
The Socialist Party of America

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The Socialist Party of America was always one of the most weird travesties of a Socialist organisation, among the many such, affiliated to the late "International." A confusion of elements, seemingly as distant as the poles, found a haven in the SP of A. Booze reformers, Municipalist and Nationalisation cranks, anti-corruptionists, trust-busters, Anarchists of the IWW — all were held in its "embracing unity." Its many journals — mostly privately owned — advocated a multitude of doctrines often directly contradictory. The rally Socialist elements — before the war, at any rate, were few and were powerless in the organisation.

As was to be expected, the war split asunder the SP of A, as it did most of the pseudo-Socialist parties of the world. A pro-war and an anti-war section appeared, the latter again being divided into pacifists and revolutionists. Of course, many who were "pacifist" for the first two years became "pro-war" when the United States became a belligerent.

For over four years little news of the American labour movement has reached us here, but now, by piecing together that which is filtering through we are able to make a partial estimate of what these four years of world-ferment have done towards generating a true Socialist tendency.

Still Opportunist.

Despite the fact that certain of the most notorious traitors to the working class movement in the US — [John] Spargo, [Charles E.] Russell, and others — together with a considerable patriotic element, left the party when the American government declared war, the SP of A is still dominated by reformism, and the majority of its members have as yet no real grip of Socialist prin-

ciples. Its anti-war attitude was not consistently maintained, and where manifest was grounded, not on a clear understanding of internationalism, but, like that of the ILP here, upon Liberal "pacifism."

The discipline, as well as the "principles" of the party may be judged from the fact that its "lone Congressman," Meyer London, who has not only adopted an anti-Socialist attitude on practically every matter before Congress, but has, while in office, repeatedly ignored, in the most contemptuous manner, the decisions and instructions of his own party, was renominated as party candidate in the recent elections.

The "Left Wing."

Nevertheless the collapse of the late opportunist "International" together with the militaristic brutality of their "democratic" government appear to have done much, in connection with the spread of revolutionary education, to open the eyes of a growing section of the Party to the glaring defects in its policy and organisation. This so-called left wing is not by any means a united or nationally organised movement. The size of the country makes independent propaganda on a national basis extremely difficult. The "new outlook" has developed independently in several localities and, in accordance with local influences both of social environment and propaganda, has taken on different forms. The constitution of the Party, which admits of each State division forming its own platform, by fostering a concentration upon the State organisation, has hindered the formation, by sections with like views, of a common programme throughout the Party.

"Left Wing" factions are in practical control of the Party machinery in the states of Washington, Minnesota, Ohio, and Michigan, and in the city of Philadelphia. Journals expounding the different views of various groups were started usually by a few individuals, and later were in several cases adopted or endorsed by Locals and State Parties. They include the *Socialist News* (Cleveland, Ohio),¹ *Revolutionary Age* (Boston), *Class Struggle* (New York City), and *The Proletarian* (Detroit, Mich.)

¹ Actually supplanted by *The Ohio Socialist* from January 1918. This publication later became *The Toiler*, *The Worker*, and *The Daily Worker* over the course of the next decade.

The variety and confusion of ideas represented by this movement of revolt against the official attitude of the Party may be estimated from the statement of one who ought to know, Karl Dannenberg, who, in his *Radical Review* (Oct.-Dec. 1918) says, "Among the left-wingers we will find reform-repudiating Socialists, Mass Actionists, Direct Actionists with Syndicalist tendencies, Socialist Industrial Unionists, American Bolsheviks aspiring for an American Red Guard, even moderate reformers and, of course, the customary chronic kickers." Such a conglomeration, if united in a separate party, would, it is obvious, form one in no way superior to the old body.

The fact is that in the so-called Left Wing there are not one but many currents, in numerous respects antagonistic. Much more Marxian educational work requires to be done before a sound, strong Socialist Party emerges from the present confusion. Nevertheless the fact that a considerable and growing section of the SP of A have seen the folly of the old opportunist tactics is gratifying, and evidence is not wanting that in several quarters the need is strongly felt for disciplined organization and for Socialist political action, revolutionary and uncompromising.

One of the most hopeful signs is that most, if not all, of the LW groups have definitely decided against the advocacy of palliatives and reforms — a stand which the SPGB was the first to take at its inception fifteen years ago. The Socialist Party of Michigan (incorporated in the SP of A) claims to have held this position since 1914. The SP of Ohio have adopted as their "complete platform" and "only demand," "The World for the Workers."

