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# **Convention Inspires Socialists to Build Mighty Party Anew: Reconstruction Now Keynote of Movement as Delegates Return Home to Intensify Local Organization Work — New Constitution to Be Voted for Makes for Efficiency**

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CHICAGO, Sept. 7 [1919].— “Reconstruction” is the word of the hour in the Socialist Party.

The party has been saved by the Emergency National Convention, and today the delegates, most of them organizers, many heads of their state organizations, are back home, taking up the quiet, unheralded, and tremendous job of keeping the party intact, and rebuilding it to the height from which it has been battered down — and beyond.

Considering that the convention took nearly three whole days to organize, of the seven it was in session, it leaves a magnificent record of work actually accomplished. Unlike the conventions of the Communist Labor Party and the Communist Party, very little work was left unfinished for the National Executive Committee to do — practically none.

The National Executive Committee has been charged with appointing a committee to draw up a declaration of principles and with the creation of a special department of the National Office devoted to economic organizations — and that is about all. The rest, for good or for bad, is the work of the convention, and the delegates have little doubt that the membership will decide the convention’s work was for good.

The new constitution of the party, if it is adopted as framed by the membership, makes for efficiency and immediacy of action by the national organization, insures more intelligent balloting on recall ref-

erendums for national officials by putting new members on a six-month probation before they can vote in such referendums, and yet insures greater democracy within the party.

The convention will elect the National Executive Committee in the future. In a national referendum for NEC members, the prominent writers, lecturers, and agitators in the party naturally get the votes.

The membership is familiar with their names. They may have pronounced executive ability or not. But they are elected. Now the national convention will elect this all-important committee.

Centralization? Yes, but the check on it lies [in] the newly created National Committee on Appeals, which will review disputed decisions of the National Executive Committee — and this committee, in turn, is responsible to the national convention.

Members of the National Executive Committee may be recalled by a party referendum. But if a brash young scribe, fresh from supporting a “peace” President whose motto is “force to the uttermost” joins the party and proceeds to reform it by the laying on of hands, he must be patient six months before he can vote in such a recall referendum.<sup>1</sup>

### **Defense Provided For.**

Just so he may have an opportunity of learning what August Claessens calls “the difference between Socialism, Communism, and rheumatism.” And accompanying the referendum, the National Executive Committee member in question will have an opportunity of defending himself against the charges, in a statement of 1,000 words or less.

By adopting the report of the Committee on Economic Organization, the convention made a decisive move toward putting the party on an economic foundation. The Economic Organization Department of the National Office, in the language of the report, is:

To prepare a series of handy pamphlets and leaflets on industrial unionism for sale and for free distribution among the workers.

To keep in touch with the affairs of the labor movement and furnish a press service to all papers and periodicals that will use

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<sup>1</sup> The allusion is to John Reed, who backed Woodrow Wilson in the election of 1916.

it setting forth the position of the Socialist Party on all important <line missing>.

To further the organization among the various state and local units of the Socialist Party of special committees on economic organization to carry on the work in their respective localities.

To send out specially qualified speakers throughout the country to address local and central labor unions and to assist the workers in the time of strikes. Such speakers should always confer with the local committee on economic organization and assist them in the preparation of plans for further propaganda and activities.

To direct and assist the locals and branches of the party to organize those of their members who belong to economic organizations into groups for the purpose of carrying on this work effectively among their fellow workers.

To collect data on the progress of this work and report the same to the national sub-committee on industrial organization, recommending such other additional features to this department as will make it an effective instrument for the organization of the workers into industrial unions.

### **Language Federations Out.**

Chaperoned by the Russian Federation, the seven big language groups are out, doing business for themselves as the Communist Party.<sup>2</sup> But there are still a good number of non-English-speaking members in the party — and more, if the truth were known, in the Communist Party — who do not know why they are out of the Socialist Party and never desired to leave it.

The party will meet the problem presented by these language groups open-eyed this time. The committee of five, two of whom represent the Jewish [Yiddish-language] and Finnish Federations, will study the question and report back to the next convention. It is not likely that the committee will favor any federation plan which is at all similar to the old one, under which the federations were the predominant factors in the party, and yet were outside its control.

The manifesto adopted last Thursday [Sept. 4, 1919] speaks for itself, of course. However, a number of minor changes have been made in it since its unanimous adoption. In the revised, or re-edited,

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<sup>2</sup> The seven “left wing” federations immediately leaving the SPA for the new CPA were the Russian, Lithuanian, Lettish [Latvian], Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, and South Slavic [Croatian] language groups. Reorganized Lithuanian and South Slavic [Slovenian] federations were later established by the Socialist Party.

form, the manifesto includes Socialist Finland and Socialist Hungary in the list <line missing> power militarism, with the aid of the United States.

