
**Open Letter to George Goebel,
SPA NEC member, in Newark, NJ,
from Louis Kopelin,
Editor of *The New Appeal*, in Girard, KS,
January 19, 1918**

Published in *The New Appeal* [Girard, KS], no. 1,156 (Jan. 26, 1918), pg. 2.

George H. Goebel,
14 Bridge Street,
Newark, NJ.

My Dear Goebel:

Replying to your recent letter addressed to me as an old friend and comrade, in which you ask me to give you frankly and fully my personal views regarding the change of policy of the *Appeal*, I will state as follows.†

1. *The New Appeal* speaks for itself. Several issues of the paper have been published since the change and they tell in black and white our editorial attitude on the supreme question of the hour — the war — and the greatest of all questions affecting the future of the people, namely Socialism. It is therefore useless for me to repeat in a letter those things we have fully explained several times in the last few weeks. All I can do is to give you a little light on the motive of this

change and our present relations with our old supporters and Socialist comrades. Having been associated with you in the party organization and

propaganda for nearly a decade and knowing that you are one of the pioneers of the Appeal Army, I believe you are entitled to a personal letter from me.

2. To begin with, I have been an anti-militarist from the first day I joined the Socialist Party in Toledo, Ohio, early in 1903. I am still an anti-militarist. I hate war today much more than I have ever in the past. Like thousands of others in the Socialist Party,

I paid little attention to anti-militarist propaganda until the world war began. All the active comrades I knew in and around New York in 1908 and 1909, when I was editing the *Call*, except



†- *The Appeal to Reason*, a venerable mass circulation Socialist broadsheet published in Southeastern Kansas, moved from the traditional Socialist position bitterly opposing war and militarism, and specifically opposing American intervention in World War I with a banner front page editorial by Kopelin in its Dec. 15, 1917, issue. In it, Kopelin declared that "Hereafter we shall make a New Appeal. The New Appeal will be to national unity and social consciousness for the establishing of fundamental democracy in political, industrial, and international relations." This dramatic change in line was emphasized in the subsequent Dec. 22 edition, when the name of the publication itself was changed to *The New Appeal*. It was this shift in the paper's policy towards the war to one diametrically opposed to the policy of the Socialist Party of America that prompted NEC member Goebel's initial query and Editor Kopelin's public response here.

George R. Kirkpatrick, confined their anti-military views to a general exposition of Socialism with its peaceful program and its analysis of the economic cause of war under capitalism. I remember some of our mutual friends used to remark that "Kirk" was wasting his time writing a book especially against war that he revised over and over again until its final publication under the title of *War — What For?*, which marked the first noteworthy contribution to Socialist anti-militarist literature in America. That "Kirk" had better foresight than any of us we must all admit.

3. The first encounter the Socialist Party of America had with attempted militarism and imperialism was the Mexican situation. Both Taft and Wilson found that the American Socialists were strenuously opposed to the sending of troops across the Rio Grande for the purpose of protecting American investments.

When Wilson came to a sort of an understanding with Carranza the party's anti-militarist campaign was soon sidetracked for regular Socialist propaganda. Personally, however, I carried on this campaign persistently through the *Appeal* with the able aid of Allan L. Benson and John Kenneth Turner. The first year I was on the *Appeal* in Girard, in 1913, as managing editor for Fred Warren, we did some special work in the Waldo Coffman case. In the same year we issued a special edition containing articles from Turner and Kirkpatrick. Five days after I succeeded Warren as editor of the *Appeal* the world war broke out. In the first issue sent to press after this catastrophe we ran a seven column head across the top of the page, reading: "No War Shall Curse This Land!" It is necessary for me to tell you, as a careful reader of the paper, how we fought jingoism and imperialism in every issue without any letup until even some of the Army thought we were overdoing it?

Benson, shortly after joining the *Appeal* Staff, made anti-militarism his leading theme. I recall running a head over one of his early articles, which read: "While There Is War Let Us Prepare For

Peace." Our idea was to use the world war as an object lesson for the American people and to organize them politically against being drawn into the war. It was this that gave birth to Benson's war referendum proposal. This proposal was opposed and ridiculed by leading American Socialists, although it met with the approval of the rank and file of American Socialists. Incidentally, some of these leading opponents have since our entrance in the world been strong advocates of the same referendum proposal. Not only were the *Appeal's* anti-jingo and anti-militarist editions and efforts received with indifference and criticism in certain official Socialist circles, but our Presidential candidate [Benson] met with the same opposition in the 1916 campaign. I remember your telling me at Kansas City after a Benson meeting there that you found during your experience as manager of his campaign that the active party comrades thought Benson was talking too much about war and conscription and not enough about "straight Socialism."

