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# Report of the National Left Wing Conference (Extracts): New York — June 21-25, 1919.

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*Owing to the fact that it is impossible to get out the complete stenographic report of the proceedings of the National Left Wing Conference, June 21-25 [1919], in booklet form in the short time at our disposal, it has been decided to run extracts from the report dealing with matters now under dispute. It is proposed to give such extracts as will state the position of both sides and will throw all possible clarity on the issues involved.*

## **First Session, June 21st, 1919.**

### **Opening Address.**

Meeting was called to order at 2:30 pm, Maximilian Cohen presiding.

Mr. [Louis C.] Fraina was elected temporary chairman.

**Chairman [Fraina]:** Left Wing Comrades of the Socialist Party: I think all of us realize that this conference is laying the basis for a new revolutionary Socialist movement in the United States. I think all of us realize that the tasks of this conference are tasks that are going to determine the future of the movement in this country. And the conditions that have been brought this conference into being are conditions of crisis in Capitalism — conditions of crisis in Capitalism that have not only produced critical conditions in the life of Capitalism itself, but have equally produced conditions of crisis in the international Socialist movement, and in our own American Socialist movement.

We have met here this afternoon in answer to a mass impulse within the Socialist Party — a mass impulse that is trying to transform the Socialist Party into

a revolutionary party of Socialism — a movement that is trying to square Socialism, not with passive, hesitant, compromising theory of ultra-Socialism and of the ultra conditions of Capitalism, but with the new militant conception of revolutionary Socialism of the proletarian struggle against Capitalism. We have been told by our opponents in the Socialist Party that it is just an isolated movement — that this left Wing is not something that has its roots deep within life itself — that it is simply an emotional expression of the proletarian revolutions in Europe. It is true that the proletarian revolution in Europe is a vital contributing factor toward the development of the Left Wing movement in the American Socialist Party. But it has been a factor in developing this Left Wing movement in that it is proven by the actual test of the revolution that the concepts of the Left Wing within the American Socialist Party — a Left Wing that was not born today or the day before, but which has always been the militant “left,” the militant minority of the American movement — that their concepts of revolutionary action have been proven correct by the experience of the proletarian revolution.

So that we don't have to base this movement of ours simply upon European events. We can base this movement of ours within the American Socialist movement itself. We can say that the Left Wing of today is the child of the Left Wing of yesterday, which has been given an experience, which has been given a new courage and a new militant insight into its problem by the Communists of the revolutionary proletariat in Europe.

And so, comrades, we are met here this afternoon for two purposes — or rather, our task is a dual task. On the one hand, it is to crush the moderate Socialism within the American movement, by trying

to conquer the Socialist Party for revolutionary Socialism. And we are also met to lay down here this afternoon not only a basis for this conquest of the Socialist Party but a basis for a new militant revolutionary party, for a party that can function either as the Socialist Party or as a party independent of the existing Socialist Party, if conditions compel us to realize that task.

And this party of ours is going to join hands with revolutionary Socialism the world over. It is going to do its task in accordance with the spirit and the tactics of revolutionary Socialism. It is going to do what it can in accord with its own conditions and its available forces to express revolutionary Socialism in the policy and the practice of the Socialist movement. And this does not mean, as the Right Wing within the party tries to insinuate, that we necessarily must have immediate revolution. We are simply trying to prepare ourselves for the day when the revolution shall come.

The test of revolutionary Socialism is not simply an immediate revolution. The test of revolutionary Socialism is in its policy during the actual struggles of the proletariat at all times, under all conditions in the struggle against Capitalism and the ruling class, and we can express the tactics and the principle of revolutionary Socialism just as well in ordinary times, just as well in pre-revolutionary times, as we can during the stress and turmoil of the revolution itself. And as a matter of fact, this revolutionary policy of ours, by impregnating the proletariat with the consciousness of militant action, is preparing the proletariat and ourselves as well for the final struggle against Capitalism — a preparation which is necessary because unless you have that preparation, unless the movement develops that revolutionary consciousness out of the actual struggle, the immediate struggle of the proletariat, when the day of the revolution does come, we shall find the movement lined up with the counterrevolution against the Socialist proletariat.

