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# The Chicago Conventions.

by Max Eastman

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The convention of the old Socialist Party began with a belligerent apology by the national secretary, Adolph Germer. The convention of the Left Wing began with a great singing of the "Internationale," three cheers for Revolutionary Socialism, three cheers for the Russian Soviet Republic, three cheers for Debs, and three cheers for the IWW. The convention of the Communist Party began with an announcement that "the management committee has decided that there shall be no smoking during the convention," followed by an accurate rendition of the "Internationale" with full orchestra and brass.

These different ways of beginning were characteristic. In the old SP convention, the "parent body," the emotional tone was a little apologetic throughout, a little wan and anxious, and yet at the same time indignant of criticism — about what you might expect of the mother of twins.

The Left Wing convention — which became the Communist Labor Party — had a little of the quality of a revival meeting. The delegates were always singing and shouting and feeling that the true faith was about to be restored in their hearts and home. At least they were, until the Program Committee made its report, training some big guns from the Manifesto of the Third International on them, and they realized that they must either put their names to a program of deliberate, hardheaded revolutionary science, or go back where they came from. They took a long, hard breath then, and most of them "came through," but they did not come through singing.

The Communist Convention — more properly called the Slavic-American Communist Convention — was characterized throughout by a spirit of youthful but sophisticated efficiency. It was a consciously expert convention. It showed the rest of them what a

convention ought to be. It was almost incredibly neat and clean and regular. I was sitting there some time before the formal opening, admiring the way the big sheets of heavy yellow paper were spread over the delegates' tables and folded and tacked underneath; I was admiring the smooth high railing of new wood which divided the delegates' stalls from the audience room at the back; in particular I was admiring the soda-water-fountain shine and polish on the white oilcloth which covered the press-table where I had laid my hat; I was just reflecting that these things had surely been prepared and arranged by an unmarried lady of advanced years, when a young Russian comrade came up with a damp cloth and asked me kindly to remove my hat so that he could "clean" that oilcloth!

## A Little History.

In order to understand how these conventions came to be, and what they came to be, it is necessary to apply the mind to some rather complicated history. I will generalize that history as clearly and fairly as I can.

There have always been elements in the American Socialist Party who were more revolutionary than the majority and in a state of continual protest against the official conduct of the party. They were more devoted to the principle of the class struggle, less willing to waste energy in office-seeking, reformism, and parliamentarianism. They believed in the IWW. They believed in the Communist Manifesto of 1848. These elements were for the most part distinctly American; they were never very conspicuous in the "foreign federations" affiliated with the American party. And also they were never very strong.

The proletarian revolution in Russia and the sur-

rounding countries — proving the literal truth of almost every word in the Communist Manifesto — gave them their strength. It sent a wave of militant or Bolshevik, or Communist, Socialism around the world. And this wave naturally reached the Slavic federations first, and affected them the most. They became almost unanimously and automatically Bolshevik. At the same time their membership increased enormously — the gospel being accepted by thousands of new recruits, both through a genuine emotion not unrelated to patriotism, and through expediency, it being generally understood that a Russian would not amount to much at home unless he had been a socialist here. This very willing membership was organized into a magnificent political machine by the brainy officials of the Slavic Federations, and it supplied both revolutionary will and revolutionary power to the scattered elements of the American Left Wing.

These officials were able to cast the vote and appropriate the funds of about 40,000 out of the 100,000 members of the Socialist Party. They made Louis C. Fraina's paper, *The Revolutionary Age*, and its wide circulation, possible. They made it possible, in spite of the Post Office censorship, to carry the "Left Wing Manifesto and Program," and the motto, "Capture the Party for Revolutionary Socialism," into the hands of almost every Socialist in the country. No one can estimate the amount that this propaganda accomplished — as compared with the direct effect of the European revolutions upon the party membership — but it is certain that by last May or June an overwhelming majority of American Socialists were committed to the Left Wing Program in general, and the Slavic Federations formed the solid and well-organized heart of this majority.

That all sounds very simple, but it was not so simple. In the first place the Left Wing took to itself a degree of organization and autonomy, which gave the Right Wing officials who controlled the party plenty of emotional, and not a few legal, grounds for expelling Left Wing members. The Slavic Federations were expelled in a body; the State of Michigan was expelled; other states, locals, branches, and members were expelled. The membership of the party was reduced by and during these proceedings — according to the report of its own secretary — from 109,000 to 39,000.

In the second place, the leaders of the Slavic Fed-

erations — partly as a result of their expulsion, partly through a thinly veiled nationalistic egotism, and partly through a sincere if somewhat theological desire to exclude all wavering or "centrist" elements from the new organization, decided at the national Left Wing conference in June, that the idea of capturing the American Socialist Party, or even attempting to capture it, was wrong, and that a call should be issued for the immediate organization of a "Communist Party."

In the third place the expelled "Michigan crowd" — although really too political-minded to be called communists — joined the Slavic Federations in this particular demand, and the Federation Leaders made every use of this increase of their voting power in the Left Wing, although privately condemning the Michigan ideas and intending to suppress them when it came time to adopt a platform.

Even so, however, they were unable to control the Left Wing conference. It decided by a comfortable majority to adhere to the original program of capturing the party, and it elected a "Left Wing Council" to carry this out. The Slavic Federations and the "Michigan crowd" then decided to ignore the decision of the conference and call a Communist Convention, whether the rest of the Left Wing agreed to do it or not.

