
Socialists to Sound Other Radical Groups: Party Waives Traditional Policy of Aloofness to Seek Possible Cooperation to Beat Old Parties: Will Not Compromise Socialist Principles or Autonomy of Party

by William M. Feigenbaum

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DETROIT, June 27 [1921].— The convention of the Socialist Party, assembled in the Northeastern High School here today, took one of the most momentous steps in the history of American Socialism when by almost unanimous vote it decided to break with its traditional policy of unqualified aloofness from all other political groups.

On a motion presented by Morris Hillquit of New York, the party voted to canvass all the militant labor and radical forces in the country with a view to seeing how far cooperation with them is possible without in any way compromising the integrity of Socialist principles, or the autonomy of the party.

The work of this canvass is entrusted to the National Executive Committee, which is instructed to report back its findings to the next annual convention of the Socialist Party.

The passage of this motion was greeted with thunderous cheers. Among the small scattering of delegates who voiced opposition to it were Victor Berger of Milwaukee and Otto Newman of Portland, Ore.

The passage of this motion lines the party up in a position very similar to that held by the Independent Labour Party in Great Brit-

ain. It was characterized by Cameron King, who was among the most sturdy of its champions, as “comparable to the unity achieved by the Socialist Party in 1900 and 1901.”

The Hillquit motion won its way over a somewhat similar resolution drafted by Mayor Daniel W. Hoan of Milwaukee.

The party also went on record today on the subject of a general strike in the United States after one of the longest and most heated debates of the convention. Two resolutions on this subject were listed on the agenda, and to these Mayor Hoan added a third variant.

Votes Down General Strike.

The motion finally passed, listed as No. 1 in the agenda, admits the folly of regarding the general strike as a practical possibility in the present-day United States and commits the party to the same unblinking facing of facts as they are which has characterized the sessions throughout.

Here is the text of the general strike resolution which the convention adopted:

The Socialist Party regards the general strike as a powerful weapon of the working class — a weapon that may be used with equal effectiveness for political and economic purposes. However, considering that it requires a high degree of organization, discipline, and solidarity, it is evident that the advocacy of a general strike in the United States under present conditions is folly. Years of education and organization lie before the American working class before the general strike can pass from theory to reality.

Furthermore, the general strike involves so many people in a given struggle that it is likely to be a failure unless it is a last resort in some grave crisis which has aroused great masses of workers. It is a weapon that cannot be used for minor grievances, nor could it be employed frequently with success. Its justification and its success both require wide organization and an emergency so grave that no other organized effort would meet the emergency. To make a fetish of the general strike as a normal method of obtaining redress of grievances would be to encourage illusions that only lead to disappointment, failure, and general reaction.

The second motion, which found no backers, took the position that a political party has no power to call a general strike, but that the Socialist Party should support such a strike in case one occurred.

Mayor Hoan in upholding his motion made a most eloquent plea. The text of his proposal was as follows:

The present status of the Socialist and labor movements of America does not warrant a general or political strike as a starting point for the attainment of our aims.

We believe, however, that the time has come when the Socialist Party shall sound the clarion call that shall bring together in conference and in closer working alignment all militant workers of this nation for the purpose of formulating such course of action as will result in the peaceful attainment of our revolutionary aims.

Be it therefore resolved, That there be submitted to a referendum vote of the party membership the following proposition:

“Shall the National Executive Committee be directed to arrange for, in connection with the next annual convention of the Socialist Party, a conference of all organizations of producers in the United States who recognize and are organized upon working class lines and who stand for the four propositions:

1. The collective ownership and democratic management of all means of production and distribution when monopolistically owned.

2. To oppose and abolish war.

3. To restore our liberties.

4. The attainment of these aims by the employment of both economic and political action along working class lines.

Such conference to discuss and to recommend back to the respective organizations such plans by which we can more effectively assist each other in the attainment of these aims.”

Upholding this resolution, Hoan said that the time had come for action and that action was what he wanted to see.

“The old way was to pass St. Louis resolutions [in 1917],” he said, “and let our comrades go to jail. That way led to nothing. It put our bravest and best men in jail and it got nowhere. Can we do something? That is the question. And the answer is that we can. We cannot order a general strike ourselves, but we can compel action on the part of the capitalist rulers by the threat of a general strike.