"Mass Action."

A considerable section of the "Left Wing," including those responsible for and endorsing the *Revolutionary Age* and the *Class Struggle*, are advocates of what they call Mass Action as a means of achieving the Revolution.

The exponents of this policy avoid definite criticism because of the indefiniteness of their proposals. Louis C. Fraina, editor of the two journals named above, tells us in his book *Revolutionary Socialism*, "Mass action is the instinctive action of the proletariat, gradually developing more conscious and organized forms and definite purposes." Delightfully explicit! So Fraina and his school

are going to rely upon the instincts of the working class to achieve Socialism. This is so much better than relying upon their reason and knowledge, for, whereas the latter needs developing by the tedious method of *education*, the former only requires *directing*. Quite the Hyndman touch! ²

Fraina, of course, does not explain it quite like this, but such is the logical conclusion of his statement. The use of the term “instinctive” to explain the actions of social groups is objectionable; particularly the absurd statement that the proletariat are “instinctively revolutionary.” If there is one thing the workers would appear, to the superficial observer, to have a rooted, natural predisposition for it is capitalism. In a future article I may be allowed to enlarge on this.

The fact is, as the reader may have guessed, that the term “Mass Action” is a shibboleth used to cover a multitude of different forms of activity and as a convenient means of shelving the “problem” of Socialist tactics. Street meetings, demonstrations, strikes, insurrections, all these are forms of “Mass Action” as “soon as they acquire political significance,” say the exponents of the doctrine. What are we to understand by “political significance?” If the government suppresses a strike this strike is obviously of political significance, even though the strikers had no conscious political end in view. The gate is open for the most unrevolutionary, palliating activity to be included in these “new revolutionary tactics.” There is a division of opinion among the Mass Actionists as to whether parliamentary action can be Mass Action or not, even though it is obviously so on the above definition, for an election is *a mass demonstration of political significance*.

The whole conception is loose and capable of all manner of interpretations. Such confusion is just what is essential to avoid in Socialist propaganda. *The Proletarian* (March 1919) hits the nail on the head when it says:

Is it [Mass Action] just our old friend Direct Action come back with a new suit of clothes on? We will do well to enquire into the meaning of the phrase before accepting it. At present it seems to be a rallying cry for all the elements who have repudiated the old parliamentarism. But we have had rallying cries before as a sub-

² Reference is to Henry Hyndman (1842-1921), founder and leading intellectual light of the Social Democratic Federation, a chief organizational rival of the Socialist Party of Great Britain.

stitute for education, and they have only proved to be a snare and a delusion.

A New York Programme.

Only two "official" declarations of principles and policy by the above-mentioned groups have been received by the present writer. Of these one is that adopted by a convention of the LW Section of the New York locals on February 16th this year. This group has a central committee which represents about 20 sections in the state of New York. It endorse the *Revolutionary Age*, published in Boston, and is now merged with the original "Mass Action" group, the Socialist Propaganda League.

The programme opens well: (1) We stand for a uniform declaration of principles in all party platforms, both local and national, and the abolition of all social reform planks now contained in them.

(2) The party must teach, propagate, and agitate exclusively for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of Socialism through a Proletarian Dictatorship.

(3) The Socialist candidates elected to office shall adhere strictly to the above provisions.

It then goes on to endorse "revolutionary industrial unionism" and demands a party-owned press, the repudiation of the old "International," and the affiliation to that recently formed in Moscow about which so little is really known in this country.

As we have repeatedly pointed out, no form of industrial organisation can be revolutionary at the present stage of the mental development of the working class, and at the same time be strong enough in numbers to function effectively in the immediate struggles of the workers on the industrial field. A union cannot be correctly described as revolutionary unless the majority of its members are conscious revolutionists. As Socialist education is the only deliberate means of hastening the formation of the latter, it is a wast of valuable time to advocate how the formation of revolutionary unions before the ground has been adequately prepared, as the New York Left Wing suggest doing.

In addition to this positive error the programme commits an error of omission in failing to point out the necessity for political action in order to obtain control of the armed force of the State.

The programme bears a strong family resemblance to that of the American SLP, the mistakes of which have at last been partly realised by its British namesake.³

“Good Stuff” in Michigan.

The platform of the Socialist Party in Michigan is a much more satisfactory declaration. I append it in full:

We, the Socialist Party of Michigan, in Convention assembled at Grand Rapids, February 24th, 1919, reaffirm our allegiance to the uncompromising principles of international socialism.