The majority of the "Left Wing Council," together with the *Revolutionary Age* — the organ of the whole movement — denounced them as "traitors" for a week or two, but then suddenly capitulated in the middle of the summer, abandoned the slogan, "Capture the Party for Revolutionary Socialism," upon which their paper had built up its constituency and united the American revolutionaries, and joined in the call for an immediate Communist Convention to meet in Chicago on September 1st.

This sudden change of front occurred so late that there was no time left, even if there had been a moral possibility, for those who had united upon the original plan to unite upon the change. For better or worse, the Left Wing was split into two camps.

On the one hand there were the heads of the Slavic Federations and the Michigan Socialists, with the *Revolutionary Age* and all the National Machinery of the Left Wing organization, in the hands of Louis C. Fraina of Boston, I.E. Ferguson of Chicago, C.E. Ruthenberg of Ohio, Maximilian Cohen of New York,

John Ballam of Massachusetts, Hiltzik of the Left Wing Jewish Federation, Jay Lovestone, Rose Pastor Stokes and a few other non-Slavic delegates.

On the other hand, adhering to the original program of attempting to capture the party, there was the minority of the National Left Wing Council, Ben Gitlow and John Reed of New York, with other prominent Socialists of the Left like Kate Greenhalgh (Kate Sadler) of Washington, Joe Coldwell of Rhode Island, Fred Harwood of New Jersey, Max Bedacht of California, Jack Carney of Duluth, William Bross Lloyd of Chicago, Ludwig Lore, Editor of the *Volkszeitung* of New York, Margaret Prevey of Ohio, Tichenor of St. Louis, Owens of Illinois, Wagenknecht of Ohio, Katterfeld of Indiana, Mrs. Harmon of Kansas, and 92 other delegates from 22 states. To this group there was also promised the adherence of the Italian Socialist Federation, and the Scandinavian and Left Wing German Federations, together with 19 Slavic Federations (sic.) who were expelled from the major organization for resisting the machine.

Each of these groups would like to think that the rank and file of the American Communist movement was represented in its convention. But it is impossible to decide that question now. The rank and file never had time to consider and act upon the issue between them. It was a division among leaders, and a very vague and queer one, too. Delegates were wandering from one convention to another under indefinite instructions, or no instructions at all, except the understanding that they were to form a party in accord with the Manifesto of the Third International. Out of this unhappy confusion almost everybody hoped and strove for unity of the revolutionary elements, except the heads of the Slavic Federations, whose absolute control would have disappeared if unity had been achieved, and who maintained that their absolute control was necessary to the formation of a pure and perfect party of communism.

### **The Parent Body.**

If this confusion of elements represented is exasperating, it is at least a relief to know that the conventions occurred in some historic order. The Socialist Party convention was convened in Machinists Hall *on Saturday morning, August 30*. The Left Wing delegates

who were seated in that convention walked out and joined with the rejected delegates waiting in a room downstairs to form the convention of the Communist Labor Party *on Sunday afternoon*. The convention of the Communist Party was called to order in "Smolny Institute," a hall leased by the Russian Federation of Chicago, *on Monday, September 1st, at about noon*.

Art Young and I arrived at Machinists' Hall early Saturday morning — early enough to find Julius Gerber looking like an unsettled thundercloud and Jack Reed beaming. This is not because Julius was vanquished and Jack Reed victorious, but because Julius doesn't enjoy a fight and Jack does. It seems that some of the Left Wingers arrived early at the building, and decided after a caucus to go upstairs and take possession of the hall, putting their own national secretary, Wagenknecht, in the chair when the time came, and proceeding to organize the Convention. Having elected their National Executive Committee by an overwhelming majority, and having through their committee duly appointed their secretary, they felt justified in this procedure, notwithstanding that the election had been set aside as fraudulent by the old National Executive Committee. So they proceeded upstairs in a rather formidable frame of mind. They were met and opposed at the door by Julius Gerber, the secretary of local New York, and it seems that Gerber in his turn was "set aside." We heard a good many different stories of this incident by eyewitnesses, and none of them were quite so bloodcurdling as what we read in the newspapers. It seemed to one of our informers that "Gerber could have licked Reed, if Reed hadn't held him so far up in the air that he couldn't reach down." Another comrade said that Reed acted just like a nice big dog, shaking himself. Another reported that there was "a little windpipe work on both sides." Gerber stated to the convention that he made Reed understand that swinging a sledgehammer with the proletariat is just as good a preparation for life's battles as playing football at college. At any rate, the "Left Wingers" got in, and there they were, and what was the right wing going to do about it?

Some of them didn't know what they were going to do, but Adolph Germer knew. He may not have consulted anybody when he arranged to have the police there, but he consulted the membership figures and the record of recent votes for officers, and votes

on referendums, which were in his possession, and he decided that if the official minority were going to exclude the voting majority from the convention, they would have to do it with the forces of the capitalist state. In that he was entirely right.

Germer never denied that he had arranged to have the police there, although some members of the national committee denied it for him. When he was asked point-blank across the floor of the convention whether the officials of the Socialist Party had brought the police to that building he said, "What officials do you mean?" and withdrew his attention while some interrupter took up the talk. But he did deny that he told the police to "treat 'em rough," as two passionately indignant delegates subsequently informed the convention. He said that he asked the contested delegates two or three times "in a comradely spirit" to leave the room, before he told the police to put them out, and that he didn't tell the police anything else.

Two women who were among those put out, swore to the truth of the following account; one of them, Mrs. Harmon of Kansas, was later seated in the Convention and made the Convention believe what she said:

"The first thing I saw was that they were trying to eject Reed through the door. Soon after that Germer came up to us where we were sitting, and said, 'You'll have to clear the room.'

