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# The Working Class Convention: National Convention of Socialist Party at Chicago, May 1 to May 6, 1904.

by Hermon F. Titus

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Attributed to Editor Titus, who was one of two Washington delegates to the 1904 Convention.

Some 200 delegates to the Socialist Party's National Convention filled the floor of Brand's Hall on the North Side of Chicago from Sunday morning, May 1, to Friday night May 6 [1904].

These delegates were strangers to each other on that International Labor Day when they first met. From New York to Texas, from Alabama to Oregon, these men and women came up to this Industrial Center of the Continent, aflame with an enthusiasm born of awakening class consciousness and determined to effect their own emancipation.

When they parted Friday evening their enthusiasm and determination had become intensified by the sense of fellowship and union which gradually developed during those 6 days' sessions. Suspicions and differences disappeared as it became evident that the great majority of the delegates stood unmistakably for the working class first, last, and all the time. Factions and schemes were annihilated before the proletarian will that asserted itself in every test vote. There were no combinations or caucuses to effect this result. It was the class-conscious will spontaneously speaking its own

mandates. There is nothing like it on earth. Individual interests wither and fall before it. It is the will and voice of destiny. Working class fanatics and middle class schemers are alike paralyzed before it.

*This class-conscious unity working toward its own end was the most conspicuous, significant, and prophetic sign of the Chicago Convention of 1904.* It came from the party, from the rank and file who sent the delegates there, and it will go back reinforced tenfold to the party membership again. If the convention had adopted no platform, no constitution, passed no resolutions, only named its standard bearers, those two splendid types of the best wage workers of the land, [Eugene] Debs, the fireman, and [Ben] Hanford, the printer, thus expressing its new found consciousness of its own mission and power, this alone would have been enough to justify the convention.

*Henceforth there is a new force in American political life, namely, Labor organized on the political field in the Socialist Party.* It will draw into its ranks, first, the best among the workers — men like Debs and Hanford and [William] Mailly and [John] Chase and a host of

†- **Hermon F. Titus** was born in Massachusetts in 1852. As a boy he worked on farm, in a butcher shop, and in paper mill while attending school. Took course in Eastman's Business College, 1867. Bookkeeper and dry goods clerk in NYC for 2 years, attending a college-preparatory school at night. Graduated Madison University, 1873; and its Theological Seminary, 1876. Pastor at First Baptist Church, Ithaca, NY, for 4 years, and in Newton, MA for 7 years. Resigned ministry "because churches did not represent Jesus." Graduated Harvard Medical School, 1890. Practiced medicine in Newton, MA for 2 years before moving to Seattle, where he practiced for an additional 8 years. Always politically independent, Titus made a brief effort to organize the "Seattle Citizens' Movement" in 1900. When this effort fizzled out, Titus joined the Socialist Party. Titus was Founder and Editor of *The Socialist*, established in Seattle, Aug. 12, 1900. Titus was long a bitter opponent of the post-Populist agrarian approach of Julius Wayland and his *Appeal to Reason*; Titus, by way of contrast, was a staunch adherent of proletarian socialism. Titus and his weekly newspaper was a major force in shaping the ideology of the radical Socialist Party of Washington, members of which included future Left Wing leaders Alfred Wagenknecht, Ludwig Katterfeld, William Z. Foster, Elmer Allison, T.E. Latimer, and Emil Herman. Titus was a delegate to 1904 SPA Convention. The 57-year old Titus left the SPA in Nov. 1909 in protest of the NEC's intervention in the Washington factional war in favor of his "constructive socialist" opponents. His paper, *The Socialist*, terminated in 1910.

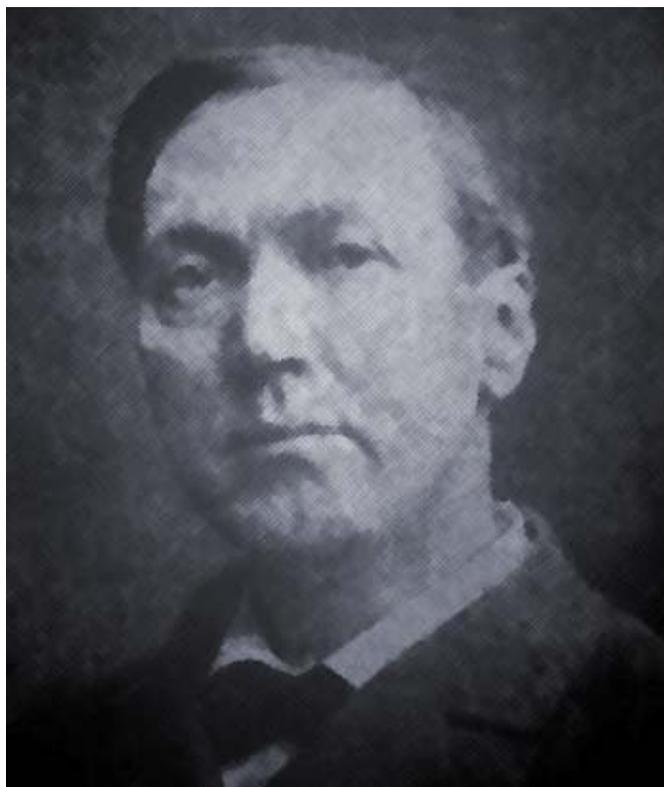
others; second, the best among those who have not come from the workers but who belong with the workers and are true to the workers, like [George] Herron, [Algie] Simons, [Morris] Hillquit, and [Victor] Berger; and third, the vast body of the workers themselves when they grow to recognize the integrity of this political organization of their own class and its sure mission to effect their emancipation. The foundation is laid. The superstructure is sure to rise upon it.

