
Unity Achieved at the Social Democratic Convention

by G.B. Benham ¹

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At 10 o'clock am Tuesday, March 6th [1900], the convention was called to order and William Maily, editor of the *Haverhill Social Democrat*, was elected chairman. Strickland was made secretary and Johnson of Chicago and Val Putnam of St. Louis assistant secretaries.

The usual committees were appointed, and an order of business was adopted. The credentials committee had an amount of work that does not usually fall to such committees, for the arrangement and basis of representation is not of the character generally used in representative bodies. Any number of members may sign the credentials of a delegate and his vote in the convention is the vote of the number who signed the credentials. Any local organization can thus send as many delegates as they desire. In fact a member can send himself, sign his own credentials, and his voice is recorded as one vote on the floor of the convention, but the vote depends entirely upon the number of signers of the credentials. Thus Margaret Haile has 196 votes, and Martin of Ohio has 1 vote.

The total number of delegates present was 67, representing 17 states, showing total membership represented 2,043.

Officers and committees have always been elected. The traditions and practices of socialist organizations was departed from in the appointment by the chairman of two of the committees. A special committee of three on reception (having in view the receiving of the special committee on unity from the Rochester convention) was appointed (by the direction of the convention) by the chairman. Eugene V. Debs, Victor Berger, and J.F. Carey were appointed. When the time came for the selection of the committee on trades unions, Chairman Maily requested that he be allowed to appoint, and his request was unanimously granted.

The reports of the National Committee [National Executive Board] and the National Secretary [Theodore Debs] were read and elicited applause as they reviewed and exhibited the growth of the party from a struggling few members two years ago to the present large organization.

The National Secretary's report showed a balance in the treasury, and a membership of over 5,000 in the United States, 53 new branches having been formed since Jan. 1, 1900. References to unity with the SLP as represented in the Rochester convention were received with evidence of friendship.

The personnel of the convention was interesting and indicative of the growth of a new movement. The representation was largely made up of young men, active and alert upon all questions. Nearly everyone seemed to be desirous of placing in evidence the fact that his constituency was represented, and a great deal of oratory on minor issues was the result of this desire.

Eugene V. Debs was frequently referred to, and his name always brought out manifestation of approval. Debs' demeanor was earnest and confident. James F. Carey of Haverhill was also a prime favorite. The manifestation of approval for Debs and Carey were so marked and numerous that some evidenced their displeasure, but one enthusiastic delegate said that the more Debsism and Careyism that he saw exhibited, the better it suited him.

Of the National Committeemen, Jesse Cox is a contented looking gentleman, who exhibits an exterior of the Barnum or Ingersoll type. Victor Berger of Milwaukee is also a large man physically. Seymour Stedman is an energetic young attorney. Theodore Debs is a man whose genial manners have endeared him to all with whom he comes in contact. Frederic Heath is a well groomed individual, who might be selected as an attorney or a preacher. Eugene Debs is the fifth member of the National Executive Committee.

Four lady delegates were present — Mrs. Corinne Brown, Mrs. M.S. Johnson, Miss [Elizabeth] Thomas, and Margaret Haile, a lady well and favorably known in the socialist movement.

Delegates Strickland, Whellick and MacCartney were formerly preachers. Chase, the socialist mayor of Haverhill, takes the floor frequently and gives evidence of legislative ability. Carey of Massachusetts is heard often. His wit makes him a favorite, and he sees the serious and humorous side of every question. Arnold of Kentucky is a pleasing and convincing speaker. Martin of Ohio was valuable and active as secretary of the credentials committee. Phillips of New York is short in stature but long in satire and invective. Judson and [James] Oneal, twin brothers, are representatives from Terre Haute, Ind.

Second Day [Wednesday, March 7, 1900].

Seymour Stedman elected chairman. The committees were slow in reporting and business was somewhat delayed. After much discussion over committee reports, the convention greeted the delegates from the special committee of the Rochester convention. Harriman walked in arm in arm with Debs, and Hillquit of New York with Carey of Massachusetts. Three cheers and a tiger were given for the SLP delegation. Harriman made a neat speech and Hillquit followed. Benham was introduced; Max Hayes came in later, was greeted heartily, and made a speech.

The platform committee reported, and a lively debate took place. Some arguments were made for and against giving direct legislation a particularly prominent place in the platform. There was also presented an argument in favor of mentioning the farming industry. During the debate on the platform, all rules were suspended and the committee from the SLP was given the floor. Harriman, as spokesman, said in brief:

Comrades:—

As a committee from the SLP, Comrades Hayes, Hillquit, and myself have been selected to impart to you the intents of the SLP convention of Rochester as regards the union of the SDP and SLP. I will read the resolution of the Rochester convention. (Here Harriman read the resolution.) This is the resolution adopted by the Rochester convention and sent to your body.