"I'm a delegate,' I said.

"It don't make any difference,' he said. 'Clear the room. If you don't I'll call the police.'

"I said to myself, 'Well, I have a right to the convention floor, and I'm going to sit here 'til the police tell me to go.'

"Pretty soon a policeman came up to me and said, 'You'll have to go, Misses.'

"I went, but I went kind of slow, and I heard Germer say, 'Officer, clear the hall, and if they don't go, *policemen, do your duty!*'

"So the delegates who were with Berger and Germer stayed in the hall, and the rest of us went out, and our delegate who received the largest voted in the State of Kansas was put out of the Socialist Convention by the police!"

Perhaps these excessively lively preliminaries accounted for the unceremonious opening of the convention. With a beautiful upstairs hall like a little the-

atre, one whole side a great sunny sky-window, and decorations containing twenty-five American flags, I expected a certain amount of introductory hallelujah of some kind. But Germer simply stood up, looking like a big well-dressed police-sergeant off duty, banged the gavel on the table, and started in.

He stated to a round of applause that "We intend to follow the splendid example set by our comrades in Russia," and added in a severe silence, "By that I want it distinctly understood that we do not intend to adopt the same methods."

He struck the keynote of the convention there. And he struck another keynote when he said, "The St. Louis program and the jail sentences of our officials prove the revolutionary and non-Scheidemann character of the party."

It is characteristic of old people to attach a great deal of importance to what they have done in the past. And the majority of the convention were old. Even some of the young ones were old. They seemed to think it was personal and impertinent for anyone to be chiefly concerned about what they were doing now, or what they were going to do in the future.

"There is no issue at stake" — "We are all agreed in principle" — "It is all a matter of personal jealousy" — "If a few so-called leaders would get out of the way, we could have a united party" — that was the burden of the talk and feeling in the anterooms of the convention. I suppose it will be a rather exasperating thing to say, but I felt sorry for a good many of the delegates. They had served their time, they had borne the heat of battle when some of us were in our cradles, and then to crown it all they had stood up under the bitter test of the St. Louis declaration, going around their home towns for two years, solitary, vilified, whipped with the hatred of their neighbors, beaten and worn down by the universal war-madness of a nation, and not flinching. They could not understand why they should be shoved aside. And I could not either, any more than I can understand death. But it is significant that in the conventions of the young, the conventions whose eyes were on the future and their muscles ready for action, there was not a single person to be found who would say that the split was personal, and that there were no vital issues at stake. They could not think of saying it; they were wholly absorbed in the issues at stake.

Germer's speech did not sail very clear after he began denouncing the Left Wing leaders as "Harry Orchards of the Socialist movement," describing them as going about "in the dark like midnight thieves sneaking from ear to ear, whispering, indubitably hoping thereby that the comrades may think there is something wrong with those selected by the comrades to manage the affairs of the party." Cries of "Count the Ballots!" "Is it in the Constitution that you have to make a speech?" brought his defense to an end, and the balloting for temporary chairman began.

Seymour Stedman, the Right Wing candidate, received 88 votes, and J.M. Coldwell of Rhode Island, the Left Wing candidate, 37. There were enough Left Wing delegates in the building to have elected Coldwell with a substantial majority, even though 40,000 of their members had already gone to the Communist Party, but only these 37 had trickled through the official sieve. The rest were "contested," and most of them never got through the credentials committee, and many of them never tried.

The pulse of the convention rose noticeably when Stedman took the chair. His sturdy and winning grace of utterance made the delegates feel a little sure they were not wrong. But his speech, like Germer's, was a summing up for the defense. And his defense, like Germer's, rested upon a record that is past, and, in this time of rapid movement, stale and ready to be forgotten. He did not say that the Socialist Party would join the Third International and loyally stand up with our Russian comrades who are starving and dying and pouring out their blood in battle for socialism, and everybody knew that it would not.

Stedman scored a point as chairman when some impertinent delegate "rose to inquire" why we should elect a sergeant-at-arms when we have the police force?

"Well," he said, "that election was provided for at a time when it was understood that all the comrades would be gentlemen at least." But the police question would not die down. It would not let itself be forgotten for two hours at a time. Once it was a white-faced ministerial comrade in the audience room, at the side of the hall.

"Comrades, I demand the attention of the delegates!" he shouted. "I just heard one of these policemen threatening to throw a comrade downstairs, and he said 'You won't light on your feet either, you'll think

you came down in an aeroplane.' I ask you if that is the way visiting Socialists are going to be treated by this convention?"

"What kind of Socialists are they?" from the New York delegation.

From Stedman: "I should suggest that it would be a good idea to forget what occurred this morning. At the present time Chicago is under the police department, whether you like it or not."

From George Goebel: "I say anybody who says we invited the police here are God damn liars!"

From Germer: "I'm glad they're here!"

And this second storm was no sooner past, and the troubled hearts quieting themselves a little, when in pops a letter from the Chicago Machinists — that one dread sovereign of all political socialists, a real labor union:

Dear Comrades and Friends:

On behalf of the Die and Tool Makers' Lodge No. 113, International Association of Machinists, and the Machinists Society of Chicago, we protest against the harboring and use of police in this hall. This hall is the property, as well as the sanctuary, of a progressive and militant labor organization, based upon the class struggle. We do not permit our members to work under police protection; we can not conceive how we can let any meeting in this hall be carried on under police protection, when we as an organization condemn it and oppose it. While we are not represented in your convention as individual members or representative of an organization, we nevertheless are with you in spirit. For all these reasons we can not let the police remain as your protectors, or perhaps your invited guests, without submitting our deepest protest. We call upon you to take steps to remove the police or make such arrangements as will satisfy us that you are not responsible for the presence of the police.