### **[The Convention Opens.]**

The first 2 days' sessions seemed wasted to many. The daily papers ridiculed them as a "Cyclone of Talk." Many delegates themselves grew impatient and complained of the "incapacity of the Socialists." They had not discovered yet the collective class-conscious will and intelligence that lay beneath that introductory deliberation and discussion. Capitalist conventions have lost all semblance of democracy. They simply execute the will of the "bosses." This Socialist convention had no bosses, it did its own work and took its own time.

The first expression of the convention's metal and meaning came in the selection of Committees on Credentials and Rules. A caucus had been held in the Revere House, attended chiefly by delegates from Kansas, Missouri, and Wisconsin, where committees were "slated." But the convention smashed the slates at the very outset and there were no more caucuses during that convention. Even those who managed the caucuses were the quickest to jump into the wage workers' bandwagon. Walter Thomas Mills made his most brilliant speech against the resolution forbidding Socialists to hold capitalist offices, but afterwards explained that he voted for the resolution, being convinced in the course of the debate.

Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday were days of business. [Frank] Sieverman of New York, the chairman for that Wednesday, was determined to expedite business and mere talkers got little toleration from him. Chairman Mailly on Thursday and [Seymour] Stedman on Friday also kept things humming, while the convention kept the chairman humming also. For the last 3 days the liveliest kind of business debates went on. The rules adopted limited each speaker to 10 minutes until the previous question was called and a 3



minute speech on each side before the main question was put. Frequently the rules were suspended and 3 minute speeches became the order of the day. A delegate from Kansas flourished a copy of Robert's Rules in the first days and seemed to think the responsibility of the convention rested heavily upon his shoulders, but he found "there were others" and became quite useful before the end.

### **[Main Points of Contention.]**

The sharpest debates were on the Trade Union Resolution and on the "Program." The platform was not debated. Its reading by Herron was followed by immediate adoption. No one offered to speak on it. It was felt by all that when the committee agreed, consisting of such diverse elements, the platform must be all right. When Herron and Berger, Mailly and [G.H.] Strobell, Debs and [W.W.] Wilkins, Hanford and Titus and [Thomas] Will could agree, after 5 days' discussion in committee, the convention felt certain nothing very wrong could have been admitted. The platform itself spoke for itself. It was in the hands of every delegate on the floor. Its reading was conducted throughout amid the utmost silence. A great burst of applause followed.

Here was a document which was the first real American expression of the class struggle as the platform of an American Socialist Party. It omits nothing that the German platforms contained, after which all our previous platforms have been modeled. It rings in every line with the idea of historic development and of the present class struggle. But its style is fresh and literary rather than didactic and dull. It marks a new era in American Socialism, the era of original self-expression. It is the first word of a self-conscious proletarian party in the United States. It does not depart a single jot from the scientific basis of Marx, but it expresses itself in American language and appeals to the workingmen of America according to American traditions and conditions. It will be submitted to Referendum undoubtedly and will waken widespread discussion, which will prepare the party for an intelligent campaign of education.

The Trade Union Resolution was adopted by a vote of 2 to 1. It substantially reaffirms the preceding resolutions on the same subject.

The "Program" for State and Municipal Socialist officials, for their guidance while the Socialist Party is a minority party, was referred to the National Com-

mittee for revision and submission to the Referendum of the party. It is all that remains of the "Immediate Demands." They become now mere suggestions for action where we succeed in electing candidates before our full triumph. It is intended for guide only and expressly disavows being Socialism. It says in effect: "Whatever is to the interest of the working class, we will do when elected to participate in capitalistic government, and we think the following line of legislation would be to working class interests while capital remains."

### [Conclusion.]

This convention at Chicago was a sane convention. It showed horse-sense. It did not yield to the DeLeonistic "impossibilists," on the one hand, nor to the Millsite Utopians on the other. It declared for common-sense Marxian Socialism, and marks the foundation of a party on the scientific basis of the class struggle between Capital and Labor, which will not deem its work done till capitalism is destroyed, but will take advantage of every possible gain till that end is achieved.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

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