
The National Committee Meeting [Chicago — May 11-16, 1913]

by Tom Clifford

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The meeting of the National Committee at Chicago, May 11-16 [1913], was anything but harmonious. The lines were clearly drawn between the revolutionists and conservatives. While the former were in the minority, what they lacked in numbers was made up in aggressiveness. At the very first session it was apparent that the wheels of the “machine” had been thoroughly greased and that the steamroller would be ruthlessly employed whenever occasion demanded.

Ohio led the opposition to the bureaucracy. Its three representatives — [Tom] Clifford, [William] Patterson, and [William] Bessemer — acting under instructions from the State Convention, demanded an investigation of the affairs of the National Office and proposed an amendment to the Constitution eliminating Sec. 6, Art. II.† There was a manifest indisposition to consider the first proposition, but finally our demand was granted and a special investigating committee was elected. Needless to mention, however, no revolutionist was permitted on the committee. Instead of carrying out the purpose for which the committee was created, they trained their guns on the Ohio delegation and impugned their motives. Apparently no attempt was made to investigate the charges of inefficiency and maladministration, and the committee finally reported to the Convention that the charges were unfounded.

When the report came up for consideration on the floor of the Convention, Bessemer, acting for the Ohio delegation, presented additional documentary evidence which brought the matter to a climax. This was in the nature of letters and telegrams between Hillquit and Barnes which proved beyond doubt a conspiracy to hold up Referendum [1912-]C (the recall of Barnes as Campaign Manager). The evidence of their guilt was so conclusive and irrefutable that Hillquit was forced to admit he was guilty of sabotaging the Constitution in illegally holding up the referendum until certain districts had been circulated and agents sent into localities known to be opposed to the retention of Barnes as Campaign Manager. His only justification of this illegal procedure was the plea that “the interests of the party demanded it,” and he supplemented his plea with the brazen statement that he would repeat the performance under like circumstances. In my opinion, Hillquit’s offense was a thousand fold more reprehensible than anything charged against [William] Haywood.‡

Immediately a motion was carried that Bessemer must return the incriminating documents to the National Office and reveal from whom they had been procured or stand suspended from the National Committee. The documents still remain in possession of the Ohio delegation, and will be made a part of our

†— **Article II: Membership, Section 6**, as written by the 1912 SPA National Convention and approved by membership referendum: “Any member of the party who opposes political action or advocates crime, sabotage, or other methods of violence as a weapon of the working class to aid in its emancipation shall be expelled from membership in the party. Political action shall be construed to mean participation in elections for public office and practical legislative and administrative work along the lines of the Socialist Party platform.” The section was finally repealed by the party’s 1917 Emergency National Convention.

‡— Socialist Party Referendum 1912-D, approved by a margin of 2-to-1 in February 1913, recalled William “Big Bill” Haywood from membership on the party’s governing National Executive Committee for purportedly stating at public meetings in New York that he had never advocated electoral methods of change to the workers, but rather the effective tactics of direct action. This was perceived as a violation of Article II, Section 6, and led directly to the successful recall effort.

report to the State Executive Committee of Ohio, and Bessemer is taking his punishment like a man.

The vote on [rescinding] Sec. 6, Art. II was 16 for and 46 against. In the limited time we had for discussion — for the “previous question” was called for (as per cut-and-dried program of the opposition) we won over three delegates. However, there are a sufficient number of States in favor of the elimination of this objectionable section to force a referendum which will be initiated by the State Committee of Ohio in the near future.

As a sample of the “machine” methods employed by the “powers that be” to accomplish their ends, the election of Executive Secretary by “roll call” instead of by ballot stands out preeminently. None but the deaf, dumb, and blind could fail to perceive the reason for this arbitrary procedure. Having “fixed” a large majority of the delegates, all possibility of sidestepping was

precluded by making them deliver the goods by voting verbally. Some of them might have asserted their independence had the voting been done by ballot.

We are now confronted by a deficit in the National Office of about \$25,000, distributed equally between the Campaign and Lyceum departments. In total disregard of this fiscal condition, the Executive Committee was given almost unlimited privilege to still further increase the indebtedness by the erection of new departments.

About the only commendable action taken was the election of a committee to visit West Virginia and investigate the conditions prevailing in that capitalist-ridden state, and the instruction of the Executive Committee to place as many speakers as possible in that particular field. whether the Executive Committee obeys the instructions remains to be seen.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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