We are not asking this to put hardship on you, but for the best interest of the Socialist party and the labor movement in general.

Yours for International Solidarity,

EXECUTIVE BOARD  
Die & Tool Makers Lodge No. 113

L.P. VANCE  
CARL HARIG  
G.T. FRANCKEL  
P. POKARA

After a serious pause one of the delegates proposed a resolution stating that it is "the sense of this convention" that the police are not here at the invitation of the party officials. Another remarked that such

a resolution would prove that the convention had no sense, for they would be stating something that they could not know.

Claessens of New York offered a resolution “that the police department of Chicago shall be and hereby is disbanded.”

Mayor Hoan of Milwaukee asserted that “they came here under the invitation of Germer for the purpose of protecting our legitimate rights and purposes,” and proposed that no apologies should be made.

“We in Milwaukee,” said Berger, “would have done it a good deal better than Germer did, because we have our own police.” His speech was the straightest one I heard. “I’ve never tried to be revolutionary,” he said, “but I’ve tried to be honest. If the police weren’t here, *none of you would be*, so what’s the use of all this hypocrisy!”

It was finally voted to send a communication to the Machinists union stating the facts, but just what the facts were, nobody knew — unless it was the policeman who told a reporter that Germer had called up the chief and asked that they be on hand early.

In the midst of this storm a telegram arrived from some rustic local: “Peace and harmony will lead us to success — hurrah for International Socialism!”

The Left Wing Delegates — about 30 of them — walked out of this convention after it adopted a motion to consider (but not act upon) the report of the National Executive Committee, before the status of all contested delegates was determined. J.M. Coldwell of Rhode Island simply rose in his chair and said, “At this point I am going to leave this convention and I call upon all delegates of the Left Wing to withdraw.”

“That is your privilege,” said Stedman, and the business of the convention proceeded.

It was a business largely as I have indicated, of self-justification upon the part of the official machine for resisting the Left Wing machine up to the point of wrecking the party — although the Left Wing Machine had organized a clear majority of the members. And this business was made interesting by the fact that a lively handful of semi-Left Wingers, or at least conscientious objectors against tyranny, was left on the floor. They were led by Kruse, who stated that in spite of his disgust at the acts of the officials, he believed it was a question of “sane Socialism against direct action,” and he intended to “stick by the party and make

it what he thought it ought to be.”

Judge Panken of New York was less moderate. For him it was a question of “tying up with a bunch of anarchists,” and he was glad of everything they did.

A delegate from Maryland supported him with the statement that “Every organization has an inherent right to preserve itself.” He said “we lawyers” in the course of his remarks, but it was not quite clear whom he meant to include.

Another delegate offered the prudent remark that “We’ve got to endorse the action of the National Executive Committee, but we’ve also got to be able to inform our constituents that we gave the NEC hell!”

Barney Berlin of Chicago, for twenty-five years a worker in the Socialist movement, was the old man Nestor of this council, presenting what seems to me the only justification for the National Executive Committee that there is. He reminded the convention of historic instances in which legal and constitutional forms and formulas had been violated in the interest of a deeper principle, and concluded, “I have not been in harmony with certain tendencies in the NEC, but *I glory in their spunk in having saved the party.*”

That is a pretty final attitude to adopt toward all the atrocity-stories that have accompanied this conflict, and it applies equally to both wings. The people who created the Socialist party all of them have enough healthy anarchy in their blood to transgress the forms of law when they are aroused over a principle. There is no doubt that they were so aroused, and did so transgress on both sides. And while I think that the principle on the Left side is the true one, and therefore I can applaud their “spunk” a little more heartily than that of the Right, nevertheless I recognize a similar moral quality in them both. “Necessity knows no law” is a maxim that lives in the heart of every live man.

Somebody will ask me just what the principle upon which this split occurred, and which enabled trustworthy people to commit so many moral and legal atrocities. And I answer, in the most general terms, as follows:

It is a question of whether the Socialist theory shall be permitted to recede into the cerebrum, where it becomes a mere matter of creed, ritual, and sabbath-day emotion, as the Christian theory has done, or whether it shall be kept in live and going contact with everyday nerves and muscles of action.

Before parting from the picture of the Right Wing convention, I ought to state that a motion endorsing the action of the old NEC in setting aside as invalid the recent election of a new NEC was passed by those remaining in the convention, without a dissenting vote. I ought to record also some of the indignant demands for “justice” to the Left Wing, or what remained of it, which were occasionally voiced by comrades of the Right. In particular I preserve a picture of George Goebel’s long, earnest, and excited figure, darting about over the convention like a superintending dragonfly. “Aw, comrades, let’s take a chance on fair play!” was one of his characteristic interpellations.

### **The Left Wing Convention.**

It was twilight when the Left Wing delegates convened in the billiard room downstairs — twilight that came dimly through ground glass windows into a low room with dull blue walls. But there was more life to be felt there — if life is spontaneous volition — than anywhere else during all the conventions. It seemed as though a thing with growth in it were being born in that place. In the other places whatever came was engineered into being by the perceptible workings of an established machine. This may be — in cold reality — either a good or a bad sign for the Communist Labor Party. I record it simply as a fact.

