
What Is the Matter with the Socialist Party?

by Charles H. Kerr

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Socialism, the proletarian revolt against the ruling class, was never so much alive as today. The ruthless march of organized capital is daily recruiting the proletariat with new wage workers and making rebels out of both the old and the new proletarians by grinding down wages to the point of bare subsistence. As a consequence the laborers are becoming more revolutionary than ever before. All over the world the ruling classes are busy devising measures to stem the rising tide. Here in the United States the "conspiracy of silence" is broken and socialism is being discussed from pulpit, press, and platform. Our own correspondence from all over the United States is day by day more optimistic, showing an ever-growing enthusiasm for our proletarian propaganda.

Meanwhile the Socialist Party as an organization has failed to make a corresponding growth. Its vote in 1908 was but slightly larger than in 1904. It has during the last five years enrolled probably over 150,000 members, including those who held membership cards in 1904, but the present total membership as shown by the monthly dues is about 45,000, and the number who took the trouble to attend meetings and vote on a recent referendum was only about 8,500. The action taken at this referendum was a surprise. Two decidedly reactionary propositions were adopted. One was to drop from our "immediate demands," in the list of social utilities the collective ownership of which is demanded, the words "and all land." This carried by 5,382 to 3,117. The other was to insert into the Declaration of Principles the following paragraph:

"There can be no absolute private title to land. All private titles, whether called fee simple or otherwise, are and must be subordinate to the public title. The Socialist Party strives to prevent land from being used for the purpose of exploitation and speculation. It demands the collective possession, control, or management of land to whatever

extent may be necessary to attain that end. It is not opposed to the occupation AND POSSESSION of land by those using it in a useful and bona fide manner without exploitation."

It was adopted by a vote of 5,936 to 2,565. We have given these details since they are necessary to the understanding of the following official communication lately received from the Third Ward Branch of Local Denver, which we regard as being important enough to deserve full consideration and discussion:

To the Membership of the Socialist Party of the United States:

Whereas, It has for some time been apparent that The Socialist Party of the United States is not a revolutionary organization of the working class, based on the principles of SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM, but is merely a stamping ground for faddists, careerists, and notoriety seekers bent upon obtaining pelf and power at the expense of an already overburdened class; and

Whereas, Practically all of the official positions in this organization have been usurped by as conscienceless a crew of bourgeois buccaneers as ever practiced piracy on the high seas of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity; and

Whereas, This cockroach element, composed of preachers without pulpits, lawyers without clients, doctors without patients, storekeepers without customers, disgruntled politician coyotes, and other riff-raff, through its self-appointed leadership, has relegated the real proletarians to the rear; and

Whereas, In their mad scramble for votes, these muddleheaded marauders of the middle class have seen fit to foist upon the Socialist Party, in the name of the working class, such infamies as "Craft Unionism," "Anti-Immigration," "State Autonomy," and a series of ludicrous and illogical "Immediate Demands"; and

Whereas, The final act, the climax, the culmination of these and other prostitutions came when the Socialist Party by referendum vote decided to drop Socialism from its platform and adopt in its stead an emasculated form of the late lamented Single Tax; be it therefore

Resolved, That we, the fifty-five proletarian members in good standing of the Third Ward Branch of Local Denver, Socialist Party of Colorado, do reaffirm our allegiance to the principles of SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM and to the cause of OUR class, and do hereby withdraw from the organization

falsely called "The Socialist Party of the United States"; and be it further

Resolved, That a copy of these resolutions be sent to the State and National officials of the party and to the Socialist and Labor Press of the United States.

*Third Ward Branch of Local Denver,
Socialist Party of Colorado*

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Committee.

Dated at Denver, Colorado, September 23, 1909.

In publishing these resolutions, we do not endorse the view of the Denver comrades that proletarians should desert the Socialist Party as hopelessly middle-class. We believe there is some measure of truth in the indictment, but we can see a definite economic cause for the predominance of the middle class in the party up to this time, and economic reasons also why we should hope for radical change to proletarian tactics on the part of the Socialist Party in the near future. Craft unionism is a survival from conditions of but yesterday, conditions under which it was the logical form of working class organization. True, the rapid march of industrial progress has made it as obsolete as the spinning-wheel and the stagecoach, but it always takes people some time to adjust their ideas and institutions to new conditions. Most of the proletarian members of the Socialist Party thus far have been members of craft unions for the very good reason that such membership was for them a necessary condition for holding their jobs. This membership naturally made them reluctant to antagonize craft unions, and this reluctance is reflected in the platforms and resolutions of the Socialist Party. Apart from trade unionists, our membership thus far has been mainly recruited from the small producers and professional men, who, as B.E. Nilsson points out on another page of this month's Review, are not in daily touch with the great industrial processes as proletarians are, and can exercise control over these processes only through the political state.

Thus it is not in the least surprising that the Socialist Party in the past has placed undue emphasis on voting and lawmaking. Nor on the other hand is it surprising that with these tactics we have scarcely touched the great mass of the proletariat.

But forces stronger than ourselves are pushing us on. The great capitalists have built up a system of organized industry beside which the political state is a pygmy. In the course of this process they have been systematically crushing out the old conservative trade unions. On their ruins is already rising a new type of union, revolutionary as Marx himself, ruthless as capitalism, strong in the thought, learned not from Marx but from grim experience, that the workers have nothing to lose but their chains, and all the world to gain. It is in these unions, not the aristocracy of labor but its *democracy*, that the Socialist Party of the future must find its strength.

Long enough we have cringed before the aristocracy of labor begging for votes that we did not get. Long enough we have experimented with "immediate demands" that might swell our apparent strength by winning the votes of people opposed to revolution. The time has come for the proletarians of the party and those who believe the party should be proletarian in its tactics to bring about a revolution in the party. Let us not withdraw like the Denver comrades but take possession. Let us put wage-workers on the National Executive Committee. Let us cut the "immediate demands" out of our platform and leave reformers to wrangle over reforms. Let us make our chief task to spread the propaganda of revolution and of the new industrial unionism, and when we elect members of our own class to office, let us instruct them that their most important work is to hamper the ruling class in the war it will be waging on the revolutionary unions. With tactics like these, apathy will disappear, and the Socialist Party will for the first time become a vital force in the struggle between capitalists and wage-workers.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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