We declare that the capitalist system has outgrown its historic function and become utterly incapable of meeting the problems now confronting society.

In spite of the multiplicity of labor-saving machinery and the improved methods of industry, the position of the workers becomes ever more insecure, and the class struggle between the exploited and the exploiters becomes ever more acute. The boasted prosperity of this nation is only for the owners of the means of production and distribution; to the proletariat it means only hardship and misery.

It is the capitalist system that is responsible for the increasing burden of armaments, wars, poverty, slums, child labor, much of the crime and insanity, disease, and the commercialized prostitution. These being some of the manifestations of the present mode of production they can only be eliminated by the removal of the cause — the capitalist system. The method adopted by the Socialist Party of Michigan for the abolition of the present social order is that of political action.

The politics of the working class are comprised within the confines of the class struggle; and conversely the class struggle is necessarily waged on the political field.

By this statement we do not imply that the political action of the working class is always confined within the bounds of parliamentary procedure; nor that the means employed in

³ The Socialist Labour Party would later become one of the primary sources of foundation members of the Communist Party of Great Britain at its establishment in the summer of 1920, second only to the British Socialist Party (BSP). This latter group is not to be confused with the smaller and ultra-orthodox Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB), the organization behind the present document.

waging the class struggle must everywhere be the same. Political action we define as any action taken by the exploited against the exploiters to obtain control of the powers of State; or by the master class to retain control, using these powers to secure the means of life.

The Socialist Party of Michigan recognizes the full significance of working class organization for the capture of the political State, and we call upon the workers in this State to unite with us to the end that we may socialize and democratically manage the means of production and distribution, and eliminate for all time the exploitation of the working class.

The basic principles outlined in the above declaration are essentially correct, though there are in it one or two errors in detail and faulty statements.

Exception must be taken to the reference in paragraph 4 to the "burden of armaments." The growing cost of armaments does not decrease either the price or the value of labour-power. The wages of the workers are not appreciably affected. The expense of armaments is borne by the propertied class, and by some of these it is certainly considered a burden. It is also true that, viewed from the standpoint of an "ideal" distribution of production armaments are a sheer waste of labour; but so, from this point of view, is more than half the activity of the workers. The statement shows signs of improperly digested economics, and it is calculated to sidetrack the workers into the reformist camp.

The fifth paragraph, though well-intentioned, is weak. The "politics of the working class" are mainly Liberal or Tory or Republican and Democrat, and, if "within the confines of the class struggle" at all, are on the side of the capitalists. It is hardly true to say that the class struggle is "necessarily waged on the political field." It will culminate, be decided, and largely end there, although it may partly revert to the economic field if the capitalists resist the process of expropriation upon the Socialist workers achieving political supremacy.

The Convention at which the above platform was adopted, and at which the Socialist element was dominant, took steps to eliminate reformist elements from within the party, in Michigan, or at all events to suppress their activities, by amending the State constitution as follows:

Any member, Local, or Branch of a Local, advocating legislative reforms or supporting organizations formed for the purpose of advocating such reforms, shall be expelled from the Socialist party. The State Executive Committee is authorized to revoke the charter of any Local that does not conform to this amendment.

An attitude upon religion identical with that of the SPGB was adopted and enforced by the constitution with the following clause: "It shall be the duty of all agitators and organizers upon all occasions, to avail themselves of the opportunity of explaining religion on the basis of the materialist conception of history as a social phenomenon." The Convention unanimously endorsed as its literary expression *The Proletarian*, though that paper as yet remains in private hands.

A resolution was carried condemning the National Executive Committee and demanding the convening of a special national conference of the party to determine the vital and urgent matters of principles and policy. That this attempts to reconstitute the entire party upon sound lines will fail is a foregone conclusion. Probably the authors have no very great hopes in this direction. What will be the attitude of its Michigan organisation if the national party adheres to the old opportunist tactics? Probably, almost certainly, the question of separation will arise. To one over here it would seem that secession would be followed by unity with the already existing Workers' Socialist Party of the United States, the principles and tactics of which are closely similar to those of the Michigan body, and which has its center in the same locality — Detroit.

In conclusion, let me state that there is every reason to believe that not the least of the factors which have contributed to the forward movement in Michigan, and to a lesser extent, elsewhere in the USA, has been the far-reaching educational influence of the Socialist Party of Great Britain.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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