Wagenknecht, who had been made National Secretary by that Executive Committee whose election was declared invalid upstairs, opened the convention here. The sound of his gavel was greeted with a song and those cheers for which all the delegates stood up. Wagenknecht’s speech was a simple statement that having done everything else in his power to give the membership a chance to express itself, he had summoned the delegates here “as the Regular Convention of the Socialist Party of the United States.” He then presided during the election of Owens of Illinois as Temporary Chairman.

Owens is a cripple — pale, but jolly and fearless as crippled people sometimes are. I can remember one sentence of his speech: “We must be ready to back up the revolutionary implications of everything we do here, and if it leads us along with Debs we must be willing to go there.”

Margaret Prevey was elected vice-chairman, and

soon took Owens’ place in the chair. It would have been well if she had stayed there throughout the convention, for she was not prepared in her mind for the actions which were taken on the floor, but she was the most able and good-humored and the best-looking chairman in the place. In its initial mood of exaltation the convention hesitated a little at the election of a sergeant-at-arms, and finally appointed William Bross Lloyd “a sort of page boy.” But there was no demur after about three hours of work, when Lloyd asked the chair to appoint “two assistant sergeants-at-arms for the purpose of clearing the aisles.”

After sending a greeting to Debs and all class-war prisoners, and accepting the report of the National Executive Committee, the convention proceeded immediately to attempt to achieve unity with the “Communist Convention.” C.E. Ruthenberg of Ohio, who had joined in the call for the Communist Convention, but nevertheless took his seat here for the time, introduced a motion that would have delayed the organization of a party here until after a consultation could be had with those who were to organized the Communist Party the next day. It would have been a humble act on the part of these delegates, leading towards a possible submission to the control of the Slavic Federations. It was vigorously, and at times, violently opposed — especially by Jack Carney, who declared “before God,” as irreligious Irishmen always do, that if this convention went over to the Federations, he would go home and tell the workers of Duluth that there was no party of communism in existence.

John Reed offered to amend Ruthenberg’s motion somewhat to the following effect: We declare ourselves to be the party of Communism in the United States and we invite all other revolutionary groups to join us.

Katterfeld of Indiana offered a further amendment, to this effect: We declare ourselves to be the official Socialist Party of the United States, we invite all other revolutionary groups to join us, and we will elect a committee of five to confer with the Committee of the Communist Convention in order to find a basis for uniting the Communist elements in one party. It was this amendment (I regret to say not accurately quoted) which finally passed with an almost unanimous vote.

The principal points advanced by speakers in

favor of sacrificing everything to unite with the Communist Convention were these:

- (1) No principles divide us.
- (2) Our unwillingness to do so is due to the personal pride of a few leaders.
- (3) The whole trouble is that "there are too many statesmen in New York."
- (4) The capitalists are uniting, and they will be glad to see us divide.
- (5) It is a cheap satisfaction to say that we organized the party of Communism first.

These points were acknowledged by the opposition who advanced the following points in favor of organizing a party nevertheless:

- (1) The delegates of the Slavic Federations have already made it clear that they will not admit us, except upon terms which leave their machine in control of the convention.
- (2) They are politicians and political bosses.
- (3) They are at heart against industrial union action in the class struggle.
- (4) They were traitors to the Left Wing program, and the decision of the Left Wing conference in June.
- (5) They are incapable of cooperating with American comrades, they will demand autonomy, and another split will follow.
- (6) It is impossible to start a communist movement in the American proletariat with a Russian nationalistic group in control.

It was midnight when Katterfeld's motion was passed and the committee elected. And thus having declared itself to be a party — indeed, *the* party — the convention adjourned until morning, when the election of committees for routine work would begin.

### **The Communist Convention.**

The Chicago police supplied the best of all arguments in favor of the Communist Convention. The Right Wing was protected by the police, the Left Wing was ignored, but the hall of the Communist convention was raided, photographs taken, decorations and revolutionary placards destroyed, and two men arrested. Perhaps this argument is a little crippled by the fact that one of the men arrested was a lawyer, and the other was Dennis E. Batt of Detroit, one of the leaders of that Michigan group whose excessively political

or educational brand of Communism is the chief weakness of the Convention.

A glowing tribute was paid to the female sex by Detective-Sergeant Egan when he arrested Batt. Rose Pastor Stokes called out: "They are arresting our comrade — three cheers for the revolution!" Egan yelled back: "Shut up — it's always a woman that starts the trouble!"

Batt was informed of the presence of a detective with a warrant for his arrest just before he went on the platform to open the convention, but he was not much disturbed by it. He stood up there looking very four-square, as he is, with a long cigarette holder in his mouth, and a lighted cigarette — defying the regulations just laid down by his own committee if not the laws of the land — and his speech was brief and quiet. He hoped that the delegates would "exercise forbearance in their deliberations and conduct themselves as men and women who have the good of the American working class at heart."

Louis C. Fraina was elected temporary chairman, and make the "key note" speech. It was the same note that had been sounding all along in the *Revolutionary Age*, with this significant, if somewhat incredible, addition: "We now end once for all, all factional disputes. We are at an end with bickering. We are at an end with controversy. We are here to build a party of action."

Considering that the convention was to spend the remaining hours of that day until well after midnight, and all of the next day until late afternoon, in a locked battle between its two factions on the question whether or not it would deign to elect a committee of five to meet the committee elected by a third faction represented in the left Wing Convention — Fraina's promise seemed a little bit premature.

