

Berger's Convention.

by John Keracher

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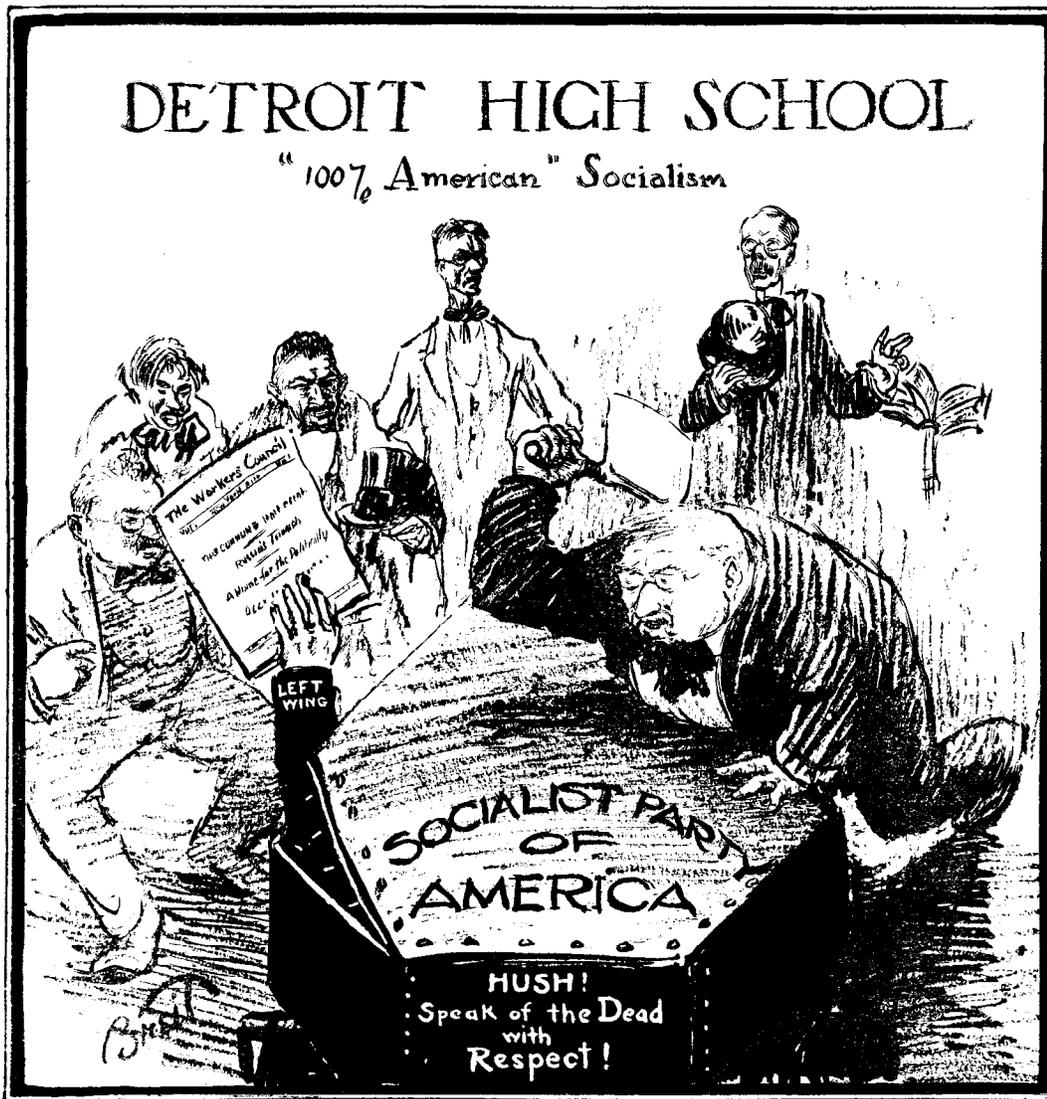
On Saturday morning, June 25 [1921], there gathered in one of Detroit's new high schools 40 delegates representing what is left of the Socialist Party of America. Needless to say there was no enthusiasm. The only thing that broke through the funeral atmosphere was the joyful smile of

Victor Berger. The Socialist Party was at last trimmed down to suit him.

The report of the National Secretary, Otto Branstetter, showed that the membership had dwindled down to 17,000. This is a big drop from its former strength of 110,000 members. Early in

the session a note was struck in the proceedings that indicated a still further reduction is inevitable.

As is well known to those who follow the doings of political parties, the Socialist Party has recently developed a "Left Wing" that has been expressing itself, chiefly through *The Workers Council*. The Chicago delegates, William Kruse and J. Louis Engdahl, were the leaders of this "Left" faction on the floor of the convention. These delegates had practically no support, a fact that was quickly taken advantage of



"WE COME TO BURY CAESAR, NOT TO PRAISE HIM"

by Berger, who made them the target for his shafts of wit.

This one-sidedness of the convention manifested itself so early that the chief issue was settled on the first day, namely, the question of affiliation with the Third International. The arguments against joining were both unconsciously humorous and pathetic.