So, comrades, I don't think that we have to elaborate upon this thesis. I know that we are going to face this task in a spirit of revolutionary Socialism, and of revolutionary reality. I know that we are going to lay a basis here for a movement that is going to engage in the militant struggle against Capitalism. Because behind this conference is not simply the masses within the Socialist Party that have sent you here in order to

realize their concept of revolutionary Socialism, but behind these masses within the party are the proletarian masses that are anxious to get the call of militant struggle against Capitalism, in order to realize the coming of the Socialist republic. And the spirit of this conference is the spirit of the Communist International, which calls upon the proletariat of the world to prepare itself for the final revolutionary struggle against Capitalism. (*Applause.*)

### **Preliminary Reports.**

**The Chairman [Fraina]:** There being nothing before the house, comrades, I wonder whether it would be a good idea to fill in the time, I think it would be a good idea, as the Credentials Committee will take probably half an hour or so to get its report — it might be a good idea to have some of the comrades from the various parts of the country make reports upon the condition of the movement in their section, short 5 minute speeches.

**Mr. [Eadmonn] MacAlpine:** I make a motion that we listen to the State Secretary of the Socialist Party of Michigan.

**Mr. [Dennis] Batt:** He is not here. But I am secretary of the Ways and Means Committee of the Socialist Party of Michigan, and might acquaint you with the situation.

Of course, there is nobody here that is not aware of the details of the activity of the National Executive Committee in expelling the Socialist Party of Michigan, and suspending the various language federations, in all approximately 40,000 members of the Socialist Party. The State Secretary of the Socialist Party of Michigan [John Keracher] went over to Chicago to verify the reports that we have received unofficially as to the expulsion of the state of Michigan. And as a means of dealing with the issue, he called a special emergency convention of the Socialist Party of Michigan, which met last Sunday [June 15, 1919] in the House of the Masses, Detroit, to consider what would be the future activity of the Socialist Party of Michigan in reference to the Socialist Party of America and the general Socialist movement in the country. We have a peculiar condition in Michigan that does not exist in any other organized group of Socialists in the United States. The Left Wing program that you brought up

and that has been endorsed, I dare say, over 50 percent — yes, 75 percent — of the delegates here this afternoon represent organizations that have only adopted that program in the last few months. I point out the fact that the Socialist Party of Michigan has been carrying on its propaganda on a non-reformistic basis since 1914. For the last five years, the so-called “Left” element has had control of the Socialist Party of Michigan. There has been no reform propaganda carried on officially by the Socialist Party of Michigan in that number of years. We have concentrated our activity upon pointing out to the working class the necessity of seizing control of the political state and establishing a workers’ government, generally called the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. And when we convened last Sunday afternoon there was no question of altering our position one iota. We never considered for one moment the proposition of apologizing to the National Executive Committee and reversing our stand upon the reform amendment that we placed in our constitution. It was moved by the Finnish Translator-Secretary in the name of the Finnish delegates to the convention that we do that kind of a thing, and the convention hooted him off the floor. They would not listen to him.

The questions that we considered there last Sunday are the questions that the comrades are going to have to answer here. The National Executive Committee has demonstrated its reactionary tendencies by expelling from the Socialist Party of America 40,000 members — practically expelling them — suspending some and expelling others. If I know anything about yellow Socialists — if I have learned anything by the past activity of yellow Socialists both in the American movement and in the different European movements, there is no step too degrading, too contemptible, too miserably mean for the Executive Committee to take in order to maintain their control of the Socialist Party of America. (*Applause.*)

I warn you here, and I warn you now that the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party of America would ruin the organization rather than turn the control of it over to you. The reason for the expulsion of the Socialist Party of Michigan is plainly apparent when you consult the votes taken on the National Executive referendum at the last election. The vote went overwhelmingly for what is commonly called

“the red slate” or the “Left Wing slate” — William Bross Lloyd of Chicago, John Keracher of Detroit, and myself. The expulsion of the state of Michigan excludes those three candidates who were duly elected. Keracher and myself are excluded, of course, by our expulsion from the party, and William Bross Lloyd of Chicago loses all chance of being a member of the Executive Committee because the loss of the Michigan vote puts him behind Victor L. Berger of Milwaukee. So, you see, they very conveniently defeated the slate of the Left Wing in that district to which we belong. Their cry of constitutionality, their cry of living up to party rules, etc., is here plainly shown as just so much camouflage. They don’t propose to perform all kinds of extra-constitutional acts in order to maintain their committee membership.