Many questions will perhaps arise. We have disposed of many of the leading objections to a union. We know that both parties have weaknesses. We have made mistakes. The trades unions have been a leading question, and we have in the past made errors. The SDP has also made errors. We desire to drop all recriminations.

We desired to find whether our principles and our intentions were identical. We found they were. We found that there was no reasonable excuse for a further division of forces. The workers of the country are being hard pressed. We have no time to waste. If the socialist parties are not sufficiently advanced to appreciate our position, and to forward by every means the strongest possible attack upon the capitalist class, then these parties and the men of these parties have no business in the socialist movement.

This unified effort must be made now. If we continue antagonists in the political field, years and years of war between us is assured. We know the time has come to close the pages of the past, and write a new history, a history of the solidarity of labor. We know you are an earnest

factor in the political field. We ask you to consider our action in our convention. Tell us whether you think it wise. We desire to base the movement upon reason and forward it for the best interests of all.

Hillquit followed and in brief said:

When this Committee of 3 [the delegation to the SDP] was selected by the Committee of 9 [the Unity Committee], the subcommittee had some misgiving when they took into consideration the difficulties of their mission, but from the demonstration here, if the expression of sentiment can be at all used as a guide, there is no hard work before us; in fact, the amalgamation is already effected. (*Great cheering and applause.*)

Hillquit then discussed the principles, tactics, and elements of the two parties, and spoke of the “necessity of the socialists, who are continually calling upon the workingmen of all countries to unite, to get together and set a good example for the workers.”

Hayes spoke briefly and in the same tenor as Harriman and Hillquit.

The proposition for a committee of 9 to confer with the Rochester committee was carried after much discussion. Fourteen candidates finally stood for election, after many had declined. After a disorderly discussion, the motion made by a delegate who desired to hamper the work of the conference committee was hurriedly adopted, and a committee of 14 was elected by acclamation, for the purpose of conferring with the committee from the Rochester convention.² This committee subdivided itself, and four — Hoehn, Chase, MacCartney, and Heath were elected to confer with Harriman, Hayes, Hillquit, and Benham of the SLP convention. The joint committee meeting lasted from 8:30 to 12:15 at night.

Third Day [Thursday, March 8, 1900].

The report of the press committee was discussed for some time, and finally it was decided, among other things, that the names of all socialist papers should be published in SDP papers under headings indicating their standing toward the SDP papers, unattached papers, and SLP papers.

A tedious discussion embracing almost all the field of thought available to the delegates took up the time of the convention for nearly two hours upon the trades union resolution. Delegate Heath, SDP candidate for Mayor of Milwaukee, was satisfied to have resolutions

against capturing central trades organizations go in operation after the municipal campaign in Milwaukee. In fact Heath supported the resolution in general, but desired to curtail the national sentiment to fit the Milwaukee campaign. Victor Berger expressed the same view.

The SDP committee of four reported to the committee of 14 at 8 am on Thursday and their session of the 14 was a stormy one, lasting until after 11 am. At 12 o'clock MacCartney for the committee of 14 reported. The report seemed to place some obstructions in the way of union. A minority report was submitted by E. Val Putnam.

The majority report called upon any conference committee to "stand" for the name Social Democratic Party. The minority recommended the committee to urge the selection of the Social Democratic name as the most appropriate name for a socialist party in the United States.

Victor Berger, Meyer London, Bocklin of Indianapolis, Putney of Massachusetts, Margaret Haile of aMassachusetts, and others spoke strongly against the minority report, evidently in fear that a general referendum would do away with the name SDP. Meyer London of New York was violently opposed to the minority report, not desiring to allow it to come to a referendum. He said SDP was the only name that could be supported under any circumstances. the minority report was finally adopted at 6 pm by a vote of 1366 to 770; 45 delegates voted for the minority report, 19 against. The minority report is as follows:

We recommend

1. That a committee of nine be elected by this convention to confer with the committee of the Socialist Labor Party in relation to union.
2. That the convention instruct the committee of nine to urge the selection of the name "Social Democratic Party" as the most appropriate name of the united party, if union shall be effected.
3. That after the conference of the two committees aforesaid all recommendations or all reports of the committees and all questions, including especially the question of party name, shall be submitted to a majority referendum vote of each party, said vote to be taken separately by each party. Provided, however, that in case any question other than that of party name submitted to a referendum vote, shall fail of concurrence, the committee shall have power to submit new propositions regarding such matters to a referendum vote.

