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# “Opportunist” Possibilities versus “Impossibilist” Inevitabilities

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Kalamazoo, Mich., May 2 [1910].— As State Secretary of Michigan I have been requested by the *Chicago Daily Socialist* to write a letter for publication in said paper relative to the work of the party and its hopes and plans for the future, and particularly with reference to the coming national conference [National Congress, Chicago, May 15-21, 1910].

First, I wish to say that while I am glad of an opportunity to say a few words, which I feel will voice the sentiments of a large number of Michigan comrades, I want it understood that as State Secretary of Michigan, I am occupying a clerical and executive position, and striving to do the work faithfully as a servant of a democratic movement in which the rank and file are masters.

## **Speaks as Individual.**

Hence, I speak as an individual and not as a “leader,” and desire to be held personally responsible for the views herein expressed. I have no one to fear or favor; they will be blunt and plain spoken.

From recent developments I am convinced that the Socialist Party is, right now, at the most critical period in its existence; that the coming conference will either mark the beginning of its power as a revolutionary working class movement, or the beginning of its disintegration into a reform movement, without any valid excuse for its existence, other than can be offered by half a dozen organizations: “Reformers,” “Independents,” “Insurgents,” and capitalistic “bait casters.”

## **Crying Need.**

The crying need of the hour, as I see it, is first the capture of the machinery of the Socialist Party by the working class. I believe it is the lesson of history, early and recent, that the working class can trust itself only.

A working class movement, officered and directed by other than working class members actively engaged as working men, will soon be chasing rainbows and building idols to false gods.

The movement of the working class is a movement that springs from the necessities of the working man's life, a necessity unknown to the preachers, editors, writers, and "what not" that assume the position of "leaders" whenever there is any considerable number of the human ego that can be haltered and led.

## **Desirable as Servants.**

I am not saying that preachers, editors, and writers are not desirable in their place as servants of the movement, should their intellectual convictions lead them to support the great movement of the working class; but they should come willing to cast their own interests into the melting pot, and to take up the battle of the workers from the workers' viewpoint, and this viewpoint can come only from the workers themselves.

Here again I would not be misunderstood. I do not class with those who would lead our movement into the cause of the old line trade unions, and their probable attempt in the near future to go into political action.

Such efforts may indicate the breaking away from old ideals, but they are merely incidental to the general disintegration that is taking place and in no way to be considered as a part of the reconstruction movement that must be revolutionary, and come from organized and unorganized revolutionary element of the working class.

## **"Old Line" Efforts.**

The efforts of the old line trade union will not be, as I see it, to bring about the overthrow of the wage system, but rather to perpetuate its existence on terms favorable to itself, as a favored class separate and apart from the general interest of all the working class.

The terms “opportunist” and “impossibilist” have in my judgment been used largely without meaning and frequently as terms of abuse, sarcasm, and ridicule. They used to be definitely defined, inasmuch as they now vaguely classify two distinct elements in the movement that are, figuratively speaking, battling for the mastery.

I shall make no effort to present an “authoritative” definition, but for the purpose of this article, that I may make my own position clear, I will at least attempt to outline a general statement of the positions.

### **What “Opportunism” Aims At.**

As I understand it, “opportunism” aims to swing our movement in line with the immediate interests of the working class; i.e., to raise the wage, shorten the hours, safeguard life, cheapen cost of living, transportation, etc.

In other words, to start right in now and capture the outposts of capitalism, this town, that town, city, county, state, or nation; to place its representatives in council, Congress, Senate, and court to draft new laws and modify old ones, until, by a general process of assimilation, we wake up some fine morning and find that we are no longer living under capitalism, but in “Cooperative Commonwealth.”

As a historic basis for this hope it is presented that the change from chattel slavery to feudalism was mad gradually, likewise from feudalism to the wage system, no one being able to put his finger on the place where one leaves off and the other begins.

The “opportunist” claims also to be a “revolutionist” in that his ultimate purpose is the establishment of the cooperative commonwealth.

### **What “Impossibilists” Believe.**

On the other hand, those who are termed “impossibilists” believe that very little can be gained by Socialists trying to administer the capitalists’ political machinery; that this machinery is especially adapted to fit the necessity of the capitalistic or ruling class.

Above the town, city, and county looms the state, and above the state the nation. It is one great machine, regulated from the head down, and the Socialist official is powerless to do more than the machine permits, and the machine permits practically nothing.

They believe that what the working class gains under capitalism at one point they lose at another; and that as the struggle goes on it will become more and more bitter, and the general distress and subjugation of the workers more and more acute; and that this process must go on until the workers learn the lesson that the source of their trouble is inherent in the wage system, and that the remedy is not in putting patches on this system, but to its final overthrow and the establishment of the cooperative commonwealth.

