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# **Socialists End All Talk of Dictatorship: Motions for Policy, Opposing and Defining It, Alike Rejected; NEC Urges Party to Get to Work: Principle of Democracy is Essential to Socialism, Declares Algernon Lee: Unwise to Discuss: Feeling Among Most Delegates is Party Should Wait Till It Gets Power Before Binding Itself.**

by William M. Feigenbaum

Article in the *New York Call*, v. 14, no. 178 (June 27, 1921), pp. 1-2.

DETROIT, June 26.— The Socialist convention, meeting here, was so determined today not to commit the party one way or another on the matter of the dictatorship of the proletariat that it voted down 5 propositions, with monotonous regularity, dealing with the question. Its final decision, taken just before adjournment of the morning session, was the almost unanimous rejection of a motion by J. Webb Richman of Washington, DC, declaring that the Socialist Party is not interested in the subject of dictatorship.

The question of dictatorship was the only one debated today, and it was disposed of completely. The convention would have neither a declaration fro the dictatorship nor a denial of it, nor a definition, nor even the two motions on the agenda, which were read by Chairman [John C.] Lewis.

“The talk of dictatorship is getting to be a nuisance,” he said.

“Any fool who has read a 10-cent book can talk about it, but not so many understand it,” G.A. Hoehn of St. Louis said.

Cameron H. King moved the following substitute:

We reject both the motions. Both are attempts to commit the party to the principle of dictatorship of the proletariat. The political development of the labor movement

in the United States is not sufficiently advanced to make a decision at this time. It will be wiser for us to await further developments in England and Europe before attempting to make a decision on this question.

Morris Hillquit introduced another substitute, which became Motion 4, King’s being No. 3. Later amended slightly by Lee, Hillquit’s substitute read:

The term “dictatorship for the proletariat” as understood by this convention, means the political rule of the working class in the period of transition from the capitalist system to the Socialist order. It is not necessarily associated with a restriction of the political rights of the opponents of the workers, or with the instituting of terror. The Socialist Party of the United States aims at the political ascendancy of the working class for the purpose of substituting [for] the private ownership of the means of wealth production by a system of socialized industries. The question of the form which the political rule of the workers will assume in the United States and the methods it will adopt is for the present time largely one of an academic interest. The Socialist Party is committed to democracy and majority rule, but this principle is not inconsistent with energetic measures for the defense of the established working class government.

## **Sorry It Was Brought Up.**

Hillquit said: “I am not satisfied with any of the motions. I am sorry the subject has been brought up. This is a political convention, not a dictionary. The

phrase is an old one, having been used by Marx and Engels in 1873. It means, as Marx used it, the capture of political power by the working class. The Russians have adopted the phrase, as they had a right to. The Communists have considered it a duty to propagate the idea of dictatorship, especially since the 21 points demanded it of them. Most people do not understand the term, and it seems formidable to many people.

“Our plain task is to propagate Socialism. Take motion 1. It says that the transitional period to Socialism will unavoidably be accompanied by civil strife. How do we know that it will be? Even Bukharin admits that it is not necessarily true that the change of power will be accompanied by violence. We do not wish to disregard the rights of the minority, no matter how small it is, unless absolutely necessary.

“We are fighting for the rights of a minority now. There is no necessity for us now to preach the curtailment of the rights of a minority. We have one task only. That is to introduce a regime of democratic Socialism. We are going to safeguard democracy. We are going to reserve the right of the defence of our victory. We stand for the dictatorship just as Marx stood for it; he meant the rule of the working class.”

Charles Solomon made an impressive speech, reading copiously from pamphlets by Lenin and Bukharin, in which they say, “It is nonsense to tell the bourgeoisie ahead of time that we want to disfranchise them. We were not strong enough (in 1917) to go to them and say that we are going to destroy their freedom. No, we say, three cheers for the freedom of the press.” Solomon continued: “If they were not strong in Russia to announce they would disfranchise, how crazy it is for us to say that we will disfranchise the minority when we get power. I am against all 4 motions. It is utterly ridiculous to think of discussing them.”

[William] Kruse took up cudgels for dictatorship. “We are here to settle the principles of our organization, and one of the principles that workers everywhere are talking about is the dictatorship. I don’t like the idea of terror that has come to be interwoven with the idea of dictatorship. We must distinguish between democracy and terror.