You are invited to attend a convention in August in the city of Chicago. You are invited to go — like hell you are! (*Laughter.*) You are not going to be represented there. The state of Michigan has been expelled. In all probability, other states will follow. The language federations which have formed a very strong part of the Left Wing movement has been suspended, and none of its membership will be represented at the national convention in August. You are going to be tried, convicted, and sentenced by whom? By the Right Wing of the Socialist Party of America. And if I know anything about the activities of that Right Wing in the past, the fact that the suspension of the language federations will be changed to expulsion is a foregone conclusion. And as for any repudiation of the acts of the Executive Committee of the Socialist Party of America, as for their repudiation of those acts, there is absolutely no hope on your part. We considered these things in the convention in the state of Michigan last Sunday afternoon, and we arrived at a conclusion — a conclusion which I am going to offer to you in the course of the convention to consider — a conclusion which I think you ought to agree upon if you view the conditions rightly. We drew up a manifesto of the Socialist Party, and we intend to send it broadcast, with or without the endorsement of the Left Wing Conference. We drew up a manifesto laying down what we have believed for the last five years to be the basis upon which the Socialist Party should be organized. We have laid down that basis clearly and concisely as a tentative program upon which the Socialists within the

Socialist movement may unite in a convention and draw up a program and platform for a new Socialist Party in America. (*Hearty and prolonged applause.*)

We have set the date for that convention as September 1st, 1919, in the city of Chicago. And I, as the Secretary of the Ways and Means Committee of the Socialist Party of Michigan, have charge of the arrangements of that convention. Before this conference is over, you are going to have an opportunity to endorse that call. You are going to have an opportunity of urging the Lefts in this country to line up on their tentative program for the organization of a real Socialist Party. I know some of you don't want to do that. I know some of you would prefer to follow the middle course of fighting it out within the Socialist Party. I know some of you would want to sit in and fight — fight in a convention in which you will have no representation — fight in a convention in which it is not as yet known that you will even have a voice — fight against such contemptible creatures as Victor L. Berger, Adolph Germer, Morris Hillquit, Seymour Stedman, and a few others. They have demonstrated, in my estimation, beyond the peradventure of any doubt that they are not going to allow the control of the Socialist Party of America to slip from their fingers. They have, since the expulsion of Michigan and the suspension of the language federations — they have turned the property of the Socialist Party of America over to trustees elected for long terms of years so that there will be no chance of any Left Wing element getting control of it. And some — some would ask us to continue a vacillating policy of fighting within such a corrupt organization of that sort. Some would even hesitate to strike now once and for all for a real Socialist movement in America. Some of you would prefer to fight this thing out within the party, but I, for one, have given up all hope of fighting it out in the Party. I considered, and we have considered — I speak in the name of the Socialist Party of Michigan — we considered that by this act of expelling some 40,000 members from the Socialist Party of America, the National Executive Committee has thrown down the gauntlet to the Socialists within the Socialist Party and i for one will not hesitate to pick it up and hurl it into their teeth. (*Prolonged and hearty applause.*)

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**Mr. Paul:** Comrade Chairman and Comrades: The question he (Delegate [Morris] Zucker of New York) brought up was resolution that was submitted by the Resolution Committee last Sunday [June 15, 1919], that the City Convention of the Greater City instruct its delegates to the National Left Wing Conference to organize a Communist Party. The question was debated thoroughly on all sides, and the resolution was finally adopted by a vote of 62 to 51. The matter was then left for a referendum to the members of the branches and locals represented in that convention last Saturday. Outside of that, the Secretary of the City Committee has not received any reports from the various branches or locals.

