
Shall the Two Parties Unite?

by Carl D. Thompson

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Since once again the SLP has proposed to form a union with the Socialist Party, and since this time a number of prominent Social Democratic officials are urging us to act in accord with their proposal, it is important that the matter be carefully considered.

The proposition to have a united Socialist movement is very alluring. To increase our numbers by a wholesale acquisition; presumably to lay aside differences and contentions among Socialists and present a solid front to the common enemy — all this sounds very enticing.

But let us look before we leap. The Socialist Labor Party has a history. And it has at present very decided characteristics. Before we commit our party to any course in this matter, we ought to know something of the nature of the situation we are running into.

From the beginning the Socialist movement has been hindered more by those who have called themselves Socialist than by its avowed enemies.

The first great malady within the movement was anarchism. A long, bitter struggle, fierce dissensions, and finally a wide split in the historic “International” freed Marxian Socialism from the blight of anarchy. Does anyone regret the split?

But let us not forget that again later, and right here in the United States, the Socialist movement has to fight against and rid itself of anarchy.

In 1882 John Most landed in New York City. In course of time he drew out of the American Socialist movement as an anarchistic (so-called) “social revolutionist.” It was “revolutionary enough” to suit any of the “scientific” phrasemongers of today. And the Socialist Labor Party of that time took up the cry of unity. They wanted to unite with these anarchists. Fortunately for them, the anarchists would not unite. But it shows how close akin the Socialism of the Socialist Labor Party has been to anarchism.

This anarchistic movement was really “revolutionary.” It ended in the tragedy of the Chicago Haymarket and the hanging, unjustly, to be sure, of the anarchists.

Does anyone regret that they did not *unite*? Unity would have been disastrous. Separation in such cases is the only salvation.

Since then many other efforts for unity have been made. In 1887 the Socialist Labor Party tried to “*unite*” with the International Workingmen’s Association. But these people

that the Socialist Labor Party *declare against political action*, and that they receive back the Chicago anarchists. They were for unity with a vengeance. The effort failed. In 1880 the Socialist Labor Party “*united*” again with the Greenbackers. And after the fusion the Socialist Labor Party went to sleep. Again in 1886 the Socialist Labor Party “*united*” (we ought to call it



“fused”) with the Henry George movement. They were kicked out in 1887, but fused again with the Progressive Labor Party. Anyone who reads this history carefully will see, and those who have been through it know well enough already, that this bad habit that the Socialist Labor Party has acquired is not a source of strength, but of very serious weakness. It is infinitely better to keep Socialism clear and free from such things.

Turning now to the origin of our present Socialist Party, it is significant to note that its first strength came not from a *union*, but from a split.

In 1897 was organized the Social Democracy of America, made up of two factions: one advocated communistic colonization as the method of Socialist battle; the other advocated the usual political action as its method, in other words, it was straight Socialistic. At the convention of the organization in 1898, the political faction was defeated, and left the convention.

This was not a misfortune; it was a good thing. It cleared the field. It left the colonizers free to try out their scheme. They did so and it ended in a wretched failure. It also left the Socialists free to try out their plan. They have done so. And the results are splendid. In the first national election [1900] the Social Democratic Party cast more votes than had ever been cast by the Socialist Labor Party in its palmiest days. The present Socialist Party is by far the best, largest, most powerful and promising Socialist organization America has ever seen. Following these tactics, and working independently, it has gone from victory to victory until it has cast nearly a half million votes. We are on the right track now. Let us not go back.

So “*unity*” is not necessarily an element of strength. It may be exactly the opposite. **Only that unity is strength which puts the organization more frankly and positively upon the basis of international Socialism.**

And a split, a division, a *refusal to unite*, to compromise, or to fuse may *not* be — and in the experience of the movement in America, *has not been* — an element of weakness, but of strength. Indeed, we have gained most by our splits, our revolts, our refusals to unite, or to continue in affiliation with unreasonable, unscientific, and destructive elements.

