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# Review of National Committee Meeting [St. Louis — Jan. 29-Feb. 1, 1903]

by Victor L. Berger

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The meeting of the National Committee which took place last week in St. Louis, and at which the writer of these lines was present as representative from Wisconsin, seems to have definitely settled two points. First, the question of STATE AUTONOMY, that is, the right of a state organization to control and manage its own affairs, absolutely free from any intermeddling on the part of the National Executive. Second, the "FUSION QUESTION," touching the union of the Socialists with other radical reform organizations and so-called Union Labor Parties, which are now springing up in various parts of the country. Such alliances are simply FORBIDDEN for the future to the branches of our party.

In regard to STATE AUTONOMY, the sentiment of the party members in the East and the far West has undergone a really remarkable change since the so-called Unity Convention. This principle was conceded at Indianapolis only because the Social Democrats insisted on state autonomy in the constitution and immediate demands in the platform, as cardinal conditions without which there would be no union. However, in last year's National Committee meeting the writer of these lines stood absolutely ALONE in his defense of state autonomy.

But this year the case was quite different. Thanks to the conduct of the St. Louis Quorum, the sentiment of almost all the committeemen was outspoken in favor of state autonomy. Every member felt that the success of the party last year was

due in no small degree to the many organizations of the many states and to the consequent multiplied intensity of energy. Indeed our party would have been lost if in last fall's elections it had been even left to the initiative of the Local Quorum in St. Louis.

This general tendency in favor of state autonomy, as well as the fact that the representative from California, Comrade [N.A.] Richardson, was a sturdy anti-fusion man and gave the assurance that fusion had come to an end in California, made the regulation of the California affair pass on pretty smoothly.

The older comrades through long experience had become wise and tolerant, and the Socialists of a more recent date, although fanatical against fusion, respected the principle of state autonomy. There was therefore no suggestion of an *auto-da-fé* for the California comrades. And thus with good will a way was easily found to make fusion and other such capers impossible for our party members in the future and yet at the same time preserve the principle of state autonomy.

The National Committee proceeded less tolerantly against the Local Quorum of St. Louis and the National Secretary, Leon Greenbaum. The majority of the National Committee this year consisted of new Socialists from the Western states — former "middle-of-the roaders" [Populists] who in 1896 lost their party to the Democrats through fusion. Naturally, the word "fusion" had the same effect upon them as a red rag to a bull. And the

majority of the Local Quorum and the National Secretary had approved the alliance of the socialist Party with the Union Labor Party in San Francisco and in Los Angeles, and moreover, in meetings and in printed articles had laid down the principle that the Socialist Party should never take the field against any POLITICAL organization of the unions, but must support them under all circumstances.

Now there is no doubt that this teaching is fundamentally false. Very lame also was the privately given excuse of the most intelligent members of the Local Quorum, that the Socialist members in California, by their narrow and impotent fanaticism, had alienated not only the labor unions, but all sensible people, so that nothing more remained for them but to support the Union Labor Party, or go down in the fight against it. Yet we claim that by their second offense (giving up their own party) they could not make good the first offense (stupid phrases about “revolutionary Socialism”); moreover from the nature of the case, Union Labor Parties have no stability, cannot last, and can nowise aid or further the cause of Socialism.

All this and a good deal more would have been shown by discussion. The older Socialists — that is, the Socialists older in the movement, for personally they were mostly younger men than the ex-middle-of-the-roaders — were rather anxious that such a discussion should take place. Not so our Western comrades. They claimed that too much time had been lost on this question already — yet at the same time they lost almost 2 days debating the different ways whether the question should be discussed or not. They finally decided not to discuss it. According to their idea, the Quorum and the National Secretary were “self-confessed fusionists,” and therefore there was “no need of any trial” — they were simply to be “punished,” lynched, so to speak.

Such extreme methods resulted in somewhat queer situations. In the first place, well known OP-

PONENTS of the policy of the St. Louis Quorum and the National Secretary (as, for instance, the writer of this article) voted AGAINST all measures to remove them. These opponents did so out of sheer sense of justice, because neither the Quorum nor the National Secretary had been given any chance to defend themselves. ON the other hand, a very positive line of demarcation was soon noticeable between the Socialists of older growth and the Socialists of “new vintage,” which to some degree also developed into an unfortunate and entirely uncalled-for antagonism between the East and the West. The National Secretary had been elected before this dualism came to the surface, otherwise William Maily of Massachusetts would have had very poor chances. (By the way, Maily was not the choice of the committeeman from Wisconsin [Berger].) But afterwards the Western comrades did all they could to “get the better of the East”; they removed the headquarters of the party to OMAHA, Neb., on the ground that there are too many headquarters of trade unions in Chicago and Indianapolis, and that consequently our party would be in danger of getting under the control of the trade unions.

This is certainly a ridiculous reason. And the procedure of the majority of the committee was rather high-handed, and evidently in opposition to the wording and the spirit of the constitution. The majority decided that the selection of a headquarters was not to be submitted to a referendum of the party — that the clause of the constitution stating that such selection is “subject to referendum,” meant that a referendum was permissible when asked for by 5 branches in 3 states, otherwise it would not be submitted. The majority of the committee was clearly in error on this point — the new makeup of the Quorum even involves a change in the constitution — and the committeeman from Wisconsin rose and gave due notice that he would see to it that a referendum should be had under all circumstances.

For take it all in all: While our party may

well congratulate itself upon the lively participation of the Western farmer element in the Socialist movement, yet the backbone and the leadership of this movement must remain proletarian for a long time in the future. The Quorum elected for Omaha has a strong agrarian coloring and would be absolutely out of touch with the proletarian masses of the country which the Socialist Party must win before all things if it wants to have success. We say this although we value very highly the sympathies and the assistance of the farmers — the writer of this article was the author of the Socialist Farmers' Platform of the Social Democratic Party, which raised so much hue and cry among the "ultra-class-conscious" of this country. But for the very reason that we want no antagonism in the Socialist Party between the city proletariat and the workers in the field who still own their tools, we do not want headquarters in Omaha, Neb., and a quorum which would represent the milieu of the surrounding states. And a Quorum in Omaha, on the ground that there it would be "outside of the influence of trade unionism," is impossible at the present time and out of keeping with our final aims. Steps have already been taken to correct by referendum this mistake of the majority of the National Committee.

But while the National Committee may have gone too far in that respect, it no doubt did the right thing in regard to the trade unions. In the respective resolutions, our friendly attitude towards the trade unions was reaffirmed and precisely stated — yet at the same time the efforts of certain men in our ranks who would like to make our party the serving-maid of the trade unions were annulled by declaring that our organization is not to take any party in the squabbles and fights of the trade unions among themselves, nor to invite them to send delegates to our political conventions.

Looking over the work of the session, the party may well be satisfied with the results. It was better than some even very deep differences of opinion should crop out there than in a convention. As everybody knows, the delegates in a convention are only too easily influenced by oratorical and emotional moments, which frequently results in choosing the worst solution of any question. The last session of the National Committee has been for the good of the cause in more than one way.

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*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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