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# Debs — Chairman of the Socialist Party.

by John Pepper

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The convention of the Socialist Party [11th: New York, May 19-22, 1923] elected Eugene V. Debs to the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party. The National Executive Committee chose Debs as Chairman of the party. For the first time since 1899 Debs is now on the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party.†

Debs has become Chairman of the Socialist Party.

We must emphasize this fact, for it is of political significance.

The Socialist Party has lately fallen into two factions — the Right Wing under the leadership of Morris Hillquit, Victor Berger; and the Left Wing under the leadership of Eugene V. Debs.‡ The Right Wing had the party completely in its power. The petty Tammany Hall of Victor Berger and Hillquit was the undisputed ruler of the party, and determined its policy. The Left Wing had no organization. It was but a vague revolutionary sentiment.

The Right Wing controlled the party, but the party could exercise an influence upon the laboring masses only through the Left Wing. The Socialist Party received 60,000 votes in New York at the Nov. 7 elections of 1922, and 40,000 votes in the mayoralty elections in Chicago, not through Hillquit and [Algeron] Lee, but mainly through this vague revolutionary sentiment represented by Debs. The Socialist Party without Debs is an insignificant opportunistic sect.

But whether we like it or not, Debs is today the leader of the political actions of tens of thousands of workers.

Where are these workers? These workers compose a middle stratum between the Socialist Party and the Workers Party. They are deeply dissatisfied with the petty Tammany Hall of Hillquit and Victor Berger. But these workers are not as yet adherents of the Communist ideology. These workers were discouraged from joining the Workers Party, partly through the brutal persecution by the government, partly because the Communists had an underground organization, and last but not least, because our agitation and propaganda was not suited to reaching them.

Those workers who continuously vacillate between the Socialist Party and the Workers Party today consider Eugene V. Debs as their leader.

We do not imply thereby that Eugene V. Debs is himself vacillating between the Socialist Party and the Workers Party. He did vacillate for some time. When he was liberated from the penitentiary of Atlanta on Dec. 25, 1921, he declared, "I cannot make a definite statement of my opinion" as to which party is in the right — the Socialist Party or the Workers Party. But in his statement of October 8, 1922, he declared, "I have arrived at the definite conclusion that my place in the future as in the past is in the Socialist Party." Yet he declared at that time that he does not identify him-

†- Technically, Debs was elected in 1899 as a member of the Executive Board of the Social Democratic Party of America, a forerunner of the Socialist Party of America, which was formally established only in 1901. Despite this esoteric proviso, Pepper's basic assertion is correct — surprising though this fact may seem.

‡- This seems a strange piece of wishful thinking on the part of Pepper. By the middle of 1923, there was very little, if anything, in the way of ideology to differentiate the (Centrist) Kautskyian Hillquit, the (Center-Right) Bernsteinian Berger, or the (Center-Left) Revolutionary Socialist-Populist Debs. All three were committed to the general ideas of majoritarian rule, electoral tactics, and the Socialist Party of America as the concrete political vehicle for social change in America. Nor had Debs at any point previously in the entire history of the Socialist Party "led" a faction. Quite to the contrary, Debs' failure to serve on the governing NEC of the Socialist Party at any point in its history was not accidental, but rather a manifestation of his abhorrence of inner-party factional strife.

self with the policy of the Socialist Party in everything.

And since then we have seen that on almost every question he had a different opinion from that of the official Socialist Party. The official Socialist Party is an ally of Gompers and an opponent of amalgamation.† Debs, on the contrary, endorsed the Trade Union Educational League, and branded the traitors of the American Federation of Labor bureaucracy as traitors.‡ The Socialist Party lives on the slandering of Soviet Russia.§ Debs has on the whole defended the Russian Revolution, even if with some sentimental pacifistic reservation. The Socialist Party is against the United Front, whereas Debs declared himself in favor of the United Front of all working class forces. Ideologically, the Socialist Party has, for a long time, been an adherent of the Second International. Debs, however, declared himself against social peace, against support of war, and for the class struggle.Δ

The laboring masses who were influenced by the Socialist Party were not won over through the counterrevolutionary activity of Hillquit and Berger, but through the policy of Debs for Amalgamation, for Soviet Russia, for the United Front, for the class struggle. The masses who voted for the Socialist Party did not vote for the official Socialist Party, but for the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs, for a party which, even if it does not exist organizationally, exists ideologically, like the Left Wing of the old Independent

Socialist Party of Germany. Naturally, the official Socialist Party drew all the advantages thereof, in the same way as the 2nd International secured the advantage from the vacillating policy of the 2-1/2 International.