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**Mr. [Isaac] Ferguson:** Comrades, at the time of the meeting of the [SPA] National Executive Committee [Chicago: May 24-30, 1919], Comrade Ruthenberg, Comrade Fraina, Comrade Keracher came in, and an informal meeting was held. I remember these delegates and all of the Translator-Secretaries, and perhaps I have forgotten two or three, some of the comrades from Chicago — a group of about 20 comrades met and informally organized a provisional committee, to carry on what campaign could be carried on until the time of the meeting of this conference. In view of what has been said, I might state the point of view: the policy of the members there gathered, and that was decidedly that it was up to the Left Wing to make the fight for control within the party, in spite of all the suspensions that had been made. So there you have another angle. The committee was unanimous in that respect. There was no proposition about organizing a new party. The proposition was that we had enough strength within the party — that the rank and file is so thoroughly disgusted, so thoroughly permeated with the ideals of revolutionary Socialism that there is no question that if we do some measure of propaganda work, some measure of organization, we have the overwhelming majority of the newly elected Executive Committee on the vote which the old NEC refused to recognize. We decided that at the appropriate time one of the newly-elected members of the National Executive Committee would make a motion

to [Executive Secretary] Adolph Germer to call the NEC in session, and if he would refuse the newly-elected NEC would meet in spite of Comrade Germer. This newly-elected Executive Committee, the majority of which are Left Wing delegates, would proceed to function as the regular National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party, issue a declaration to the membership, and try, to a large extent within its power, to take over the actual official work of the organization. The four Left Wing delegates elected to the International Congress† would meet in July, and issue a declaration to the party membership as the delegates to the International Congress of the American Socialist Party. We would furthermore try to take over the arrangements for the convention and bring the final fight to the Emergency Convention of August 30. We furthermore suggested to the comrades of the state of Michigan that they refuse to recognize their expulsion by the National Executive Committee. We recommended to them that they stay within the party, and send contesting delegates to the emergency convention at Chicago. And we furthermore recommend the same procedure to the expelled locals and branches of New York — that they organize independently of the Right Wing Party as the official Socialist Party in New York state, send their delegates to the convention, and then at the convention we would decide whether we have got the Socialist Party, or whether we have to follow some other course of action. (*Great applause.*)

**Mr. [John] Ballam:** Comrade Chairman and Comrades: As Chairman of the Convention of the state of Massachusetts, which Convention elected its State Secretary, Comrade [Marion] Sproule, and the Chairman of the Convention, who is also editor of its official organ to represent the state of Massachusetts in this Left Wing Conference, I want to say speaking for its delegation, that it has gone solidly to the Left — decidedly to the Left — that it does not intend to quibble or treat with this proposition — that it has wiped out the Center — recognizes no Centrist position; and in making this report I want to make that plain. All appreciate, and I think every delegate here appreciates the outraged feelings of the comrades of Michigan and of the various Language Federations illegally suspended

and illegally expelled by the NEC. We have made our propaganda to the rank and file of the Socialist Party, and the rank and file of the Socialist Party has accepted the Left Wing position. We have captured the party of America for the Left Wing. It is now in our hands. So that the position of the delegates from Massachusetts as the position of the Socialist Party of Massachusetts, is that we will stay in the Party and fight this thing out, not allowing the NEC to expel us, but that we will expel the NEC, and every member connected with them (*applause*), that we will prefer charges against everyone implicated in illegal acts such as they have performed, and throw them out of the Socialist Party of America, capture it for revolutionary Socialism — first throw them out, and let them take their places in America together with the other social-patriots that left the party during the war of their own accord — the Spargos and the rest of them. Now, that is the position of Massachusetts. We do not want to get out because they want us to get out. They cannot throw us out because they have not the power to throw us out. But if it should be proven after the Convention in August that in spite of the fact that by every demonstrable proof, by counting of noses and votes, that we have the party, but through their machinations they hold the Convention, it will be plenty of time to act, and if it is necessary, then to organize the Communist Party in America. We can do so, but at this time, we mean to take possession — physical possession of all the party machinery that is built up through the sacrifice of the rank and file, and we do not propose to leave that intact in the hands of a few renegades that propose to use it for bourgeois purposes to betray the Socialist movement.