### **Paragraph Toned Down.**

The paragraph referring to the Labor Party is toned down. As amended, it refers to the Labor Party as “apparently” a protest on the part of the workers against the shams and reaction of the two old parties.

The release of all conscientious objectors is specifically demanded in the revised manifesto. In the original this demand referred generally to all classes of war and political prisoners.

In the endorsement of the Soviet government of Russia, the phrasing has been changed to make more clear the intent of the paragraph which pledges support to the Russian workers in maintaining their government in Russia.

Many delegates were disappointed at the failure of the convention actually to nominate Eugene Victor Debs for President in 1920. Probably the membership was even more disappointed. But it is a pretty open secret that a pardon for Debs, not contingent on his accepting it, which will release him from Atlanta whether his unshakable devotion to principle lets him accept it or not, is a possibility any day now.

### **Brother Advised Delay.**

The question was put to Debs’ brother [Theodore], whether his immediate nomination could hurt his chances of release. He advised delay. So the convention did the next best thing and recorded itself as favoring Debs’ nomination next year.

And the anxiety lest the Communist Labor Party nominate Debs at once vanished when the “headless and tailless” ones adjourned without so much as mentioning Debs’ name. Perhaps the moving spirits of that aggregation know the sort of an answer they would expect from Debs if they, the would-be wreckers of the party, asked him to be a candidate in opposition to that party.

The actual political situation this fall will be peculiar and interesting in a worried way to all parties concerned. But it looks now as if

there would be more acute discomfort to the Communist Labor Party than to any other.

This impression was gained in a visit to the IWW Hall to witness the last expiring gasp of what started out so boldly to be the whole cheese, or at any rate the Left Wing of the Socialist Party. They were going to knock the bull right off the bridge. They were just going to walk into the Machinists' Hall before the rest got there, put [Alfred] Wagenknecht into the chair, and capture everything.<sup>3</sup>

Failing in this, they set up a howl that the Socialist Party had to call in the capitalist police to do them out of their rights. And "went downstairs," a phrase that became so common that it ceased to be a joke any longer, and was ruled out of order by the chair. Downstairs once, they got a hustle on them to grab off the name "Communist" before the dissident Russian and other federations filed a caveat on the name.

And the Russians snubbed them. They frankly said they had no use for bolters. They couldn't be led, driven, or pushed. They could get into the Communist Party only by passing an examination as to the soundness of their doctrine.

The only compromise they seem able to make with the Communists is the sort of compromise a man's head makes with the pavement when he dives down from the 16th Floor. Next May they hope to hold another convention "to solidify their position," with the same probability of success as the surgeon would have in solidifying the skull of the man who had just taken a 16-story dive to the pavement.

They didn't look very gay on that last night of the convention. They were tired out and talked out. Improbable as this may seem, they were actually talked out. Kate Sadler Greenhalgh tried to slosh around the last there was in the can, but the "head" had gone all out of it.

Still, there was the question of what was to be done at the Fall [1919] election. And [Edward] Lindgren of Kings [County] got up on his feet. There had been a few put on the ticket in Kings at the primaries; they had not succeeded in New York, owing to the "pernicious influence of the rabidly reactionary *New York Call*."

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<sup>3</sup> **Alfred Wagenknecht** (1881-1956) was the top vote-getter in the balloting for Executive Secretary in the abrogated Socialist Party election of 1919. Denied his seat by the outgoing National Executive Committee, Wagenknecht was instead elected Executive Secretary of the Communist Labor Party, the group formed by bolting delegates from the 1919 Emergency National Convention of the SPA.

The Kings County Communist Labor Party had decided to resign then, such there would be too little time and too much difficulty in getting names on the official ballot by petition, the best they could do would be to do their best to prevent the success of the “old Socialist Party.” (They could talk of the “old Socialist Party,” but once in a while they would forget themselves and tell what great things the Socialists were to achieve.)

### **Wagenknecht Boasts.**

To this tepid policy of doing nothing except to sabotage the “old Socialist Party,” Wagenknecht put forth the encouraging boast of what Ohio was going to do. It was to sail right in, conquering and to conquer. There were prospects of the election of several candidates. The “rank and file” were all soundly Communist Labor — that is, the nominations had been made under the name of “Socialist,” and they would have to be voted for under the name of Socialist, but all that would be necessary would be to tell the people that, while they were called “Socialist,” they really were “Communist Labor,” and they would officially take that name in 1920.

Oh, perfectly easy. To hear them talk, you’d think Socialists who had undergone persecution and had poured out their money and energy for that name would be quite willing to take it off and give it to the Salvation Army, as a man throws away an old hat.

And then rose up [Tom] Clifford of Cleveland and kind o’ put a crimp into “Comrade” Wagenknecht’s claim with confidence.