There were four propositions placed before the delegates, and each one voted on in turn. One by Engdahl was squarely for unconditional affiliation. The result was 4 votes for it and 36 against. The Kruse proposition implied endorsement with reservations, and received 13 votes, with 26 against it.

Then came the proposal to join the Two-and-A-Half, or Vienna international. This received 4 votes with 35 in opposition. The last was a typical SP resolution — for no affiliation with any International. The motion was carried 31 to 8. Thus the Socialist Party stands where it did before in the matter — simply, NOWHERE.

On Sunday morning [June 26, 1921], the second day of the convention, the real comedy began. Bergerism was triumphant, the bovine-like countenance of the Milwaukee Leader fairly beamed. More shafts of wit were hurled at the insignificant “Left.” He referred to them as the “Chicago Communists,” telling them how the Communists of Milwaukee, after having the revolution all planned for the First of May, had to postpone it “because it rained.” He talked to Kruse like a daddy talking to a wayward boy, hoping that he would by and by grow into a great big man. To add to the boy’s embarrassment, Algy Lee, of Rand School fame, had to rub in a schoolmaster’s authoritative chastisement. We often wondered what was the matter with Kruse, but knowing the teacher and his friends, our sympathy is all with the pupil.

After their overwhelming defeat in Saturday’s sessions, the “revolutionary left” showed much courage to return to the fray with an attempt to

commit the SP to Proletarian Dictatorship. Almost the entire morning session was taken up with the question. These resolutions were intended to commit the Socialist Party to a recognition of the need for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat during the transition period between Capitalism and Communism, but the convention would have nothing of it. The motions were unceremoniously voted down by large majorities. These “pure democrats” who expelled only 60 percent of their membership expressed themselves as “opposed to the rule of any Minority.”

[John G.] Willert of Ohio was “opposed to the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, but in favor of the absolute rule of the working class.” [Cameron] King of California referred to it as “a foreign importation.” [J.W.] Richman of Washington, DC, thought the question was “not of sufficient importance to waste time discussing.”

Hillquit was not so unsophisticated; he said he would be perfectly frank. In his opinion it would have been better if it had not been brought up at all. He added “Dictatorship of the Proletariat is a very unfortunate term. If Marx had been alive he would have altered it. He would have said, ‘Comrades — can’t you understand a joke’” He described it in practice as the “Rule of jesuitical expediency.”

Berger said he usually agreed with Hillquit, but this time he did not, as Marx *did* tell what Dictatorship meant, and he (Berger) did not want it. Hillquit’s proposition was in the nature of a substitute motion so worded as to imply Proletarian Dictatorship, but it was well disguised and “democratized,” yet not sufficiently denatured to suit Algernon Lee, who hastened to amend it adding more camouflage. Even this distortion of the meaning of Proletarian Dictatorship, with much argument and wire-pulling, could not be got through this *respectable convention*, but was voted down 20 to 18. Hillquitism was “too red” for Berger’s Convention.

Delegate [Benjamin] Orr of New York said

before the vote was taken, "We have tried to pour holy water over the term Dictatorship of the Proletariat. We have tried to make it kosher. The Communists will laugh at us if we pass Hillquit's resolution. We will be the laughing stock of the whole world."

Monday's session [June 27] had for its chief purpose devising of ways and means of linking up with other working class parties. The motion was made by [Dan] Hoan of Milwaukee and it was not long until it became apparent that the "working class" organizations referred to were the Farmer-Labor Party and the Non-Partisan League. Hillquit took the floor to show that there was nothing in these organizations to unite with; the Farmer-Labor Party was a failure and so forth. Berger was not opposed to uniting if the Republicans could be got out of those parties; some elements were worth having and others not. Cameron King was for an immediate call for unity with all organizations whose principles were not out of harmony with Socialist Party principles (whatever that meant). "What the working class wants," he said, "was success." And again, "we have a patient before us whose condition is serious indeed, according to the report of the National Secretary, and as Victor Berger says, 'we are back where we were in 1903.'"

The remaining days of the convention [June 28-29] were taken up with matters of little importance. Otto Branstetter and his friends, who are fighting the "Left Wingers" of Chicago, tried to get a motion through that would make it possible for locals to expel all those who advocated affiliation with the Communist International, but it did not carry. A call is to be issued for the immediate raising of \$20,000 to help to wipe out the party debts, which are said to be in excess of that sum. An effort was made to support the movement for the exclusion of Asiatic labor from California, but it was sidetracked.

Now that the convention is over, and its little "Left Wing" farce hopelessly defeated; now that the Socialist Party of America has again demonstrated its reactionary character, will those who advocated a turn to the LEFT remain with and support such an organization? We feel confident that a section of the rank and file of the membership will see the futility of further "boring from within." We do not feel so confident, however, about the so-called "Left Wing" leaders. Most of those who hold jobs will likely remain. Let those who are sincerely upholding the principles of the Third International withdraw, or forever hold their peace.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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