
Socialists Abolish National Committee: Convention Marked by Stirring Scenes Over Question of Constitutional Revisions

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ST. LOUIS, April 13 [1917].— At tonight's session of the convention the National Committee was abolished. The membership in the Executive Committee was increased to 15, and will consist of 3 members each from the 5 territorial zones.

Efforts to change Article 2, Section 1, of the Socialist Party constitution by striking out the words, "political organization," so as to permit members of other political organizations to join the Socialist Party, were defeated at the morning session of the convention by a vote of 113 to 51.

The proposed amendment was considered as a move to solve the problem arising out of the existence of the Non-Partisan League of North Dakota, which is a political organization and not a political party. The amendment was strongly opposed by arguments that to make the change would be ruinous to party discipline.

John C. Kennedy of Chicago, chairman of the Committee on Constitution, spoke in favor of the proposed amendment. He said the party must meet new conditions, and that it lives by its deeds and not by its creeds. He also said that labor unions are entering into politics more than ever, and that they are endorsing candidates of all parties. He declared that, if the amendment were not carried, the Socialists would be barred from carrying their activities into unions.

Algernon Lee of New York was elected chairman and Dan Hogan of Arkansas vice chairman.

Meeting of Unionists.

During the noon recess a large meeting was held of all delegates who are members of unions. J. Mah-

lon Barnes of Pennsylvania presided at this gathering.

Henry Stump told of his experience under the primary law in Reading, Pa. He said that the party that never changed its tactics to meet the laws made against it, and that he believed such a position strengthened the party movement. Jane Tait took the same position as Stump. L.E. Katterfeld closed for those opposed to making the change. He pleaded for an uncompromising position, and asserted that the party must not yield an inch in the matter.

Cannon Uncompromising.

Joseph D. Cannon closed for those in favor of the change. He taunted those who call themselves uncompromising revolutionary Socialists with having been of those who voted for Wilson because he "kept us out of war." He quoted names signed to the statement of Charles Edward Russell and William English Walling in support of his charge. The convention was in an uproar. Chairman Lee finally restored order.

Cannon closed by saying: "You cannot bend facts and must meet conditions with something beside revolutionary phrases."

The motion to make this proposed change in the constitution was defeated by a vote of 100 to 59.

Immediately after the vote, John Spargo asked for the floor and presented a report on the War and Militarism question signed by 60 delegates. He asked that the report be printed and go out on the referendum with the majority report.

C.E. Ruthenberg followed, and under a suspension of the rules asked the convention to instruct the National Executive Committee and the National Sec-

retary [Adolph Germer] to have the majority report on War and Militarism printed at once, as the official utterance of the party, and supply copies to all [locals] of the party throughout the country meeting.

Job Harriman of California made a strong plea that a recommendation be made to the convention that all members of the party eligible for membership in various economic organizations get into them or get out of the party. The matter was referred to the National Executive Committee.

The afternoon session was full of excitement over the proposed change to Article 10 of the party constitution. It was proposed that party members who are shut out from the opportunity of voting for Socialist candidates on account of the elimination process in primaries be permitted to exercise their personal choice in voting for candidates of other parties.

Only the firm hand and cool head of Chairman Algernon Lee kept business going. The delegates showed intense feeling over the matter on both sides. Henry Green told those attending the convention that there is great danger in letting down the bars in any way.

S.J. Mahoney of Buffalo warned the convention that to hold the delegates too strictly to account where they have to face such conditions is to invite constant disintegration through the loss of members and requires constant rebuilding of the membership.

“Too much narrowness and strictness makes the members mere cogs in a machine,” he declared. “The purpose of the party is to educate the members into seeing that they can accept nothing from the capitalist

class candidates. Firing them from the party before they see this is to demoralize organization work.

Shows Feeling of Members.

He declared that the election of delegates to the emergency convention was ample notice from the rank and file that they wanted a proclamation on War and Militarism adopted by a majority of the delegates given the widest publicity possible at once as the official utterance of the party on the question.

George H. Goebel of New Jersey insisted that such action would be a violation of the constitutional rights of the members. The motion, however, carried by a large majority.

Section 6 of Article 2 then came up for consideration, and was stricken from the constitution. It crated a slight ripple in the convention.†

Assessment is Ordered.

A supplementary report of the Ways and Means Committee was submitted and resulted in the convention ordering a 25 cent assessment on all members of the party to help pay the indebtedness of the National Office and the expense of the emergency convention.‡

At the close of the session J.T. Crumbie, W.B. Smith, and W.R. Gaylord asked to be recorded as voting against the majority report on War and Militarism.

†- This was the controversial “crime and sabotage” provision, adopted by the 1912 SPA convention and a major cause of the 1912-13 departure of a significant percentage of the party’s syndicalist Left Wing. The provision reads as follows:

Art. II (Membership): Sec. 6. Any member of the party who opposes political action or advocates crime, sabotage, or other methods of violence as a weapon of the working class to aid in its emancipation shall be expelled from membership in the party. Political action shall be construed to mean participation in elections for public office and practical legislative and administrative work along the lines of the Socialist Party platform.

‡- According to Adolph Germer’s 1918 report to the National Executive Committee, payment compliance of this assessment was spotty at best, with no state meeting its quota. As a result, an unfunded debt remained over the head of the National Office.

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