
The Future of the Socialist Party

by Thurber Lewis

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Well, what's to become of the Socialist Party now? They have had a Party Convention. Not a very momentous one, nor large, nor revolutionary; but nevertheless a convention in which the future policy of the SP was laid — however indefinitely.

Their spokesmen, Jim Oneal in particular, already foresee potential possibilities. They are frank (as if they could be anything else, with figures about) in saying that their party is weak, weak because of the war, the Department of Justice, Debs in jail, the Left Wing (this in particular), and ever so many other things. Their party is reduced in membership from 100,000 (a short while ago) to something around 15,000. They are in debt more than \$20,000. They are touring very few national speakers and pulling in their organizers for lack of funds. And yet there are potential possibilities.

Three Ways.

You see, everyone in the SP agrees to the necessity of building a party. But there are a number of ways in which to go about it. Let us take them one by one and see what would be liable to happen in case of the adoption of any one of them. Let us first enumerate them: the "Right" position, looming threateningly over the Milwaukee horizon; the "Centrist" position of Hillquit, which was temporarily adopted at the convention; and the more insignificant "Left," championed by the Jewish Federation and the so-called "Left Wing" of

New York and Chicago.

The "Right."

It is a safe conjecture, I believe, to say that the "Right" policy offers the best possibilities, under existing circumstances, for the Socialist Party to develop numerical strength and political prestige. This may seem peculiar — peculiar at least for a revolutionist to say; but let us examine the situation a little more closely.

The first step in pursuance of this policy would be fusion. In proof of this we need merely to mention the resolution submitted by Dan Hoan, mayor of Milwaukee, at the last convention. The Socialist Party is replete with reformist politicians. They have had a wide experience in political campaigning, in pure and simple vote-catching. In case of an alliance with the Farmer-Labor Party, the Non-Partisan League, and other liberal and reform labor organizations, the Socialist Party would take the lead. The SP would give great impetus to an allied reformist party in this country, it would throw fresh blood into the movement, and what with their glib mouthings of revolutionary phrases and their sophistication on matters touching the working class movement, the SP membership should prove quite a success in such a venture.

Under the direction of the SP there would probably be formed quite a powerful Labor Party in this country, and with Hillquit's assistance they may be able to save their faces by retaining a cer-

tain autonomy such as the ILP in England maintains in the Labour Party. There is no denying that there is a field for such a movement, especially so long as the campaign of repression continues to serve as a muffler on the more revolutionary elements.

Where They Belong.

It would be the heyday of Berger, Hoan, [Cameron] King, et al. They would probably get themselves elected to Congress or perhaps some less auspicious bourgeois gatherings. They would be hailed as the Hendersons and Vanderveldes of America — and they would play the parts well. They would prate about Democracy (not to forget cheap milk, government ownership, etc.) and brush aside with a gesture all thought of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Such a policy would put the Socialist Party just where it belong. It would merely serve to hasten the transformation of the Socialist Party into a party of Scheidemanns and Noskes, which must inevitably come. This is a policy of honesty. And in spite of the fat that Berger and Hoan may someday find themselves signing my death warrant or that of my comrades, I cannot help but like them for their frankness.

The “Center.”

Then there is the “Centrist” position. What is it? It is a cowardly position. It’s an ugly thing today; still, what more appropriate characterization can be found for a policy that fears on the one hand to make a clean breast of revolutionary principles because it has a certain love for reformism, yet which, on the other, has misgivings about a complete embracing of peanut politics because it assumes to be revolutionary.

Strictly speaking, this Center in the SP is not identical with the usually accepted Centrist positions of certain of the European movements. But it carries analogous earmarks: the most

significant of which is the incessant tendency to move to the Right. When Hillquit, by a clever maneuver at the last convention, evaded the Hoan proposal of immediate fusion, this tendency was very noticeable. For after all, be admitted that he was not altogether in disagreement with fusion, although he said he did not think it practicable AT THIS TIME.

If the Socialist Party persists in this policy, it must fear for its future. If it continues to denounce the Third International and disavows the more revolutionary tactics that are being embraced the world over, it can, to be sure, never hope to draw support from the more advanced portion of the American working class. Continuing a policy of aloofness toward the liberal and admittedly reformist parties and organizations, it throws away the only means that it can have for survival.

The “Left.”

What would happen if the SP accepted the demands of the “Left”? First of all let me point out that there is not the least grain of hope that such a thing will happen. But if it did? Well, Hillquit himself has told us. First the Socialist Party would endorse the Third International. Then it would be obliged under instructions of Moscow and its American Section, to start housecleaning. Hillquit, Berger, and all [objectionably] petty bourgeois elements would have to step aside. It would declare for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and all the revolutionary principles that go with it. Whereupon the Department of Justice would make them understand that it would be best for them to get underground with the rest of the Communists. So you see there is little possibility that the Socialist Party, that is Berger & Co., would take kindly to such proposals.

The Sign of the Current.

Of the 3 courses, I am, by all means, in fa-

vor of the latter, for I have no particular love for the SP. But that is quite out of the question. Now of the other two, I am personally in agreement with the Centrist position. Because I believe that such a policy would render the SP a politically lifeless organization, destined to travel much the same road as the SLP has so unwillingly yet gloriously traversed for the past years, a sterile admiration society, thus reducing it to a tolerable annoyance. But it is to the interest of the SP to commit itself to the “Right” position.

Therein lies its only hope. Although Hillquit has for the time being convinced the membership that it will do best to sit by a bit longer, Berger will finally win out. One-third of the membership of the Socialist Party is in Wisconsin. That state organization has already struck up a friendship with the NPL [Non-Partisan League]. California finds the need of drawing strength from liberal alliances. “The Assemblymen” in New York are not scrupulous over such a trifle as political trading. The Socialist Party Convention in Detroit refused to take action on any important tactic touching upon revolutionary activity. They gave a great deal of attention and passed with waving banners such things as: instructions to the elected, voting against military appropriations, fusion, national campaigns, and the whole hodgepodge of their ballot box paraphernalia. The signs of the current are unmistakable — the Socialist Party is going to emulate its own cheap and politically reformist past; it is going to align with everything and anything that might add to its strength; it promises eventually to land squarely into the camp of the White Guard and the Counterrevolution.

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