“We should let the message go out of this convention, a message to the workers, a message to Wall Street and to Washington, that in the event of another war there will be a general strike. We should let

the message go our that our party is not afraid to meet face to face with elements who agree with us on fundamentals. Debs went to jail because he fought single-handedly against the party's resolution.

Preparing for War.

"It may be asked who will come in. Well, there is the SLP. Are we afraid of them? I am not. Let them come in. Suppose such a conference would recommend a labor party. What of it? The resolution if carried would commit the party's delegates to such a conference to nothing but to reporting back.

"They are preparing for another war. Within 12 months, I understand, there will be war with Japan. What can we do about it? Can we pass more St. Louis resolutions that can't be carried out? Let us meet the railroad workers face to face, the machinists, the Amalgamated, the miners. Why, the miners alone and single-handed had the country on its knees and would have won their demands single-handed if it were not for the yellow streak of their leaders.

"The Labour Party of England passed a resolution that no men and no ammunition would be forthcoming for a war on Russia. The machinists here are on record opposing the making of munitions for the next war. What can we do? Now let's meet them face to face."

Then Hoan told a story that has never been told. The story of how he faced the war crisis as Mayor of Milwaukee.

"Dan Hoan has never done anything of any importance, he said, without first going to the Central Committee. And when the war broke out a law was passed lining up every mayor in the country as administrators of the draft law. I went to the Central Committee and I asked: What shall I do? The St. Louis convention told me to obstruct the war, to refuse to carry out the draft act would be mutiny, and that I would be court-martialed and maybe shot, but I said that I would do it. The Central Committee said: No, if you are thrown out for disobeying that law, there will be martial law, and we will be worse off than before.

"I did not live up to the St. Louis resolution, although I believed in it, because there was no power on earth to back it up. What did that resolution do to our beloved Debs? What are we going to do during the next war? Some more ineffective resolutions, no action? I want action and I am willing to go out for a general strike to prevent the next war!"

There was cheering at the conclusion of the speech, and at the story, that had never before been told, of why Dan Hoan was head of the draft board in his city. Closing, Hoan predicted that the Communists in the convention — meaning Engdahl and Kruse — would vote against the resolution because their sole purpose in the party, he said, is to prevent the party from functioning.

“I was a kid in 1900,” he said, “but I remember very well how our party leaders told us what a horrible person that man Debs was, and that man Berger and [Frederic] Heath and [Gus] Hoehn. The membership of the SLP wanted unity, and so did the membership of the SDP, but the leaders didn’t, and the members went to the members and stole the party from its leaders.”

“Not in Milwaukee,” shouted Berger.

“No, not there, but everywhere else. And this unity resulted in tremendous enthusiasm, and the party grew as it never grew before. And so will we grow as never before when the word goes out that the Socialist Party is raising the banner of unity. There is one fundamental principle that unites all of us, the principle of class consciousness. The material interest of the working class will make the working class get together.”

Hillquit then offered his substitute, saying:

“In principle, I am fully in favor of the Hoan proposition. History has proved the fact that a Socialist party surrounded by a Chinese wall will be impotent for many, many years more. If Comrade Hoan had exercised strategy he would have called his conference a Soviet of Workers and Farmers, and he would have got the united Illinois vote. It is a fact that confronts us, not a theory. If we were to call a conference, to whom would we address ourselves? The Farmer-Labor Party? That organization has proved an awful failure, comrades. Its principles and its platform are muddled and at its first convention [Chicago: Nov. 22-25, 1919] it showed that it was ever willing to compromise anything for political power. It failed miserably. Its leaders were exceptionally inept. The farmers? But there are farmers and farmers, most of them conservative. To unite with some of them would be a definitely reactionary step. Upon what platform would we unite? It takes more than one to unite.

“After all, there is something that we cannot afford ever to have shattered — a platform and our principles, our ideals, with which we know that we will eventually triumph. I cannot conceive of any coop-

eration that denies the party autonomy in its organization, its principles, and its tactics.”

George Roewer made an impassioned plea for the old policy of “no compromise, no political trading.” He said that the Wisconsin motion sprang from a desire to compromise with the Non-Partisan League. “Let’s not go to the right,” he cried. “I am afraid of the opportunist tendency that is being displayed. It gives ground for the criticism that we are a party of compromisers.”

[Fred] Feuchter said: “You are at last talking sense. If you decide this question rightly, you have decided the future of the Socialist Party in the United States.”