The so-called “impossibilist” takes very little stock in the capture by the working class of municipalities on programs demanding municipal ownership, etc., believing at the best that these programs are palliative, tending but to put off the day of reckoning and prolong the general misery of the unaffected districts.

### **Believe in Evolution.**

They believe firmly in the law of evolution, and that this law is working constantly in the capitalistic state evolving the methods of its own destruction, and that the master class itself will be forced to adopt such changes as are desirable, in an attempt to stem the tide of revolution, which will yet be manifested by a strong, clean cut, revolutionary working class movement; a movement not to be put off with temporary concessions and reforms.

As Tolstoy says, the master class will do any and everything but “get off the backs” of the working class, and they will do that, too, someday — when they have to, not before.

The so-called “impossibilists,” as I understand it, believe that the change from capitalism to Socialism is not in any way to be confused with the process of changing slavery to feudalism, or feudalism to the wage system. Neither of these changes were brought about by the working class; in reality they were merely changes in methods of exploitation, not in the essential fact.

If Socialism is going to be another system of exploitation it can easily graft on on the old tree, as has its predecessors. But if it is to bring to the world the triumph of a new era, the final capture and overthrow of the master class and the establishment of an entirely new principle in production, then we will all know when it happens — unless we bite the dust before.

I trust I have given a fair presentation of this matter. Nothing whatever is gained by subterfuge or misstatement. As to my own posi-

tion, which in this connection may not be out of place, I do not think I belong to the extreme wing of either of these divisions, but I am frank to admit that my judgment, after some years of active work and thinking, leads me to accept in the main the position of the so-called “impossibilists,” though not the name, for I believe that revolutionary Socialism is not only possible but inevitable.

### **Milwaukee Situation.** <sup>1</sup>

As to the Milwaukee situation, I consider it the “opportunity of the opportunists”; an opportunity fraught with gravest responsibilities and difficulties. I feel in such a case that we of the revolutionary trend of thought should withhold judgment until the Milwaukee comrades have had a fair trial.

We are, however, justified in putting off the day of rejoicing until the experiment has proven to be of positive benefit to the great working class movement.

We should furthermore appreciate their limitations and be willing to recognize even slight advantages, and these are certainly possible in case of strikes, fights for free speech, etc. The Milwaukee comrades can at least give Milwaukeeans a clean, capitalistic administration, free from graft, and if they do nothing more it will be the first experiment of its kind, and deserving of commendation.

In spite of all they can do, however, capitalism will be largely the same in Milwaukee as it is in Chicago, San Francisco, New York, or anyplace else; that is, the wage system of exploitation will prevail and the class struggle will be on.

The great danger, in my judgment, is that this questionable and perhaps temporary victory will whet the appetite of the “leaders,” and they will involve our movement into a petty scramble for the control of the office in capitalistic municipalities until the real mission of the Socialist Party is completely forgotten.

I do not wish to pose as a judge or critic, but am making these observations as an interested student and observer, conscious that no one man is able to satisfactorily solve in advance the exact path that economic evolution will pursue, and willing to change any of my views to coincide with the facts as they make themselves manifest.

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<sup>1</sup> The Social-Democratic Party of Wisconsin, state affiliate of the Socialist Party of America, was swept to power in a landslide in the April 1910 elections in Milwaukee, a massive victory which saw Emil Seidel seated as the city's mayor and Socialists capturing control of the city council and other key elective offices.

A more hopeful sign to me than the questionable victory in Milwaukee is the growth of the spirit of solidarity among the working class as manifest by the frequent sympathetic strikes and the tendency towards industrial unionism.

### **About the Conference.**

A few things I would like to see done at the coming conference [National Congress of the Socialist Party] are the following:

First— A Clean cut statement of the revolutionary principles of the movement.

Second— Recognition of the principle of Industrial Unionism as the only basis for effective work in the industrial field.

Third— The establishment of a party-owned press and job printing plant; each state to have its state-edited department.

Fourth— Abolition of the National Executive Committee and an extension of the principle of democratic management.

Undoubtedly there are other matters to be discussed, but these are certainly worthwhile.

### **Endorsed by Grand Rapids.**

P.S. Since writing the above I have addressed a meeting at Grand Rapids and left this article with the local to be discussed at a special meeting. The result is that 37 members endorsed it and 3 opposed. I do not know whether other locals in our state would give it as friendly a reception but I hope that Michigan is red, not yellow.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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