Socialism gained immensely when it broke positively with anarchism. It gained again when it broke with those who rejected the ballot. It gained again when

it broke with the utopian ideas of colonization. And at every break of this kind it not only gained tremendously in the clearness and strength of its own position, but at every point it gained also in power, in numbers, and in following.

We should, therefore, not be too hasty in what at first might seem to be a very promising course. Our party, after terrible experiences and interminable struggles, has at last got onto the ground occupied by the Socialist movement of the world. To admit those who from the first have fought against all this progress might be suicidal, especially to admit them in a body. Instead of unity with this element we should frankly and earnestly seek to keep our party free from it.

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In the discussion of this subject in the last number we showed that the Socialist movement has made progress not so much by union, affiliation, or fusion with the various reform factions as by a constant struggle to free the movement from false Socialism. In other words, the experience of the past 25 years in the work for Socialism bears abundant evidence of the fact that the process of separation, elimination, has been vastly more important in bringing the movement to a really scientific and true Socialist position than all the efforts for so-called “unity.” Let us now consider the definite dangers that confront us in the proposition to enter into any sort of affiliation with the Socialist Labor Party.

1. If we should receive into our organization any considerable number of Socialist Labor Party members it would greatly reinforce the impossibilism within our ranks. This would be serious and possibly fatal to our movement. A study of the history of the Socialist Labor Party, a reading of their platform, or the knowledge of the personnel of the movement will make it perfectly clear to anyone that of all the impossibilists the Socialist Labor Party people are the worst. We already have too much of this in our own party, and it has given us endless trouble. And wherever the people have had any considerable influence there the movement has been dead. In most of the states, however, we have at last, after years of struggle, got our movement onto the basis of International Socialism. If now we should open our doors to this flood of impossibilism

from the Socialist Labor Party, most if not all of the progress we have made would be lost.

In order that the seriousness of this danger may be appreciated, let us call attention to one or two of the characteristics of the Socialist Labor Party impossibilism.

On the question of trade unionism, for example, the Socialist Labor Party has a most astonishing position. At its National Convention in New York City in June 1900, it adopted unanimously the following resolution:

If any member of the Socialist Labor Party accepts office in a pure and simple trade or labor organization, he shall be considered antagonistically inclined towards the Socialist Labor Party *and shall be expelled*. If any officer of a pure and simple trade or labor organization applies for membership in the Socialist Labor Party, *he shall be rejected*.†

Such is the position of the Socialist Labor Party. And it has maintained it with the most unyielding dogmatism until as a matter of fact, it has done more toward alienating the organized working class of this country from Socialism than we shall be able to overcome in years of work and effort.

The last adventure of the Socialist Labor Party in this light of antagonism to trade unionism was the IWW movement. Whatever may be our view of the principles or the motives of this movement, it cannot be denied that it resulted only in dividing the labor forces and deepening the feeling of prejudice against Socialism and Socialists on the part of trade unionists on the one hand, and splitting off a few party members here and there who went over to the Socialist Labor Party Alliance with its bitterness and disaster.‡

Thus all through its history the Socialist Labor Party has succeeded only in antagonizing and alienating the organized working class of this country. Would it not be suicidal to invite into our movement by wholesale an organization that stands for this kind of tactics?

Again, on the farmer question this same impossibilistic attitude is shown. Within our own party

we have comrades who have come to us from the Socialist Labor Party and who have undertaken to control the movement in several of our states. The writer is personally acquainted with the situation in Nebraska for example. Under the influence of the Socialist Labor Party tactics, our comrades there openly refused to allow the farmer to join the Socialist Party on the ground that because they own some land and machinery they are *capitalists* and cannot therefore belong to the working class movement! And those who have tried to introduce into our party there and elsewhere a more rational view upon this farmer question, and have tried to get the party frankly to accept the task of making propaganda among the agricultural working classes, have been most shamefully assailed by these people. Shall we now admit into the party a large group of people who will reinforce this impossibilistic attitude?