I think, briefly stated, that this is the position of the Socialist Party of Massachusetts, and I sincerely hope it will be the position of the Left Wing Conference. (*Applause.*)

**Mr. [Alexander] Stoklitsky:** Comrade Chairman and Delegates: We have had a very pleasant time discussing questions with Comrade Germer. There were certain moments when I personally felt that I must leave that office and go away from there. Comrade [Alfred] Wagenknecht is here, and he can illus-

†- Elected as International Secretaries of the Socialist Party in the 1919 referendum election were Louis C. Fraina, John Reed, C.E. Ruthenberg, and Alfred Wagenknecht. As with the vote for members of the party's National Executive Committee, these results were declared invalid by the outgoing NEC in their *de facto* 1919 coup.

trate that thing from the side of a Comrade who was in the place and saw how we were treated there. As a matter of fact it was not the office of the Socialist Party, but it was merely a police station, comrades. (*Laughter.*) But we are used to fight, and we did our share. I don't think it is necessary for me to explain how it happened. You know all about it. I am sure that our federations — they will stay together as federated federations, with the Left Wing of the Socialist Party, if the Left Wing of the Socialist Party will prove they are real Bolsheviki. (*Heartly applause.*) But, comrades, if there will be any question, and we will see that there is not a real policy of Communists, we will fight, and we will fight very hard, even for a small technical thing. We are used to it. And the main power of the Bolsheviki is that they fight big things and small things with the same power and with the same force, and we will do that. I thank you, comrades. (*Applause.*)

**Chairman [Fraina]:** There was a convention recently, comrades, of the Jewish Federation of the Socialist Party, in Boston [4th: May 29-June 1, 1919]. This convention was packed by the moderates. They used all kinds of parliamentary tricks to strangle the Left Wing delegates there, and the Left Wing delegates stayed away and formed a Federation of their own. I have been asked to present to you the request of a representative of this new federation — revolutionary federation, to speak on this matter, Comrade Hiltzik.

Mr. [Harry] Hiltzik: comrade Chairman and Delegates: I am here to greet this convention in the name of the Jewish Left Wing Federation, just lately organized in Boston. Comrades, I just want to mention a word or two as to how our Left Wing has been formed in the Jewish movement. You all know that the only two conservative federations up to date have been the Jewish and the Finnish — that is the information that we got here in New York from the Socialist Party. We began a revolution in the Jewish Federa-

tion as early as May 1918. It was at this time when the Jewish machine — the machine of the Jewish Federation — organized an effort to turn the Jewish Federation into a campaign of social-patriotism, and they called for that purpose a National Conference here in New York last May to repudiate the St. Louis platform and to recognize the social-patriotic stand of all social-patriots of the world. At that time, they decided by a fake majority of 25 against 19 to support the Wilson administration and to repudiate the St. Louis platform. That is the time when the revolutionary comrades in the Jewish movement found it necessary to organize and to test the rank and file of the Jewish movement, and we found that before the Left Wing was organized that the Jewish comrades in the movement were already in revolt against their federation. And we finally decided that when the Jewish Convention would be called, we were certainly going to capture the Jewish Federation for the revolutionary Socialist Party — that is, for the Left Wing. But when we came to the convention we found that they had also at this convention a fake majority of social-patriots and opportunists, who have been trying to put a Jewish Socialist Federation on record as against the Left Wing. When we could not do anything else, we split the convention with a great minority, about 40 percent of the delegates present — that is, we were in the majority if not for their fake make-up of a majority — we left the convention and formed our own convention. We named our convention the Jewish Left Wing Federation of the Socialist Party. We also decided at that convention that we go on record as joining the Left Wing — supporting the Left Wing morally and financially. We elected our officials, and the only thing we are waiting for now is the establishment of a Communist Party, and at that time we are going to join the Communist Party.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

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