To anyone interested in brains for brains' sake, this battle was vividly entertaining. It was brilliant, sharp, rapid, full of poignant contrasts in personality, far more philosophic, more erudite, more at ease in the Marxian dialect, than anything to be heard at either of the other conventions. The points made by those opposing the election of a conciliatory committee was that the elements who had bolted from the old Socialist Party with the Left Wing were not true Communists. They were "centrists," "Kautskyians," in some cases mere radicals who objected to the tyranny of the

party officials. All but a few, at least, of the true communists had abandoned the Left Wing program of capturing the party, and come directly to this Communist Convention.

The point made by those advocating conciliation was that, although undoubtedly some Kautskyians and centrist were to be found in the other convention, they were not predominant, and they were not any more predominant than the centrists in this present convention — the “Michigan crowd” being those alluded to.

Having already attended a session of the other convention, and satisfied myself that there were really many delegates there who had no understanding of the Moscow program and whose revolt against the old party was but an emotional reaction against the acts of its officials, I was rather friendly to the opposition in this debate. I cannot divide and classify people and place them so accurately in the various pigeonholes of the Marxian theory in advance of their acts, as most of these speakers could; but I fully realize the necessity of casting out of the concept of proletarian solidarity, not only the Scheidemanns and Noskes who murder the revolution with machine guns, but also the Kautskys, the Longuets, and MacDonalDs, who poison it with passivity and negative thoughts. That peculiar state of mind described by Lenin as the “wavering center,” expressing the fluctuating will of those economic classes not wholly bourgeois nor yet wholly proletarian, is an identifiable thing, and a thing that must be regarded as hostile in the period of the actual breakdown of capitalism.

In spite of my realization of this fact, however, and a prepossession that had been growing in favor of the “Communist Convention,” I was discouraged by what I heard in the course of this debate, and when the opposition won and the Left Wing convention was given the cold shoulder by a vote of 75 to 31, I felt like going back to the Left Wing convention.

It is not easy to tell exactly why, but after I recovered from admiring the mere quantity of abstract intellectuality which filled the air, my mind began to grow a little tired, as it does at a game of chess, with so many problems that are unrelated to reality or action. Along towards ten or eleven o'clock a realization stole into my head that there was something a little childish, a little sophomoric, in all this exaggerated states-

manship. I saw in the flesh that academic and rather wordy self-importance which has characterized the official literature of the Left Wing, and made it get so much on my nerves, as well as on the nerves of the IWW editors. The political and educational expression of the class struggle is always excessively loud and distressing, like the racing of a motor when you detach it from the running-gear without shutting off the gas, and in this group of self-consciously detached and perfect Bolsheviks that impression was exaggerated almost to the point of burlesque.

“Our purpose is to organize a real, a pure communist party,” said comrade Lunin. “We will allow the delegates of the other convention to come to our credentials committee one by one, and we will examine them thoroughly to find out if they are communists or not. For you can not become a communist in one day — no, nor in two days, nor in three days, nor in a year. Even in Russia it takes plenty of time to make a true Bolshevik.” Like most of the Slavic Federation leaders, Lunin was himself a Menshevik only about a year ago.

“Give them the test of humiliation,” said another earnest youth. “Demand that they come here and ask admission to this convention. This humiliation will test the sincerity of their revolutionary principles.”

“Let them come here and sit in our convention without a voice,” said Nicholas Hourwich, “We are perfectly willing to allow them to sit here. They might learn something. They might even learn enough to go next time to the communist convention.” Hourwich is the editor of the Russian daily, *Novy Mir* — a strange, intense, and intensely impractical intellectual gnome, with feminine gesture and attitude, but a kind of obdurate unsentimental force. He observed the ruthless workings of his political machine with so infinitely complacent a smile on his features, that I could not help feeling glad he was so happy.

The only effective opposition he receive was from Fraina and I.E. Ferguson of Chicago, who made gnashing and spirited attacks upon this machine that was rolling over them, to the added delight of its engineers. “That man is a communist,” said Fraina, “who happens to agree with your particular purposes at a particular moment. While you were boasting of the purity of your communism, you have made unholy deals with those whom you know and admit are not

communists.”

“The real question is,” said Ferguson, “Do you want to exclude English speaking delegates from the floor of this convention. It is not whether you want to exclude centrists. The test of a communist for you is when or where one chooses to organize the communist party.”

At the conclusion of the same speech he said: “I don’t want you to lose control of this convention, because I know that your control means that we will have a real communist party in the United States.” I do not know how to reconcile these two statements, and I do not believe Ferguson does either, but he was sincerely convinced by them both.

My impression was — to sum it up — that the heads of the Slavic Socialist Machine are in a mood for the organization of a Russian Bolshevik church, with more interest in expelling heretics than winning converts, and with a pretty fixed opinion that although Americans must perforce be admitted to the church, they must not be admitted in such numbers as to endanger the machine’s hold upon the dogmas and the collection box. (It is their mood, not their conscious intent, that these words describe.) And it seems to me that what has compelled some at least of the American comrades to accept the dictation of this machine, and try to form an American proletarian party with so preposterous a handicap, is that inward dread of not proving sufficiently revolutionary which hounds us all. It hounds us because we are conscious of the continual temptation of respectability and personal prudence, and because we see so many of our fighting Comrades lose their courage and fall by the wayside. It is a wholesome dread. But we ought to be sufficiently sure we are revolutionary, so that we have a good deal of energy left for trying to be intelligent. And it is not intelligent to start the American Communist Party with a mixture of theological zeal, machine politics, and nationalistic egoism in control.

