
Socialist Party Convention: Opportunism and Petty Bourgeois Reform Mark Outstanding Traits of Convention and Standard-Bearers

by “J.W.”

[events of May 21-24, 1932]

Published in *Proletarian News* [Chicago], vol. 1, no. 11 (June 14, 1932), pp. 1, 7.

The Socialist Party convention, held at Milwaukee, Wis., May 21-24 [1932], again has brought to the fore the confused and vacillating character of the “leading” working class political party in America. The delegates showed a complete lack of understanding of the economic development of capitalism. Their even greater confusion on the political field, their misconception of the real function of government, and their idolizing of democracy and freedom as possibilities within class society shows retrogression rather than progress among the leading men of the Socialist Party.

Some of the sessions were stormy, and a left section was fighting the right Hillquit machine, but the fight was centered against machine rule and party politics rather than against the petty reform measures proposed for the platform. The great possibilities for growth of party influence in this “banner year,” with six or seven million votes in the coming election and political victory in 1936, was the main argument of the speakers.

Chairman Hillquit Opens Convention.

In his opening speech, Morris Hillquit dealt at length with the reason for the breakdown of capitalism and concluded by stating that the Socialist Party was “the only party that can successfully cope with the capitalistic breakdown.”

He condemned middle class liberalism or progressivism, stating that “it will not fill the crying need of our time, it is a confused agglomeration of superficial political views, radical in phrases and gestures, but without sound economic foundation, without a definite program, without organization, and without a will and power to act.” A mighty fitting description of the SP itself.

He equally strongly condemned communism, stating that “It can never become a power in a *democratic country*.”

The Milwaukee Journal, leading capitalist newspaper in the city, in commenting on Hillquit’s speech, compared him to N. Murray Butler, President of Columbia University, and stated that the latter “seems to be more radical in his views.”

Confusion on Liberalism Applies to SP.

As an example of how well Hillquit’s condemnation of the confused and superficial character of liberalism befits the SP itself can be mentioned the adoption of the so-called Blanchard resolution. For three hours the delegates wrestled over a resolution on Russia. The controversy arose over whether freedom for only working class political prisoners should be demanded, or whether the word “all” should be substituted for “working class.” It was pointed out in the arguments that some of the political prisoners were actual counterrevolutionists who could not be set free, while others held that no differentiation could be made on that score.

One delegate especially waxed eloquent on the charge that there is the worst dictatorship in the Soviet Union, even surpassing Fascism in character; implying that America is a democratic country... At the suggestion of Norman Thomas that “all” instead of “some” political prisoners were freed, the Blanchard resolution was adopted. It reads as follows:

Whereas, the Socialist Party recognizes that the Soviet experiment is being watched closely and with intense interest by all the workers: that its success in the economic field will give an impetus to the acceptance of socialism everywhere, while its failure will discredit an economy based upon planned production and abolition of capitalism;

Be it resolved, therefore, that the SP, while *not* endorsing all the policies of the Soviet government, and while emphatically urging the release of political prisoners and restoration of civil

liberties, endorse the efforts being made in Russia to create an economic foundation of a socialist society, and calls on the workers to guard against capitalist attacks on the Soviet Union. We believe the economic and political conditions in each country should determine the revolutionary tactics in that country, and that the Russian experiment is a natural outgrowth of the conditions peculiar to that country.

An endorsement of the Soviet “experiment” if it succeeds, but condemnation of the one thing that makes success possible, the dictatorship of the proletariat. Beyond this repudiation of the only working class government in the world the Socialist Party has not emerged.

Presidential Candidate a Pacifist.

The candidates for President and Vice President gave their nomination speeches. Norman Thomas, the Presidential choice, came forth with his usual pacifism. He stated that “It is within the power of the workers to build up an organization that will strike against war, of men that would dare to say: ‘I will die if necessary but not in mortal combat with our brothers.’” James H. Maurer, the choice for Vice President, came forth with a scathing condemnation of the present social order, yet not a work of the necessity for the working class taking power.

Hillquit asked for a mandate from the people (not the working class) “to build on the ruins of an outworn economic system a new economic system.”

Argument on Confiscation.

Into a draft of the platform had been written that the means of production and distribution of the means of life must be taken over through confiscation. A fight ensued which did not subside until Thomas threatened to withdraw as candidate, upon which the word “confiscation” was changed for the word “transfer,” a word that can be used to satisfy the many different shades of opinion within the ranks of the SP.

Opportunism With a Vengeance.

Among the many suggestions and proposals submitted there was one by the delegate [Al] Benson of Wisconsin, urging the party to go on record to take the factories, mines, and mills, run them until everything runs smoothly again, and then turn them back to their rightful owners, as the government did with the railroads in wartime. As a vote-catching plank that ought to have taken first prize.

Debates and hot arguments developed on many of the proposed platform planks and resolutions. The prohibition issue caused an uproar, "the Japanese imperialist adventure in Manchuria," "the threatening war between Japan and Soviet Russia," fascism, birth control, and other issues were subjects for much heated discussion.

The closing session of the convention brought out a number of resolutions with a more radical tinge. Although these were defeated, they showed that a number of militant labor men were present. The most outstanding of these resolutions was one on the labor union policy. A delegate from Pennsylvania proposed that the party go on record for endorsing the industrial union ideal and send organizers out to organize industrial unions. The resolution was defeated, but received a substantial support, the vote being 68 to 84.

It is a healthy sign of the times that a militant labor section is developing in the Socialist Party. We can only urge that this militant section push forward to a more revolutionary standpoint. This might result in their finding themselves on the outside of the ranks of the organization, as have happened to the revolutionary sections before. But even this militant section has as yet a long way to travel before it will become Marxian in its understanding and revolutionary enough in its political activity to constitute any real danger to the petty bourgeois makeup of the Socialist Party.

The biggest fight of the whole convention came over the election of National Chairman. Charges were hurled forth and back among the delegates of Ku Klux Klanism, Anti-Semitism, and sectional favoritism. Hillquit was reelected over [Daniel] Hoan with a small majority.

On the whole, the convention revealed that the Socialist Party has not moved forward toward an understanding of the class struggle and the historic mission of the working class. It has learned nothing from the Russian revolution and the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The Socialist Party is a reform party in a period of capitalist development, when reforms are no longer possible. But more serious even than the reform policy is its petty bourgeois makeup. A working class party might learn to adapt itself to the needs of the working class. A petty bourgeois-controlled party is bound to go down with the class it represents unless its makeup can be changed. This seems an impossibility with the Socialist Party.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · December 2013 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.