
Impressions of the Convention

by James Oneal

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If there was one country in the world where we had reason to believe that the Socialist Party would be unshaken by feuds it was in the United States. The party had taken its stand in April 1917, at St. Louis, and had suffered for it. Thousands of locals and branches had been broken up by the semi-official White Terror organized in many states. In some states of the West and Middle West practically all organizations of the party were destroyed. The party organs which survived the attacks of the Wilson administration dragged out a miserable existence. Party headquarters were raided in many states, open-air meetings were impossible, and in many of the larger cities even halls were closed to us.

When the Chicago Emergency Convention met [Aug. 30, 1919], New York was the scene of concentrated attacks against all party agencies, including related institutions like the Rand School. Various party organizations had been raided by the Lusk Committee and the Soviet Bureau [headed by Ludwig Martens] met with similar attention. The capitalist powers were possessed with a frenzy of fear and threw all discretion to the winds.

If there was any time when we had a right to expect solidarity against the common enemy by all divisions of the working class movement, this was the time. There was another reason why we could reasonably assume that no party questions would be raised. Many of our comrades were serving long terms in the penitentiaries. Others were under indictment and still others whose cases were to be heard on appeal. Usually this situation generally served to thrust party questions in the background in most countries.

The party had early after our entrance into the war displayed a fine example of solidarity. We had been

vigorously and, sometimes, maliciously attacked by the IWW. The schism between the two organizations had been wide for a number of years, yet when the IWW was subjected to wholesale arrests in 1917, the party forgot the old differences. It responded with resolutions of protest by the National Executive Committee, with contributions to aid the victims in the courts, with publicity in the party organs.

Many of us thought we could expect a similar solidarity within the party so long as it was receiving a shower of blows from the reaction outside. Events that followed show that all our calculations in this respect were wrong. We could not anticipate the power of the intoxication that seized many of the party members under the spur of a few well-trained leaders. Following the armistice the storm acquired increasing velocity until it culminated in the dramatic meeting of the National Executive Committee in May [1919]. The Emergency Convention which followed was merely a formal recognition of the schisms that had developed and no one who watched developments was surprised when, instead of one convention, three met in Chicago and three organizations emerged from the welter of conflicting views.

Here it may be said that many of those who had in the meantime attached themselves to the insurgent forces were thoroughly sincere in their belief that the Socialist Party had in some way betrayed the historic aims of the Socialist movement. The remarkable thing about this wave of unquestioned sincerity is the fact that those who guided the insurgent movement never formulated any specific evidence to verify their attacks. The party was unable to hold any convention during the war and the resolutions of the National Executive committee from time to time expressed the position

of the party each time it met. In no single instance were the generals of the insurgent movement able to point to a single resolution wherein the alleged betrayal was evident.

The best they could do was to point to occasional lapses of a party member here and there, something that has always occurred in pre-war times and which never gave occasion for a general insurgent movement in the party. The rest of the insurgent munitions was composed of highly emotionalized attacks which at times bordered on hysteria. The insurgent group displayed the same sort of mental distress and irrational conduct that the deserters who left the party shortly after the entrance of the United States into the war. Both constituted an irrational reaction to the great events transpiring in Europe. Thousands of party members who were not swept off their feet undoubtedly felt the impress of the European upheaval and at certain moments were inclined to permit their emotions to sway their reason.

No better illustration of the power of the material world making its impress on the human mind was ever witnessed than this period of party struggle and final party division. The most extreme types probably were a faithful reproduction of many who could be found in the ravaged and ruined regions of Europe.

Viewing this drama in perspective it was as inevitable as the rising of the tide that a convention this year would result as it did. It is evident that if no convention was held the same divisions that now exist would have appeared and formed the separate organizations formed at Chicago. Considering the emotional reaction that was sweeping over the party the result would be just the same, convention or no convention.

In the convention itself the careful observer could see the impress of the power that had shaken the party at work. Nothing was certain about it until the end of the third day. It was swayed from time to time by varying moods. At times it was a hot surge of rebellion, only to be met by a similar wave until both were spent in exhaustion. This occurred time and again during the hearing of the numerous contests. Normal judgments began to return and became more and more stable as it became apparent that delegates with pronounced Left Wing sympathies were being seated either by the recommendation of the Contest Committee or by the action of the convention in overruling its

recommendation in some cases.

