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# Principles of Socialist Propaganda League: Letter to the Editor of the *New York Call*, March 4, 1917.

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James ONeal has two arguments against the principles as laid down in the manifesto of the Socialist Propaganda League of America. One is that “there is nothing new in it,” there is nothing “that differentiates it from the Socialist Party.” The second argument is that it is “a mere assembling of words, mingled with revolutionary phrases, some of them obscure, others contradictory.”

He then starts to attack the language. We have used “universe” instead of “world,” and “to exercise influence on uncompromising principles” is considered grammatically incorrect. Maybe, but every worker will understand the meaning, and we do not write for lawyers or professors or bureaucrats.

As to the principles, the part of our manifesto which appeals to our critic as particularly insane and obscure, “not equaled in any literature, ancient or modern,” so that such “jargon of obscurantism” should “not be lost to history,” is a part of section three. As no other statement in the manifesto has attracted to such a degree the full discrimination of ONeal, it is but fair to accept the challenge and to demonstrate our principles on this very statement. I cut the statement in two:

“The principle function of the Socialist movement is to participate in the class struggle in such a way that the workers are educated to realize that their industrial power must back up a political or general class fight.”

Now compare this statement with our party constitution, which defines “political action,” considered as the principle function of the Socialist Party, as follows: “Political action shall be construed to mean par-

ticipation in elections for public office and practical legislative and administrative work along the lines of the Socialist Party platform.” This confines political action to purely parliamentary reform business and is as narrow as it possibly could be. Does our statement not “differentiate” from that in the party constitution?

According to the manifesto, the principle function of the Socialist movement is to participate in the class struggle, which means to actually support any action of the working class against the capitalist class. But to participate in such a way that the workers are educated, which expresses the belief that real education has mainly to develop in action, in fighting, and that Socialists are bound to use their better understanding of society and the future to illustrate our theories and to give a clear purpose to the all day fighting, in which they are to participate. The first part of the statement further explains that the real power of the working class lies in their industrial power, and that political action can only be effective in so far as the workers back it up with their industrial power. Parliamentary action is powerless, unless the capitalists know or fear that the workers finally will use their mass power and political strikes. But if this is right, then it is our duty not to become a voting machine, but to strengthen the tendencies toward mass action and political strikers into a system, to consider political action as something more than parliamentary action and office seeking.

The second part of the statement declares that in the general or political class fight “the masses are to gain such a degree of organization and understanding that they can disorganize the political supremacy of

capitalism and substitute the organization of the working class, by the exercise of their own influence on uncompromising Socialist principles.”

Here it is plainly stated that we cannot expect results, unless the masses themselves get the understanding and the spirit of organization, which, as stated before, has to develop in action. There is a very close relation between our vision of mass action as a means to exercise power against the capitalist class and the form of organization we stand for. But this, of course, does not appeal to bureaucrats, who will continue to be puzzled about the meaning of mass action until they are swept away by the tide.

The paragraph, as cited above, further states that the organized working class will have to “disorganize the political supremacy of capitalism,” which may be subject to grammatical objections, but which is clearly opposite to the standpoint of those who expect their salvation from the present state. We have to overcome the power of the state, which is an instrument of capital against labor, and in this struggle it is important not only to increase our power, but also to decrease the power of the state, by trying to disorganize its means of suppression. This should be done not only by criticizing and exposing the real character of the state and its tools, but by organized action as well. As an example, I refer to the Russian mass actions, in which, through a series of strikes of protest, the discipline of the troops that had to be used to back up the police power was badly disturbed. Another example is the disorganization of the bureaucratic machinery of the central government by tying up the means of communication. This opens the vision of a revolutionary period in history, a period in which gradually the organization of the working class will prove the strongest, and will overthrow the capitalist state. The end of this paragraph states that this struggle can only be accomplished by the working class through their own influence and sticking to uncompromising Socialist principles.

Now, you may disagree with this conception; you may put your hope on cooperation with some middle

class movement, or you may expect to vote the capitalists out of business, but to deny that this declaration of principles gives a definite stand, in accordance with the views of the European Left Wings, means simply a lack of understanding of what is going on all over the world.

It seems hardly possible to give in a few lines more fundamentals in plain language than in this “jargon of obscurantism,” and, when the shortness might leave too much to the intelligence of some readers, we should not forget that the whole manifesto is meant to further explain our position. And, besides, *The Internationalist* is started with the purpose of elaborating these principles and illustrating them.

Mass action will be dealt with time and again, and I will not try to treat this subject here in a few words and be refused space on account of length. I may refer to several articles in the *International Socialist Review* on this subject.

Oneal finally claims that the Socialist Party did its share in “supporting mass action of the workers on the industrial field.” The Socialist Propaganda League evidently is not as easily satisfied as that. To cite Eugene V. Debs in *The Call* of August 11 [1916]: “Hundreds of militant, red-blooded Socialists have quit the party, and their valuable influence has been lost to us, because of the party’s evasive, not to say cowardly, trade union attitude.”

As long as we look first to the big men of the AF of L to learn our attitude, we will continue to fail to do our duty as Socialists.

Don’t let us fool ourselves: There is a difference among Socialists the world over, not only on principles, but on action as well. There cannot be harmony between Scheidemann and Liebknecht. We have to make our choice. But we should not try to talk away differences that will continue to exist. The Left Wing claims its right to criticize and to reorganize. Others will oppose, but let us not try to cloud the issues.

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*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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