4. Just about a year ago, when the world war seemed about to collapse, I prepared for a series of articles on government ownership of railroads. Charles Edward Russell having made an extensive study of this subject, both here and abroad, seemed to me the man for the job. I made an agreement with him to run a series of articles for about 6 months on the same day President Wilson delivered his famous "Peace Without Victory" address before the Senate [Jan. 22, 1917]. War for America on that day appeared more than ever remote. Everyone knows the sudden turn of events, beginning with Germany's renewal of submarine warfare, about a week after the President's Senate address. While featuring the railroad articles, the *Appeal* did not neglect its duty in trying to keep this country out of war. A glance at the files of the paper during March and April [1917] will refresh anyone's memory. We opposed the war with all our might. And after Congress formally declared war we foresaw the conscription law and opposed

that. While the war and conscription were in their formative stage we exercised fearlessly our rights in standing for peace and democracy.

5. Our next move, after America had been irrevocably committed to war and conscription, was to help organize liberal sentiment for a general peace that would be just and lasting. We enthusiastically took up the democratic peace formula of "no forcible annexations, no punitive indemnities, the right of self-development and self-determination of peoples." We believed then and believe now that this formula is the only basis upon which "this unspeakable agony of nations" may be ended. It was our devotion to this aim that logically brought us to our present editorial position. We realized that withdrawal from the world war by the United States was impossible both from idealistic and practical viewpoints. Socialists now generally agree that the world war must be settled as a whole and that a separate peace for any nation is not only not feasible but it fraught with real danger. It could only prolong "the unspeakable agony." To a general democratic peace we were therefore dedicated.

6. That both sides to the world controversy were blamable I well knew. That elements in every national favored imperialism and annexation I also knew. Germany's silence in regard to its aims and the Allies' statement of last year were both unsatisfactory and sufficient cause for distrust in the eyes of any Socialist. This was the condition that obtained until President Wilson replied to the Pope's peace proposal. Until then it seemed to me that the only way out of the world war was utter exhaustion of all belligerents. The cry of the liberals seemed to be lost in the din of strife. The proletariat was not strong enough in Germany to bring a change in their government. The Allies seemed to be deaf to our demand for a restatement of aims. In spite of the support given to this demand by the Russian democracy the reactionary elements among the Allies held the upper hand. No responsible ruler interested himself in

the democratic peace formula one way or the other, while the reactionary press charged every person and paper advocating this formula with being hirelings of the Kaiser. We also shared in this calumny. Whatever may have been his motives — and this is no time to quibble over the probabilities in this minor connection — President Wilson virtually repeated the democratic peace formula in so many words when he told the Pope [Benedict XV] that the Allies would accept it as a basis for peace if the people of Germany would guarantee its faithful observance.

It is no secret that Socialists and liberals have the confidence of the President and he has many of them in his counsels. That Wilson may have had political reasons for swinging toward the liberal position is not doubted, although I personally believe that the man has shown by many acts that he is not a reactionary at heart. His addresses and notes prior to his reply to the Pope [Aug. 27, 1917] were belligerent and susceptible to narrow interpretations. Wilson found himself in the strange position of being coolly received by his liberal friends and sharply criticized by the Roosevelt type of jingo imperialist for not being sufficiently aggressive.

The Russian situation was appreciated by Wilson sooner than by the leaders in the Allied governments and from his distant and reflective position he was able to see that the British-French diplomacy was driving Russia away. He therefore decisively began a new diplomatic offensive in his reply to the Pope and as recent history has shown forced the Allies to follow his lead.

7. Still the President's reply to the Pope was general in terms. He gave us the terms but no concrete applications. During those many months following this reply no further statements of war or peace aims was made by any nation. In America, as among the Allied nations, two schools of thought were being developed. The reactionaries were preaching the partition of Austria-Hungary and the continuation of the war until all the aims

of the Allied imperialists could be realized. Not only this — the reactionary press and spokesmen denounced the Russian revolutionists as pro-German traitors and sneered at the hope of the world's liberals that any aid might be obtained from the people of Germany. Not only war against the Prussian military caste, but war against the German people, its literature, its art, its science, was preached. American militarists called upon the expected Congress to declare war against Austria, Bulgaria, and Turkey, and insisted that this declaration should be interpreted to mean that we were endorsing the territorial aims of some of the Allied imperialists.

The liberals, on the other hand, realized that united action and energetic propaganda were necessary to defeat the enemy within our ranks. The reactionaries received considerable strength because some of the Socialists and liberals who preached a democratic peace were found to be purely pacifists who would have ended the war at any price. They charged — and in some cases the charge was true — that a statement of aims was asked of the Allies by liberals but with no assurance that if this statement were satisfactory the liberals would lend their support to the attainment of these aims. Through devious methods the reactionary elements succeeded in keeping the old imperialist aims of the Allies unrevised, although a government in Russia that failed to secure a re-statement of war aims from the Allies had just been violently overthrown by a group more daring and uncompromising. This was the situation when Congress convened in December [1917].

