideas upon these changes, we must place ourselves in a position where we can do so. Otherwise we shall look on while others do it. Splendid isolation doesn't suit me a little bit. I want to help build the new social order. To do so, I am willing to work with all other organizations that are willing to federate for working class purposes.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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