“The principle of proletarian dictatorship is distinguished from laborite collaboration. I holler for democracy myself when I get on the stand. I demand

free speech and free press and freedom for political prisoners. But there is one thing I remember that I learned at the Rand School from Comrade Lee. That is the fact of the class struggle, and that fact — and that we all recognize its existence — is what distinguishes us from laborites.”

Cameron King: “We voted heavily against entangling alliances with Moscow. We are now trying to import a hateful European phrase. Let us watch how the workers in Europe find democracy and dictatorship. Then we will work out our own methods.”

### **Berger Says “Let Them Get Out.”**

Victor L. Berger, resplendent in a Palm Beach suit, was greeted warmly. He is popular with all sides because of his unfailing good humor and friendliness. “Why worry about the chickens that haven’t been hatched, the eggs for which haven’t been laid?” he began characteristically. He told of the way the revolution was scheduled by the Communists for May 1. “But it rained, and the revolution was postponed. If you have the kind of a movement that can be broken up by a rainstorm, why worry about how you’re going to put over Socialism? I don’t want dictators. If I had the power I would not suppress any papers, not even [that of] Louis Engdahl. I would let him write all the dangerous editorials he wanted to. I’m not afraid of that.

“They don’t belong in the party. Let them get out, and write and say what they want and I’ll not trouble them. If we adopt the motion we will dictate to our grandchildren. I suppose that even though we are smart there will be plenty of people in 1980 as smart as Morris Hillquit and Billy Kruse and Victor Berger.

“I agree with Solomon. I am against all the motions.”

Engdahl demanded: “Are we afraid to tell the world what we stand for, or what we are? If we are, then let’s throw all our definitions out. Are we afraid of the dictatorship because it is foreign? Then Socialism is foreign. Marx was a German Jew. What about it? The dictatorship of the proletariat is the rule of the majority. It is not the rule of the minority. I want free speech. I want free press. I will fight for freedom for all political prisoners, but I will fight for them under

no flag but the red flag.”

### **Oppose All Discussion.**

[Girolamo] Valenti said that the giant Italian party was built up without using such phrases. “But the use of the phrase now is a la mode, and I suppose everybody feels they have to talk about it.”

[Adolph] Dreifuss said, “The question has been put up to us, and we will have to deal with it, whether we want to or not.”

[John G.] Willert of Ohio made a plea for building up the party here.

Richman of Washington said, “If we adopt any of the motions we are putting a club in the hands of our enemies. Let us cut out all talk of dictatorship, and wait until we get power.”

He introduced Motion 5, declaring that the matter was not of sufficient importance for the convention to be recorded upon one way or another.

Lee said, “Although the phrase is an old one, it really is new, because it is being debated in the Socialist movement widely as a new thing.” Then he introduced amendments. “The principle of democracy is essential to Socialism,” he said. “We can’t do without it. The aim of the class struggle is to broaden and extend democracy. The people are eager for democracy. To sneer at democracy is to do irreparable injury to our cause and our party, because you bring the Jesuitical idea of putting things over right to our own party. Kruse says we haven’t democracy. Why does he go out and holler for it? Because under capitalist rule democracy is limited, and the people demand it, and are

eager for it. That’s what I taught him in the Rand School, and I am sorry that I didn’t have a more apt pupil.”

King closed by denouncing Hillquit’s “2.75 de-natured dictatorship.” he said: “Terror is inseparable from dictatorship, and terror is needed to put it over. I am opposed to it.”

Hillquit closed, saying, “I thought I would be opposed to any discussion of the question of dictatorship. The debate here has made me change my opinion. We should have an authoritative party definition, so that neither the one side nor the other can denounce us for our stand on the ground that they don’t know what it is. The term is an unfortunate one. My definition is almost literally Marx’s and Engels’. I was afraid when I came to this convention that the reaction from the debate on the Communist International would drive our comrades to a position too conservative. It is as disastrous to be a party of trimmers and compromisers as it is to be a group of thoughtless Left Wing-ers. We are not trimmers. We are a revolutionary working class party.”

The voting was as follows:

Motion 1: yes 9, no 30.

Motion 2: yes 8, no 21.

Motion 3: yes 2, no 37.

Motion 4 (Hillquit’s): yes 18, no 20.

Motion 5 (Richman’s): yes 1, no 38.

The fact that no action was taken was commented upon by one of the delegates as meaning that “the convention was so hell bent on taking no stand that they took no action on a motion committing the party to a stand that said it takes no stand.”

***Edited by Tim Davenport.***

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