8. I was in Chicago conferring with our advertising representative on December 4 — the day the President was expected to make his address. I anxiously watched for the afternoon papers. Soon they appeared with flaming headlines announcing that the President urged war against Austria. Needless to say, I was depressed as I glanced over the heads and leads of the several Chicago dailies, which I took up with me to our office to read

carefully. I had hardly finished reading the first paragraphs of the text of the address when I discovered that the headlines and leads did not give the true import of the President's address. Two-thirds of his statement was devoted to a declaration of aims and the recommendation of war on Austria as Germany's ally was carefully preceded with a declaration that America did not care to rearrange the map of Austria-Hungary or interfere with its internal affairs.

As you know, I was a Washington correspondent for 3 years and from my experience there I realized that the President would be flooded with telegrams of congratulation that would as a result of the way the papers handled his address be based upon the declaration of war against Austria but not upon his restatement of aims. I felt that the White house would be led to believe that the country did not care a snap about a democratic statement of aims because the newspapers and telegrams would feature the belligerent part of the address. I therefore came to the conclusion that so far as our paper was concerned we would stand by the President so long as he stood by a democratic peace such as we advocated. I telegraphed him to that effect. The President gave to the press my telegram and has shown that he appreciates encouragement from Socialists and liberals in his efforts to commit the Allies to a broader and more democratic position on the settlement of the war. Neither the *Appeal* nor I are committed in any way to either Wilson or the Democratic Party. The support mentioned is to the President of the United States and not to any political leader or political party. I am as much a Socialist as I ever was and I intend to remain so.

9. Of course it would have been better if we could have stopped the war in the good old Socialist way, and that is by a general uprising of the working classes of all countries against their exploiters. If the German Socialists, at the beginning of the world war, had refused support to the Prussian militarists, our course would have been

clear. When German Socialists took part in the invasion of Belgium and France, the Socialists of the latter countries could do nothing else but defend themselves. Capitalism being international, the upheaval in continental Europe was bound sooner or later to affect the rest of the world. Whatever theories one may hold, the facts are that the social forces which more or less control our individual destinies have driven nearly every capitalist country into the war. And in it we are. How are we to get out with the least bloodshed and suffering for us and even for our opponents? Who knows the only sure way? Who takes upon himself to say that he alone or he and his fellows have the key to peace? I do not. I have never indulged in hard names against my comrades who believe in certain methods to bring about that which is the supreme desire of the suffering world. I am stating my position and if it convinces them, very well. This I do believe, that a democratic peace may be secured by the cooperation of the Socialist and liberal forces. We can strengthen the hands of the German Socialists if we make it clear that we will support all Allied efforts to attain a democratic peace and oppose all efforts to obtain imperialistic advantages to either side. We will strengthen the hands of the enemies of the German Socialists — the Prussian militarists — if we say that we will oppose all imperialistic aims of the Allies but not lift a finger to oppose the imperialistic aims of the Central Powers. I take it that the Socialists of the Allied nations do not simply favor peace — a surrender — but a just and democratic peace. As Leon Trotsky has written in the Russian negotiations at Brest-Litovsk, “Our government has written at the head of its program the word peace, but at the same time has undertaken the obligation to sign only a just and democratic peace.”

10. This letter is written before Germany's

reply to the recent addresses of Lloyd George and President Wilson has been made public. The Count Czernin proposals made Christmas day have since been withdrawn and they were exposed by Trotsky when he tried to get the Germans to make an application of those proposals in Poland and Courland. While some of the proposals of Lloyd George are apparently unacceptable to the Germans they are not minimum demands, as careful reading of these proposals will show. Morris Hillquit says that Wilson's address forms a basis of negotiations and that “it is now Germany's move.” And on January 17, more than a week after Wilson made his address, Lloyd George tells the British Trade Union Congress that no answer had yet been made and that in his opinion “the answer which is to be given to civilization is an answer which will be given from the cannon's mouth.” I hope Lloyd George is wrong. I hope that an answer will be given that may be the basis of peacefully settling this war. But if Lloyd George's judgment is correct, if the proposals made by the Bolsheviks, the United States, and Great Britain, are answered with a tremendous military offensive on soil not belonging to Germany, what in God's name are we to do? How can any sane and active Socialist or Socialist newspaper remain aloof in this greatest of all human crimes?

11. *The New Appeal*, as the old *Appeal*, will aid in all efforts to bring peace and happiness to the world. Socialism is our principle aim. Until that is achieved we shall work for everything that will serve humanity and advance this aim. Every line of *The New Appeal* is inspired by this desire.

Fraternally yours,

Louis Kopelin,

Girard, Kansas, Jan. 19, 1918.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing Corvallis, OR, 2008. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.