When the hour for adjournment (6 pm) came, a motion was carried for an extension of time to nominate national candidates, amidst great

applause. Debs was nominated in an eloquent speech by MacCartney of Massachusetts. This was seconded by Carey, Arnold of Kentucky, and others. Debs declined, pleading ill health. He was urged to accept by many speakers, but made no sign of acceptance. Carey then nominated Job Harriman of California, and the nomination was seconded by several SDP delegates. London of New York protested against the nomination of Harriman. MacCartney was nominated. Theodore Debs was also nominated. MacCartney declined in favor of Harriman. Theodore Debs declined on account of youth. A heated debated occupying an hour and a half then took place. Carey withdrew Harriman's name. Various motions were made regarding nominations. Arguments were made in favor of Harriman and Hayes. In great disorder the convention adjourned at 8 pm.

Fourth Day [Friday, March 9, 1900].

J.C. Chase, who served as chairman on the third day, was again elected to preside.

A motion to elect two delegates to the International Congress at Paris in 1900 was carried.³ Eugene Dietzgen was elected as one delegate, and on motion the election of the second delegate was referred to the joint committee of 18, the delegate to be elected by referendum.

MacCartney took the floor and state that Debs had reconsidered his declination. Great applause. Debs was declared the nominee.

G.B. Benham was called upon for a speech, and congratulated the convention upon the nomination of Debs:

...a man recognized from the Atlantic to the Pacific as one of the bravest advocates of the rights of the workers that the world has ever seen. His example has inspired the best efforts of the exponents of socialism, and his candidacy cements the union of socialist forces and assures us a grand result for the coming Presidential campaign.

Victor Berger nominated Job Harriman for Vice President. The nomination was received with applause as hearty as that which greeted the nomination of Debs. His nomination was declared unanimous, and all rose and gave three cheers for the candidates. Great enthusiasm. Handshaking was in order.

Margaret Haile, secretary of the committee on constitution, read the report of the committee. The report with but slight alteration was adopted as read.

The SDP National Executive Committee was by motion continued, subject to the action of the joint committee of 18.

On motion designs of emblems were ordered submitted to the committee of 18, the best designs to be submitted to a referendum vote of the membership. The place of meeting, as well as time of meeting of the joint committee of 18 was left to the committee without recommendation.

The committee on resolutions introduced a resolution calling attention to the fact that the farmers' condition varied in the different localities, and that the local organizations use their discretion in regard to proposed legislation and demands in accordance with socialist principles.

Hoehn of St. Louis made some remark regarding a red flag which hung in the hall. Comrade Hoehn said the flag historically represented the socialist movement in the US for 25 years:

It was carried in the great railroad strike of 1877 in Chicago. It is still an emblem which we love. It now hangs in this hall over a convention of 67 delegates. Let us hope that at the next Presidential convention it will hand over a convention of 600 delegates, representing one million socialist voters in the United States.

Votes of thanks were recorded the local SDP committee of arrangements, to the press of Indianapolis for courtesies, and to Comrades Strickland, Putnam of St. Louis, and Johnson of Chicago as secretaries.

Job Harriman was called upon for a speech. In brief he said:

I feel sure a real union of socialist forces has been consummated. The good work of the Rochester convention has been duplicated here. Let us go forward bent upon nothing but doing the best we can for the socialist movement. Upon the question of unity we are agreed. Let us now show by our efforts that we appreciate our duties and our responsibilities.

[As to] the difficulties which face us in the educational work among the working class, let us be firm and aggressive. Who shall say that following a wise and intelligent policy in gaining power, that our representatives will not have the wisdom to make and execute laws of a character beneficial to the working class? A new temple is to be built where the rights of the people shall be the guiding power in the management of public affairs.

The differences of the past have to be buried forever. Let us not judge men by their motives, but by their acts. Our duty is to see to the carrying on of that great policy of amalgamation which made grand the socialist movement in foreign lands.

This speech was greeted with great demonstration of satisfaction by the delegates.

Comrade [A.S.] Edwards led in the singing of the “Socialist Battle Hymn.” This was followed by the singing of “The Marsellaise” by Comrade Strickland and the delegates joined in the chorus.

Hillquit was called upon for a speech, and went forward amid great applause. In brief he said:

I do not know whether you have fully taken into consideration the import of the results of this last session of the convention. We have destroyed the pages of history which recorded the errors of infancy in the socialist movement in the United States. We have written a new page in socialist history. We have passed through the diseases of childhood. We have arrived at manhood. We have now a united force, which has a future, bright in its portents for the socialist movement of the world.

From today we pass into a few era of the work of the conquest of the public power. We will raise the level of the socialist movement in the United States to the position it deserves — to the level of a fighting, aggressive proletariat, with the force and intelligence to throw down the gauntlet to their enemies, the capitalist class, with the full assurance of a final victory for the forces of the militant proletariat of the United States.