The irrational conduct of a number of such delegates in refusing to accept the seats awarded to them also tended to stabilize the convention. The spectacle of some such delegates demanding admission and then refusing to take their seats when given them was something that had never been witnessed in a Socialist convention before. It had a sobering effect on those already seated. They felt that valuable time had been consumed in an effort to seat all entitled to seats only to be rewarded with rebuffs and, in several cases, with sneers.

Yet again the old fires flared up when the reports of the National Executive Committee were before the convention. It was apparent that a heated debate was imminent over the question as to whether the National Executive Committee had taken the wisest course in voting the suspensions and revocation of the Michigan, Ohio, and Massachusetts charters. Yet by the time this matter was reached it was apparent to every delegate that the Michigan organization and the suspended federations who were meeting in the "Smolny Institute" had drifted too far to be reassimilated by the Socialist Party. In the meantime a group of delegates had also assembled on the floor below the Socialist Party convention and had adopted the name of "Communist Labor Party." Some of its actions were already known and its obscurantist position regarding political action did not increase its friends upstairs.

The debate showed that the main difference of opinion was as to whether it would not have been better to have permitted the struggle to run its course until the convention met. There was a strong minority who believed that this would have been the better course and a minority of this minority who did not become reconciled to the suspensions at all.

But the action of the convention on the report of the special committee to investigate the disputed referendums, which was taken before the reports of the National Executive Committee were acted on, proved to be the turning point of the convention. Only one delegate had the temerity to defend the suspended federations after the evidence was placed before the convention. His was the first speech on this report, and no other delegate would follow his example. At the conclusion of the discussion the vote was unanimous in favor of the report of the special investigation

committee. When the negative vote was called for there was silence for a moment. Then the convention burst into a roar of applause.

What had happened was apparent to all. This body which had rocked into a storm of suspicion and suspense for many sessions had acquired permanent stability. It was solid and would “stick.” Not that all decisions would be unanimous, but that the desertions which the body downstairs had hoped for and planned would never be realized. The convention below had circularized the Socialist Party delegates a number of times, with the view of causing dissensions and eventually a bolt. It failed and finally gave up the attempt.

One incident is worthy of note here because of the way it was distorted. The presence of police in the convention, together with a stenographer of the Department of Justice and secret agents in the hall, was not relished by the delegates. The Department of Immigration had advised the Chicago Police Department the day before the convention met to have a squad of police present. All Socialist meetings in Chicago have been attended by policemen for nearly 2 years. It was no unusual thing. It was a situation we could not avoid.

Naturally the insurgents took full advantage of the situation and diligently circulated the story that the police were present by request of party officials. This situation was brought up a number of times, once in the form of a protest by the machinists who owned the hall. It was voted that the secretary [Adolph Germer] write to the machinists and explain the presence of the police in the hall.

The Communist convention and the convention of the Communist Labor Party also met with police in attendance. In one convention a delegate, or spectator, I am not sure which, was clubbed by a policeman. Both insurgent conventions were no more able to avoid meeting with Chicago police present at each session than the Socialist convention was. Ad it is likely that few meetings will ever be held hereafter by

any of these groups without being “honored” by the presence of officers of the law.

No convention in the party’s history was ever characterized by so many dramatic moments and so much tense feeling and uncertainty, for the first few days of this one. The Unity Convention of 1901, where a number of factional sores had to be healed, was tame in comparison. Three years later in Chicago there was some strong feeling in the first few days due to a few irreconcilables who would cut the party adrift from support of all economic struggles of the workers and eliminate all immediate measures of interest to the working class from the platform. This is practically the position of the Michigan organization today. In the California delegation to the recent Emergency Convention was one Left Wing delegate who was conspicuous as one of the irreconcilables in the Chicago convention of 1904.† This delegate was a palmist and astrologer in those days. Whether she has abandoned these cults now I am unable to say.

It remains to the party members to avoid invectives and recriminations and get down to the great tasks before us. The Socialist Party has passed through other internal struggles like the recent one and within a year it has risen stronger than ever. It will be so in this case. Neither reaction without or schisms within can destroy it. Many of our late comrades will return to us as they come to realize that the other two groups have fatal dissensions and cannot permanently live. It is doubtful whether the Communist Party will ever function in the elections next year. The Communist Labor Party may be able to survive longer, but its program is one that permits a variety of views regarding political action. This inevitably makes for factions and war within, which leads to pessimism, weakness, and final dissolution.

The future is before us and with devoted work and persistent agitation the Socialist Party will play a part in the stirring times ahead.

†- Apparently a reference to Irene Smith, who was a delegate from Oregon to the 1904 convention and a founding member of the Communist Labor Party from California in 1919.

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