Taking Fraina’s and Ferguson’s own characterization of these Federations, without adding a word, there is enough reason for desiring that they should function by themselves as a Slavic Communist Party, and that the American party should begin elsewhere, more modestly, and more in proportion to the actual state of the revolutionary movement in America. I could not help thinking what Lenin himself would do

to this group who are trying to bluff us in the name of our internationalism, into accepting a nationalistic control of the movement.

Some similar thoughts must have entered the minds of the American delegates, for after this session was over and the vote taken, they delivered an ultimatum to the Federations, stating that they would bolt the convention and go home, if the vote was not rescinded and the committee appointed. Accordingly the convention was adjourned, and the next morning and afternoon devoted to a caucus of the Slavic machine. Then the convention was called together again about five o’clock, and the vote rescinded — unanimously. It is a formidable machine that can reverse 75 votes without a slip, without allowing one single individual opinion to record itself. It commands admiration. But I think there is a discouraging lack of realism and the sense of workmanship in a convention that will spend twenty-four hours fighting over the appointment of a committee, when it is clearly obvious all the time that the committee will do exactly the same thing that the convention would have done if the committee had not been appointed.

The committee did, of course, go up to the convention of the Left Wing — by this time already the Communist Labor Party — and hand in a typewritten document embodying the will of the Slavic Federations. Beneath a good deal of diplomatic and rather Wilsonian indirectness, this document simply stated that the Slavic Federations would not permit a union of the two elements upon terms that would endanger their control, which they consider essential for the formation of a party of true communism.

The Communist Labor Party adopted a resolution making a standing offer to the Communists to unite the two parties on equal terms. That is the end of the matter, until the rank and file of the revolutionary workers take action upon it.

### **The Communist Labor Party.**

It was something of a relief to wander down to the IWW headquarters, after all this theoretical striving after wind, and examine the new rotary press they are installing, and hear the clicking of two accomplished linotype machines in the back room. And it seemed a good omen for the Communist Labor Party

that when they found themselves too large and busy for the downstairs room in the Machinists Building, they moved over to the IWW Hall on Throop Street.

There a battle was fought and won, which for me seemed to contain the heart of the drama of these Chicago Conventions. It was not a battle between two machines, for there was no time or possibility here for the formation of a machine. It was a battle between those who understood and accepted the Moscow manifesto and wanted to apply it in a concrete, realistic way to American conditions, and those who did not understand or accept it, dreaded its practical application, and wanted to take refuge in more vague and old-fashioned socialistic pronouncements. The most powerful figure in the militant group — and the best speaker, I should say, in all three of the conventions — was Ben Gitlow. The function of furnishing forth drafts of documents, making motions, drawing up amendments and resolutions, and being ever on hand in general with a wealth of ideas was filled by John Reed. On the other side Margaret Prevey and Louis Boudin were equally prominent and equally definite in their opinions.

The convention, being somewhat dismayed by the voluminous and plain-spoken “program” which Reed’s committee brought in, and yet feeling in their bones that they were going to have to adopt it, appointed another committee to draw up a “platform.” I think they had an idea that they would keep the program as a kind of “esoteric doctrine” to be revealed only to the true disciples, and distribute the platform to the general public. So they put their more tender-minded or “centrist” members on the platform committee, and these members drew up a brief document expressing — only a little more vigorously than usual — the timeworn “ultimate demands” of the Socialist Party.

The communist element did not oppose the plan of adopting a brief and highly generalized “platform” in addition to their program of action, but they were determined that this platform should be in fact a generalization, and not an evaporation of the communist principles. Therefore they assailed the document that was reported to the floor, and succeeded in striking out every one of its vague or unscientific clauses, and substituting amendments in their own language. They succeeded with surprising ease until they arrived at

the two final clauses, and here the minority rallied for a last obstinate resistance.

The clauses as reported by the committee, read as follows:

“To this end we ask the workers to unite with the Communist Labor Party on the political field for the conquest of the State and thus secure control of the powers of government.

“We also urge the workers to organize themselves on the industrial field, and thus unite their political and economic power to establish a cooperative commonwealth.”

For these clauses Reed offered the following substitute:

“To this end we ask the workers to unite with the Communist Labor Party for the conquest of political power, to establish a government adapted to the communist transformation.”

The significance of this change in the “Platform” is made apparent by the following clauses of the “Program” which had been reported to the floor, but not yet at that time adopted:

“The working class must organize and train itself for the capture of state power. This capture means the establishment of the new working class government machinery, in place of the state machinery of the capitalist.

“This new working class government — the Dictatorship of the Proletariat — will reorganize society on the basis of Communism, and accomplish the transition from Capitalism to the Communist Commonwealth....

“Not one of the great teachers of scientific Socialism has ever said that it is possible to achieve the Social Revolution by the ballot.

“However, we do not ignore the value of voting, or of electing candidates to public office. Political campaigns, and the election of public officials, provide opportunities for showing up capitalist democracy, educating the workers to a realization of their class position, and demonstrating the necessity for the overthrow of the capitalist system. But it must be clearly emphasized that the chance of winning even advanced reforms of the present capitalist system at the polls is extremely remote; and even if it were possible, these reforms would not weaken the capitalist system.

“The political action of the working class means

any action taken by the workers to impose their class will upon the capitalist State.”

It was an all day debate. I recall a few sentences somewhat at random. The first is from Margaret Prevey, whose friendship for Debs and her consecration to the task of liberating him from prison, gave a special interest to her opinions. “We came here,” she said, “to form a political organization to supplement the industrial organization of the workers. If not why *are* we here? We must use the political power in order to get a hearing for the working class. I want to see a working class judge to pass sentences upon the workers, a working class jailor to open the doors of the prisons for the working class. I want to see the working class get control of the police and the United States army, so that they can be used on the side of the workers, instead of against them in their industrial battles.”