Turn to the platform of the Socialist Labor Party. You will find that it has no program whatever. No immediate demands. And if you will read their literature and listen to their speakers, you will find that they do not believe in a program. They believe that to work for municipal ownership, government ownership, better wages, shorter hours, old age pensions, and other reforms is treason to "revolutionary Socialism." So tenacious are they of this view, and so intolerant to those who differ from them that the literature of the Socialist Labor Party is one constant polemic and assault upon the comrades who believe in a constructive program! If we admit into our party such elements as this, how then shall we ever be able to win the confidence of the working classes of this country? Such influences as these have terribly hindered Socialism in this country. Instead of encouraging it, or affiliating with it, we should do everything in our power to get as far away from it as possible.

2. Furthermore, the entrance of the Socialist Labor Party into the Socialist Party would tend to break down the spirit of democratic management and control. To us Socialism means a democratic form of party organization and management. With the Socialist Labor Party we have a most dogmatic and unyielding

†- Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States*. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1903), pg. 340. Emphasis by Thompson.

‡- Reference is apparently to the Socialist Trades & Labor Alliance, the umbrella group of revolutionary industrial unions established by the Socialist Labor Party in 1896. The ST&LA was merged into the Industrial Workers of the World at the time of its formation in 1905. Thompson's chronology appears to be garbled here.

boss rule. For example there is no such thing as the freedom of the press in the Socialist Labor Party, because the paper is owned and controlled by the party organization, and the party organization is owned and controlled by one man, Daniel DeLeon. While we maintain a great variety of publications, all free to utter their own convictions and to contribute their own quality of work to the movement, the Socialist Labor Party element always insists that the Socialist press should be owned and controlled absolutely by the party, and that the party should be highly centralized and autocratic.

And again, take the question of State Autonomy: the fact that we have given each state control of its own internal affairs has kept the national movement out of the petty quarrels of various localities and therefore left it free to work for the general propaganda. At the same time it has also protected states that had won a constructive program from impudent interference from without, which would have destroyed the effect of the work. We have in our party of course a great many people who do not believe in State Autonomy. There has been a constant effort to break it down. To receive the Socialist Labor Party into our organization would greatly strengthen the position of these elements. And while perhaps we might be able to prevent the breaking down of our democratic principles, it is quite certain that we would immediately be forced into a constant struggle to maintain them. Why should we invite such a controversy?

3. And finally, to receive into our organization any considerable number of the Socialist Labor Party would add just that much to the controversial and quarrelsome element in our party. The Socialist Labor Party has killed itself by its narrow, bitter, doctrinaire controversies. By constant accusation, suspicion, and

recrimination, it has kept itself so embroiled with internal controversies that all its strength and value has been destroyed. We have also had the same element in our party. Hardly a state has been free from it, and at no time are we without these disgusting and damaging internal conflicts. But in nearly every case the cause can be traced either to men who have had their training in the dogmatism of the Socialist Labor Party or to the spirit which has been drawn from it. So far, we have been able to make some progress in our party in spite of this blighting influence. In fact, in many directions we have practically subdued it and the party is partially rid of it. Shall we now invite into our midst a reinforcement of this sort of thing?

If there was any reason to believe that what is left of the Socialist Labor Party could be assimilated if admitted to our party, there might be some reason for receiving them. But as a matter of fact, anyone who knows the temper and genius of the followers of Daniel DeLeon knows well enough that these are not men who learn. They are unyielding dogmatists. And as for learning some new truth, or changing their views upon theories or tactics, such a thing is regarded by them as absolute treason. It is therefore useless to hope to win these people from their present and well-established dogmatism.

Therefore, if these people wish to join the Socialist Party the door is open to them as individuals, the same as to all others. By accepting our platform, our program, constitution, and tactics, they may come in. And upon no other ground. For them to propose any other bears upon its face a sinister suggestion. Let them apply as others do to the individual branches. And let the branches be the judge of their individual fitness and right as in the case with all others.

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