### **On Horns of the Dilemma.**

“I’m just about tickled to death to think of what’s ahead of me when I get back to Cleveland,” he said with all the gayety of vinegar on his teeth. “Oh, I’ll like it fine. I’ll tell ’em we’re really Communist Labor Party, but that we shall have to vote the Socialist ticket at this time, although we’ve separated from the Socialists. But what’ll I say about the candidate for Mayor? His name is Ruthenberg.”<sup>4</sup>

Talk about voting three ways for Sunday. The secessionists will have to vote for the Socialist Party for which they had such scorn that they wouldn’t even deign to make a contest for seats in the conven-

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<sup>4</sup> **C.E. Ruthenberg** (1882-1927) was Executive Secretary of the rival Communist Party of America.

tion, but slammed their credentials on the table and walked out, head up and tail over the dashboard. They'll have to vote for the Socialist Party, to whom they wouldn't even act civil, and they have to vote for the Communist Party, that wouldn't act civil to them.

### **Milwaukeeans Modest.**

"Notice the Milwaukee delegation," said Theresa Malkiel one day. "Don't they seem different to you from any other?"

Come to think it over, they did. In the first place, they seemed to have deliberately chosen to take a back seat, although Wisconsin Socialism and particularly Milwaukee Socialism has so far had no particular reason to be shy, for it is, as Roscoe Conkling said of General Grant, "great in the arduous greatness of things done."

They have had no trouble from Left Wingitis on the one hand; on the other hand, there is not the slightest possibility of the American Labor Party [Labor Party of the United States] starting up in their state. Wisconsin doesn't need to take a back seat for anybody. Yet it did. Right bang up against the rear wall. Such modesty naturally would make that delegation seem odd to any member of the New York delegation — which was in the front rank, directly in view of the chairman and showing no signs of voice failure.

### **Melms Looks Like Sheriff.**

You do not need to look twice at [Edward T.] Melms to become convinced that he really is, as represented, a sheriff. He has a kind of sherifferous appearance, thick-bodied (not "pussy," just thick), cylindrical legs, a gum chewer, a little of a lisp, not dead in love with the sound of his own voice.

The picture of Melms that remains is his putting both hands to his mouth to make a trumpet through which to shout across the sea of racket just how to get to Milwaukee to inspect a guaranteed non-skidding Socialist movement. If a body has to be taken charge of by any sheriff, he cannot do better than to patronize Sheriff Melms.

Dan Hoan, Mayor of Milwaukee, is as dry and rasping as Melms is unctuous. Rather thin and tall, he has black hair and red cheeks and smokes a cob pipe, the only one seen in the convention. He has a nasal, twangy voice that cuts through the hubbub like a knife through cheese.

He was chairman of the convention one day, and if he had been President of the United States at the time he couldn't have been more solemn or more appressed with the cares of office. But, on the last day, when he invited the delegation to come on up to Milwaukee and be welcomed at 12 noon, and if they got there too early and found that standing around became tedious, to step inside the Mayor's office and make themselves at home, he showed that there were moments when he could relax and be a right nice kind of a fellar.

### **Milwaukeeans Spoke Seldom.**

They spoke so seldom that a person hardly had a chance to get acquainted with them. One would like to hear more from [K.L.] De-Sombre, who, for all his foreign name, seems to be one of the old-line stock of Americans, with the real flavor in his voice and idioms, and the same pulling of the corners of his mouth far back into his cheeks when he smiles.

They didn't do much speech-making; they didn't hop up every three minutes, and, when they did get the floor, it was not to display their learning. They seemed to think that one garrulous person in a delegation was as much as it was entitled to. That garrulous person was, of course, Victor L. [Berger] himself.

The stenographer has not yet completed his transcript of the proceedings, and when asked "What's the score?" he was unable to do more than express his belief that Rose Weiss of New Jersey was about tied with Louis Waldman of New York for the number of speeches, but that Waldman had the advantage of her because every two words she had to stop and say "the — er — convention — er —" while Louis never dropped a stitch.

### **Berger Bad Third.**

Also, he could work his elbows while he spoke, thus giving him the advantage. Victor L. Berger, the stenographer said, would probably come in third, a bad third, but way in the lead of the field. Victor was frequently heard, but he was never so funny on the floor as in conversation.

A person could put in his time to advantage by sticking close to Berger and keeping a record of his witticisms. Mention has been made of his use of an old trick of the stage; that is, repeating a sort of

gag, which, not humorous of itself, becomes a scream by the time it has been heard a few times.

Not in the convention itself, but in one of the committee meetings, he got off his old gag, “If you don’t do this, I’ll bolt,” and, of course, everyone laughed.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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