John Reed answered here in the one burst of oratory that came out of him. He reminded her that when a Socialist Mayor of Minneapolis wanted to use the police to protect the meetings of the workers, his policemen were superseded by a body of special deputies appointed by the Governor of the state; when a radical governor of Illinois (Altgeld) tried to use the state power to protect the workers in the Pullman strike in Chicago, Grover Cleveland sent the United States army into Illinois to protect capital; “and if you had a Socialist President in the place of Grover Cleveland, the Supreme Court would come to the protection of capital; and if you had a Socialist Supreme Court, J.P. Morgan would organize a volunteer White Guard, and the interests of capital would still be protected! So it would always be. The struggle is between economic forces and it cannot be settled upon the political field.” He asked Margaret Prevey and the others who opposed the program which he had drafted, and who wanted to elect Centrist to the executive committee, to explain candidly to the convention just what kind of program they wanted, and what they conceived communism to be. After some hesitation the answer came that they wanted to go back to the language of the previous manifestos of the Left Wing. The special significance of this lies in the fact that those more academic and therefore less revolutionary manifestos were written by the very delegates in the “Communist Convention” who were now scorning this convention because of the presence of Margaret Prevey and these

other not sufficiently revolutionary elements!

If that makes the reader dizzy, he has the satisfaction of knowing that he would have been a thousand times dizzier if he had actually tried to attend those three conventions.

Kate Greenhalgh said that she had often heard working men in the northwest say that they would never again put their name and address down in a poll book to be used in hunting them out by the master-class, but still she believed in political action as a means of acquiring a “political status” for the revolutionary propaganda.

Jack Carney supported the amendment with the vehemence of one who doesn’t really care whether the propaganda acquires a “political status” or not. “I resigned from the Socialist Party,” he said, “not because they expelled the members and refused to do their will, but because I want the American workers to get down to the real fight, and the real fight is on the job.”

Margaret Prevey’s position was supported by Baker of Ohio, who said in the course of his remarks that, The Old Guard used to be always telling how they do things in Germany; now we have a crowd that are telling us how they do things in Russia; I thought we were here to decide how we are going to do things in America!”

Ludwig Lore asserted that the absence of “immediate demands” was enough to distinguish this platform from the reformist platforms of the past.

Zimmermann of Indiana was on the same side, although with a different note: “When the revolution comes,” he said, “then we know what kind of methods we are going to use, and we won’t have to ask any platform.”

But the ever-present voice on the side of the Mensheviks was that of Louis B. Boudin of New York. Boudin is a Marxian scholar of great erudition, so great that he was given an honorary chair in the international university established by the Bolshevik Government at Moscow, although he happened to be employing his erudition in an attack on the Bolshevik Government at the time.

Boudin laughed with a learned scorn at one of the phrases which John Reed had embodied in an amendment to the platform. Reed said nothing, but quietly slipped out of the building and pretty soon came back with a copy of the Communist Manifesto,

in which he showed Boudin the identical phrase at which he had been laughing. The scholarly brows were bent in perplexity: "It's a very poor translation," he said.

Boudin has learned a great deal about Karl Marx in spite of a busy life, but he has never learned to control those neural conduits which lead from the cerebral cortex to the organs of articulation. An idea no sooner pops into his head than it pops out of his mouth; and this makes it very difficult to conduct a parliamentary assembly in which he sits. Therefore it was a practical, as well as a theoretical, triumph for the majority when Ben Gitlow, walking up to the front of the hall like a great sombre mountain, gradually unloosed the crackling thunder of his eloquence to the effect that Boudin had deliberately employed his knowledge of Marx to dilute and destroy the scientific integrity of this platform, and Boudin, crying "It's a lie, it's a damn lie!" got up and fled like a leaf out of the storm.

Reed's amendment was then soon adopted, and the question whether this should be a communist or a "centrist" party essentially settled by a vote of 46 to 22. There was clear sailing for the "program" after that. It was adopted substantially as reported by the committee. A kind of anticipatory "St. Louis Resolution" on the war with Mexico was also adopted and it was cabled to every organization in the Communist International. An Executive Committee was elected, composed not of public celebrities who will meet once in a while, but of members of the party who are going to work — all of them ultimately, it is hoped, on salary

from the party. With these good signs of life the convention closed.

Its program is upon the whole a vital, simple, and realistic application of the theories of Marx, and the policies of Lenin, to present conditions in America. It contrasts with the program of the communist convention in no point of principle, but it applies its principles more specifically to existing conditions, it is written in a more American idiom, it is written in the language of action rather than of historic theory, it is not abstractly didactic in its attitude toward organized labor, but somewhat humbly instructive and promising of concrete help. In these respects it seems to me superior to the program of the Communist Party, although I have not had time to study and compare them at length.

It would be foolish to pretend that The Communist Labor party, any more than the Communist Party, is a wholly satisfactory nucleus for the growth of Communism in America. Nothing that happened in Chicago was satisfactory. But the Communist Labor party has a certain atmosphere of reality, a sense of work to be done, a freedom from theological dogma on the one hand and machine politics on the other, which is new in American socialism, and hopeful. A strong movement of the rank and file of revolutionists to the Communist Labor Party would weaken, convince, or drive out its uncertain minority, and at the same time leave the Federations where the attitude of their leaders naturally places them, in a separate or autonomous Slavic Party of Communism.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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