Max Hayes, on being called upon to speak, in his usual happy vein referred to the honor conferred upon him in his nomination as Vice President by the Rochester convention: “But next to that honor I consider it the greatest honor that I ever had to step down and out in favor of Job Harriman, and to assent in the nomination of the splendid ticket that is to lead us on the way of progress to the goal we seek.”

A committee of five was selected (by action of the convention) to inform Eugene V. Debs of his nomination. Comrades Berger, MacCartney, Stedman, Hillquit, and Benham were elected. Hillquit was selected as spokesman.⁴ In a brief and expressive speech Comrade

Hillquit conveyed the message of the committee. Comrade Debs replied that the duty was plain and he yielded to the wishes of the convention.

Afternoon Session.

The committee to confer with the SLP was as follows: Berger of Milwaukee; Chase of Haverhill; Butscher of New York; Haile of Massachusetts; Hoehn of St. Louis; Carey of Haverhill; Heath of Milwaukee; Farmer of Texas;⁵ Stedman of Chicago.

After the assembling of the convention, Debs and Harriman, on their arrival, were welcomed with cheers and applause. This was prolonged for many minutes. Debs was called for to make a speech. In brief he said:

I have felt that a duty is imposed upon me. We must all yield to the dictates of the will of the delegates of the socialist parties. I feel not only the honor, but the responsibility of the trust that has been brought to me. I thank you also for bringing as my colleague upon our national ticket so grand a man and so true a socialist as Job Harriman of California. (Applause.) We are building anew home and a new place for the working class. We are now the messengers and the functionaries for the establishment of the new civilization. In the new order shall be seen the triumph of labor and truth, and the downfall of the capitalist class, and the upholders of the present degrading arrangements in the industrial system of today.

We pass on to our duties, proud that we are socialists. I believe in the conquering and emancipating power of socialism. This belief makes me desire to live. Without the hope for better conditions the world becomes a jungle, and mankind wild beasts devouring one another. With socialism in operation we can look one another in the face and call ourselves men.

Again I thank you for the honor, and ask that you join me in my ardent hope for the future of the United Socialist Party of America. (*Great applause.*)

Job Harriman was called upon and in brief said:

In California the bright sunshine and the general conditions bring forth the fruits and flowers that bring gladness and comfort to man. So it would be in a true and honest society. The proper conditions would bring forth such a race of men and women as the world has as yet

never seen. I have been asked if the world is worth saving. I say we are not here only to save the present generation, but to make all the world of futurity as good and great as we can.

We wish to open every opportunity to every man. The dynamic power is here to forward us to the end we seek. Let us see that the power is properly directed. The factories are prisons. If our conditions are such that long hours and poverty shut the libraries to the workers and the schools are closed to the worker's children, there we do not have the benefits of civilization and consequently the worker must sink into intellectual squalor and physical degradation. It is to stop this process that we are endeavoring to change the conditions that surround the workers.

We seek an end worthy of the grandest efforts of man. Let us never falter in our task. (*Great applause.*)

James F. Carey was called upon and in brief said:

I open the campaign for Debs and Harriman today. When the news of this unification reaches the factory hands of Massachusetts, they will rejoice; yes, they will doubly rejoice when they read the names of Debs and Harriman as the national candidates. I see in the future the chains dropping from the workers. I can see the key inserted in the lock of the economic prison. I long to see the day when the members of my class will step forth with the full powers of society at their command, for the first time crowned with the full glory of manhood. (*Applause.*)

All matters not adjusted by the convention were left to the joint committee. With repeated cheers for socialism and unity, Debs and Harriman, the convention adjourned sine die.

The SLP delegates present conferred with the SDP committee after the convention had adjourned. Job Harriman, chairman; Margaret Haile, secretary; Sunday, March 25, at 9 am was selected as the time for the meeting of the committee at New York City.

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¹ G.B. Benham, a member of the Unity Committee elected by the Rochester convention, was the editor of *The Class Struggle*, the longest running socialist newspaper on the West coast and seems to have attended the SDP convention in the capacity of an individual acting as a journalist.

² The committee of nine selected for the actual negotiations with the SLP counterparts included William Butscher of New York; Frederic Heath and Victor Berger of Wisconsin; Seymour Stedman of Illinois; John C. Chase, James F. Carey, and Margaret Haile of Massachusetts; William Lonergan of Connecticut, and G.A. Hoehn of Missouri.

³ The 5th Congress of the Second International was held in Paris from Sept. 23-27, 1900.

⁴ This extraordinary committee included three members of the SDP and two visitors to the convention from the dissident SLP. It is particularly telling that the top leader of the 1899 revolt against the administrative regime, Morris Hillquit, was tapped as speaker for the group.

⁵ It is unclear when and why William Lonergan of Connecticut was substituted for W.E. Farmer on this committee.