
Debs and the Socialist Party

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At the beginning of the year 1919 the Socialist Party was an organization of nearly 100,000 members. It had as part of its membership the most advanced revolutionary elements in this country. It was an organization of powerful potentialities in the class struggle.

In the early months of that year the struggle between the Left Wing revolutionists and the Right Wing reformists came to a head. The Left Wing won the party elections by overwhelming majorities. If the Left Wing representatives were permitted to take office it meant the reorganization of the party and the ousting of all non-revolutionary elements.

In this crisis the Right Wing leaders of the party in control of the party machinery overrode all the constitutional provisions and rules of the party and expelled the Left Wing. The issue between the two groups was a fundamental issue of principle which could not be compromised. Either one group or the other had to leave the party. The Right Wing held the party machinery and used its power to hold the party.

But in expelling the Left Wing the party officialdom sapped the very life of the party. It was the Left Wing elements within the party that had been its strength. The party finances came largely from this element. When the situation clarified, after the September conventions, the Right Wing officialdom of the party found that it controlled the party, but

that the membership had disappeared. By the fall of 1919 the party membership of 100,000 of the previous spring had been reduced to a bare 15,000. It was an empty victory.

Not all of the 75,000 to 85,000 members who left the party affiliated with the Communist parties. A large element, disgusted by the reactionary trend of the Socialist Party and the split in the Communist movement, remained outside of any organization.

In January came the raids directed against the Communist parties and the reorganization of these parties as underground organizations. Here again members of both parties, the weak-kneed and hesitating, dropped out, adding to the former membership of the Socialist Party which was not affiliated with any organization.

The situation in the early spring of this year was that there were from 15 to 20,000 Right Wing members in the Socialist Party and an equal number of Communists, willing to risk anything for their principles, in the underground organizations of the two Communist parties. There was the difference, however, that while the Socialist Party was drifting toward complete disintegration, the Communists were solid, militant organizations.

By their attitude toward the Left Wing the Socialist Party leaders had lost the confidence of a large block of membership, which, while not yet Communist, resented the reactionary

trend of the party. Up to the time of the Albany trial,† the St. Louis war program and the war record of the party had been the means of holding some of its membership — although the membership which forced the unwilling leaders to adopt this program had long ago left the party. But with the complete repudiation at Albany this asset was gone. A new block of members within the party threatened to revolt. The future looked black.

It was to meet this situation that the reactionary Right Wing leaders appealed to the magic name of Debs.

The Hillquits, Stedmans, and Bergers of the Socialist Party have never liked Debs. In the controversies within the party prior to the split, dating back for 10 years, whenever Debs had spoken he had aligned himself against these leaders. In the 1912 convention of the party, in which the last previous nomination of Debs was made, they had fought against his nomination and had tried to foist upon the party [Emil] Seidel and a Socialism that talked about sewer building as its great achievement. Debs was nominated only after it became apparent that the militant rank and file of the convention could not be forced to swallow Seidel and Sewers.

The 1920 nomination of Debs through the influence of these leaders is merely a political trick. Through this nomination they have to rehabilitate the Socialist Party. They do not like Debs. They do not want Debs. But they are ready to swallow Debs in order to have a party and they expect that the magic name of Debs will again rally to the support of the party all those elements which have been unaffiliated with any organization since the

split took place, and even to break into the Communist ranks.

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Does Debs willingly lend himself to this political game? That is a question which is in the mind of many revolutionary workers.

The Right Wing Socialist leaders have tried to create the impression that Debs is fully informed in regard to the developments in the party since his imprisonment and that he accepted the nomination of the Right Wing with a complete realization of its meaning. This is part of the game to use his prestige for the rebuilding of the party. Debs knows all the facts and Debs is with the Socialist Party, therefore the Communist attack upon the party is made up of lies and calumnies, is their argument.

THE FACT IS DEBS DOES NOT KNOW. He does not understand the depth to which the Socialist Party has sunk in its repudiation of Revolutionary Socialism. He does not know all the facts about the Albany defense and its abject apology to the peanut politicians of the New York legislature for being even suspected of standing for those things which Debs upholds, particularly the St. Louis war program. What little information Debs has secured about the recent acts of the Socialist Party convention made him hesitate and in accepting the nomination of the party he made the qualification that in doing so he did not intend to accept anything that would be a compromise of his previous utterance on the matter of Socialist principles.

This statement as to Debs' attitude is not based on hearsay. It is made after more than an

† — Reference is to the expulsion proceedings taken against 5 elected Socialist members of the New York State Assembly, a process which began with the action of denying them seats when the body was convened in January of 1920.

hour's talk with Debs, which took place since he accepted the Socialist nomination.

Debs permitted his name to go before the Socialist convention, hoping that his candidacy would serve as the means of reuniting the former factions of the Socialist Party. The belief that his candidacy could reunite these factions is in itself evidence that Debs does not understand the great difference in principles that divide them. He has not been in touch with the drift to the Right by the Socialist Party leaders and the drift to the Left by the Communists.

It might as well be said frankly that while Debs would quickly repudiate the present position of the Socialist Party and its leadership were he outside of prison and fully informed, at the same time he is not a Communist in fundamental understanding. Emotionally and through his revolutionary spirit he is with the Left, but not through understanding and acceptance of Communist principles.

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What then shall be the attitude of the revolutionary workers to the candidacy of Eugene V. Debs?

There is but one answer.

Debs may be ever so dear to us because of his past services to the movement. We may still admire him for his unwavering stand in his Canton speech and during his trial. We may respect him for his unshakable devotion to the

cause of the workers, which has characterized his utterances since he has been in prison. In the past he has been the spiritual leader of the revolution and as such we may still give him our love and admiration.

While our attitude toward him personally can well remain unchanged if we understand that he acted without full knowledge or a full realization of the meaning of his acceptance of the Socialist Party nomination, as the candidate of the Socialist Party Debs has no claim upon us. It is the social revolution that we are working for and principles determine our course of action. When loyalty to our principles and loyalty to an individual clash, the individual must be sacrificed.

No revolutionary Socialist will support the Socialist Party because Debs is its candidate. Has not every revolutionary Socialist often declared that he fights for principles and not for individuals? The principles of the Socialist Party are potentially those of the Ebert-Scheidemann-Noske counterrevolution in Germany. At Albany the Socialist defense came pretty near to declaring it so.

Debs' name cannot cover the reactionary character of the Socialist Party. Rather will the fact that the party has tried to camouflage its reactionary character by trying to pull Debs down to its level excite the complete disgust of every revolutionary worker. The Socialist Party has betrayed the class struggle. It cannot disguise that betrayal with the name of Debs.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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