
No Precinct Committeemen for Us

by Hulet M. Wells

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A number of Socialists in Seattle recently committed party treason by deliberately running a sticker ticket in the primary. Some of the candidates on the sticker ticket were in opposition to regular Socialist candidates for the same office; others were for vacancies on the regular ticket; but in both cases the names were selected informally by a few individuals without the endorsement or consent of the party.

Now these same people have had themselves elected as “Socialist Precinct Committeemen,” as they are allowed to do by the primary law, and they are claiming to be the only real party. They are even threatening to have the law on the regular party and take their property away. They claim that the law made by Republicans and Democrats for the regulation of their parties has taken the place of the Socialist Party constitution in the matter of choosing our party officials, and that if we are to have any standing as a political party we must do as they do, and accept a governing committee elected by the votes of all voters who want to call for Socialist ballots.

This self-elected Precinct Committee in Seattle is in correspondence with the Socialists and ex-Socialists in Tacoma and Spokane, and hopes to get a few Precinct Committeemen from other places to join those in Seattle in forming a “State Central Committee.” They would then take over the management of our splendid dues-paying organization of over 7,000 members, and our present State Committee and Executive Committee would

automatically lose its authority. All this would be done by the power of the courts through the enforcement of the direct primary law.

Now I believe that the Socialists of Washington are so clear and uncompromising in their party tactics that they would not think of allowing any but red card members to vote for party officials, and if a capitalist legislature really did pass a law intended to force us to let the public elect our committees, then we surely would ignore the law, just as we have already successfully ignored the intent of the “non-partisan” law.

But the fact of the matter is that there is no law to force us to do anything of the kind, and the group of lawyers who are leading this “Precinct Committee” scheme must know it, if they are good lawyers.

There were doubtless some loyal Socialists who got elected as Precinct Committeemen because they thought the law required it, and they were not parties to the Seattle plot to disrupt the movement. There were also some who ran on the sticker ballot whose names were put on without their knowledge.

My aim in this article is to clear up the confusion as to how that section of the law providing for election of Precinct Committeemen applies to the Socialist Party.

To understand this it is necessary to analyze our form of organization.

In law, organizations are classified, and there are different rules applied to the different classes.

For instance, there are corporations, joint stock companies, voluntary associations, and political parties. Each of these is in a different class, governed by different rules.

Now the Socialist Party has a double entity. The whole mass of voters who vote for the Socialist ticket comprise what the law regards as a political party; but those who hold membership cards, pay dues, and are subject to our constitution constitute what the law calls a voluntary association.

The law will not interfere with nor regulate the affairs of voluntary associations; and the general rule has been to let political parties also make their own rules; but there is a modern tendency to regulate parties by law, and that is the reason for the primary law provision for Precinct Committeemen.

The primary law also says that parties may make their own rules, so the law is contradictory, and the courts might hold it to be optional, or they might hold that the legislature had no power to make such a rule.

Supposing, however, for the sake of argument, that these Precinct Committeemen were recognized by the law as the legal representatives of the Socialist Party, there is absolutely nothing for such a committee to do. When candidates were chosen by conventions a committee was of some importance, because the convention that

was called by the recognized committee was the one that got its candidates on the ballot under the party name. But since the direct primary came into use such committees are of no importance whatever except in the election of delegates to national conventions.

Since our delegates to national conventions are chosen by referendum of our red card membership, it looks as though the job of Socialist Precinct Committeeman was a pretty worthless office.

The Socialist Party of King County [Seattle] voted not to elect Precinct Committeemen, so there was no contest, and anyone who voted for himself for that office would probably be elected by one vote. This explains the “unbroken series of victories” of the insurgent faction in King County. They are welcome to the offices, but by their deliberate act of running an opposition ticket, they have put themselves outside the party.

They expected the approval and support of Victor Berger, but Berger is a Socialist, and he told them plainly to do their fighting inside the party, and not to attack it from the outside.

As to the party property being awarded to this Precinct Committee by process of law — that is ridiculous. The only way they can get control of a voluntary association is in the manner provided by its constitution.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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