We have a new Debs before us today. In 1921 he could not as yet choose between the Socialist Party and the workers Party. In 1922 he chose the Socialist Party, but with criticism, and he remained an ordinary party member. In 1923 he became member and Chairman of the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party. We must wait now to see if he will accept also the official policy of the Socialist Party. In any case, he has accepted the official leadership of the Socialist Party under remarkable circumstances. The same Socialist Party convention which elected him unanimously as leader has decided against his policy on all questions. The Socialist Party convention declared against interference in trade union affairs, which means against Amalgamation. The Socialist Party convention tabled the motion to repudiate Abe Cahan's attack on Soviet Russia, which means that it endorsed all his shameful slanders against Soviet Russia. The Socialist Party convention declared against the United Front and against participation in the Farmer-Labor Party Convention in Chicago [July 3, 1923], that is, against the Labor Party.β

Against Amalgamation, for trade union officialdom, against Soviet Russia, against the United Front,

†- Pepper makes this assertion repeatedly in various documents. It is a misrepresentation of the political views of a big majority of the membership of the Socialist Party, which throughout its history favored industrial rather than craft forms of unionization and stood in opposition to the pro-capitalist, non-party "rewarding of friends and punishing of enemies" advocated by Gompers. The critical aspect of Socialist Party ideology which Pepper seems to miss, or which he willfully misrepresents, is this — the Socialist Party saw a sort of Chinese wall between the political (SPA) and economic (trade union) aspects of the labor movement. Whereas, one side could advise the other, the form of organization of the trade unions was not deemed to be within the purview of the party, which was to limit itself to the attempt to ameliorate the difficult lives of the working class via governmental power en route to the full assumption of state power and achievement of the social revolution via the legislative mechanism. It was the purview of the unions to organize themselves and to conduct collective labor action to ameliorate the lives of the working class through increased wages and benefits and improved shop conditions, not the party's. Whereas Pepper might logically and correctly have argued that the Socialist Party was "tepid and impotent" on the matters of the amalgamation of craft unions into industrial unions or on Gompers' control of the AF of L apparatus, the party was in no way "an ally of Gompers and an opponent of amalgamation."

‡- Debs was a foe of factionalism and an advocate of United Front action of the working class, so far as practicable. His public support of TUEL in 1922-23 went farther than many or most in the SPA. Debs' willingness to speak his mind about the Gompers regime was a beloved aspect of his personality, in line with the views of the party majority, not a manifestation of anathema to SPA dogma.

§- This is a gross misrepresentation of the SPA majority's perspective, which was enormously supportive of the Russian Revolution up to the trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1922, and critically supportive thereafter. Harsh anti-Communism was a viewpoint of a minority fringe in these years.

Δ- Once again, Pepper misrepresents the viewpoint of the SPA majority of 1922-23, which remained essentially in the camp of the 2-1/2 International — against the "Social Patriots" who had collaborated with the capitalist war machine. The SPA was consistently anti-militarist throughout WWI, suffering harsh consequences for their maintenance of this principled position.

β- The Socialist Party was very much for a Labor Party in the years 1922-24, although it was hostile to the American Communist

against the Labor Party — that is the mandate which the Socialist Party convention has given its newly elected leader Debs.†

What will Debs do? Will he fight for his previous views, or will he carry out the decisions of the convention? This question interests us, not because of the personality of Debs, but because of the political position of those laboring masses who still listen to Debs. Debs faces a dilemma. If he fights for his own political views, he must fight against the petty Tammany Hall of Hillquit and Berger. But the destruction of the petty Tammany Hall of the Socialist Party officialdom means the death of the Socialist Party. And yet, if Debs chooses the other way, and accepts the policy of the petty Tammany Hall of Hillquit and Berger, the laboring masses who have confidence in him today will quickly abandon him. That also means the death of the Socialist Party in another way.

Debs has taken over the leadership with the slogan: “We should not speak of differences of opinion, we must now rebuild the party.” But willy-nilly, no matter what road he takes, his destiny is to destroy the Socialist Party. It is a tragic dilemma, but Debs will not play the role of tragic hero. We know of no tragedy where the heroism of the hero consists of hesitancy and vacillation.

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movement, suspicious of their intentions, and utterly unwilling to engage in United Front action towards this objective, which was perceived to be ultimately counterproductive as a tactic which would scare off the ranks of organized labor. The SPA majority was, in summary: *for* amalgamation and against Gompers but not for intervention of the party in trade union affairs, *for* Soviet Russia with certain criticisms about anti-libertarian excesses and violence of the revolution, *against* any United Front with the Workers Party, but very much *for* a Labor Party which excluded the Communists.

†- As was the case with the Workers Party, the position of “Chairman” was largely honorary in the Socialist Party. Real party power lay with the Executive Secretary hired by the National Executive Committee to run the National Office in Chicago (Otto Branstetter), with the elected members of the National Executive Committee (which ran affairs by mail ballot and quarterly plenary session), and with a handful of influential New York-based party leaders, including particularly Morris Hillquit and James O’Neal.

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