[Algernon] Lee said: “I am tired of hearing that the Socialist Party is dead or dying. It is alive, and functioning. In all these years, and especially the last 4, it has performed a real, vital function. We have created a wonderful sentiment. We are a power in New York and the party organization is the center and the plexus of the sentiment we are creating.”

Lee said that Hoan’s resolution would drive thousands of members out of the party, but that Hillquit would throw the matter open for discussion and adoption.

Hoan said that if Wisconsin wanted to fuse they wouldn’t come to a national convention, but they would do what they wanted in private. The very fact that they came to the convention showed that they didn’t want to dicker and trade.

Hillquit said: “As the situation stands today, we are something of a joke in the world movement. In other countries we have millions of votes and hundreds of thousands of members. We cannot wait for the slow building up of [the] party in the old way. On the international agenda, the business immediately before the people is Socialist domination.”

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Berger said that he believes in the sentiments, but that action should be left to the states. “We have expelled only 3 people,” he said; “a man named Richter, who was a German war patriot, and then he joined the party and became a Communist; and we expelled Senator Zumach and Assemblyman Glenn Turner because they worked for the Non-Partisan crowd. We’re a pretty lenient bunch. But I want to

¹ Material missing in the original.

say that there isn't a more common cloak for rascality than patriotism and extreme radicalism in the Socialist Party. Leave it to us in the state organizations."

Rose Coleman said: "This resolution is the lowest depths of intolerance. This isn't a Socialist resolution. This doesn't look like a Socialist convention."

[Lazarus] Davidow said: "I am against the resolution and will oppose it. But it has taught one good lesson — those who have advocated expulsions, that two can play at the game. It has frightened them into demanding tolerance, something they didn't know about before."

Branstetter, who is responsible for the motion, said: "This doesn't sound like a Socialist motion, because it isn't. It is a Communist motion. It is very customary in Communist conventions. It will not pass. And it oughtn't to, but it has served a very good purpose. Those who advocated the affiliation motions, did they get up and disavow Point 7, to expel Comrade Hillquit? Did they disavow Point 13, for clearance every year of elements they don't like? Did they disavow Point 21, that every delegate to a convention who votes against the points should be expelled? No one disavowed these points. They would have expelled [others] if they had the chance. There isn't a man in this convention for whose expulsion from the party I'd vote, but the man who says that the Socialist Party is your enemy is staying in the party for no honest purpose. I know these men didn't mean to expel. But they are so infatuated with the Communist movement that they were too cowardly openly to disavow the Moscow methods. This resolution has served to call attention throughout the party to the Moscow attitude, and it has served its purpose."

Kruse rose, white with emotion, and said: "When Branstetter says that he introduced this as a joke, to smoke us out, he lies."

Hillquit said: "I will vote against the resolution, but I do not consider it entirely as a joke. There is one humorous feature — that is Comrade Engdahl's appeal to tolerance and decency and democracy after he has demanded my expulsion. Point 7 demands it. If expulsion is good for me, why is it not good for you? There is one serious feature — I hate heresy hunting. I have never indulged in it and I never will. I do not consider Communists and adherents of the Moscow International place themselves outside of the Socialist movement. But Engdahl has no right to go outside of the party and make common cause with enemies of the party in a publication, the so-called *Work-*

ers' Council, every number of which is a venomous attack upon the party as such. Such a person has no place in the party. Self-respect should impel him to leave it. The party will have to develop discipline and self-respect."

Sends Negroes Sympathy.

Earlier in the day the convention sent its greetings and assurances of sympathy and support to the colored people of this country, who are simultaneously holding a convention in this city, in the following terms:

The Socialist Party in national convention assembled sends cordial greetings to the convention of the NAACP and wishes it all success in its efforts to combat race prejudice to put an end to the shameful outrage to which the Negro population of this country is subjected, and to win for them the equal political, economic, and social rights which are their due. The disfranchisement of negroes in many states, the many forms of discrimination against them, whether embodied in law or only in custom, the propaganda of race hatred which leads up to lynchings and riots — all these are disastrous to the mass of the working people, white and colored alike. We pledge the Socialist Party, through its national, state, and local organizations, through its press and through the work of its individual members, to do all in its power to abolish these evils and to cultivate an active solidarity in the whole body of the workers, regardless of race, creed, or color.

A committee was sent to bring this message to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in convention here.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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