
The Socialist Party and the Militant Program

by James Oneal

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After about two years of agitation before party branches and two New York City conventions, after numerous caucuses and special conferences held during this period, the Militants have presented the Socialist Party with the ripe fruit of their deliberations in a pamphlet of 15 pages. They have made little or no headway with the party members and in New York City those comrades whom they believe to be conspicuous opponents headed the list of the delegates chosen by the members to go to the National Convention [Cleveland: May 21-24, 1932].

We welcome the appearance of this carefully considered program and advise party members to read it. Of the 39 names associated with it all except 8 or 10 joined the party in recent year. That is, roughly speaking, about three-fourths of the signers are comparatively new members. We may add that, possibly excepting two or three, the signers are not those who have had experience in the mines, factories, railroads, and shops where class feeling and, eventually, class consciousness bring workers into a Socialist movement.

Of the document as a whole we are convinced that it is more interesting for what it does not say than for what it does say and where a definite statement of view is offered it is often vague. This, we believe, is due to the composition of the Militant group. It is a matter of common knowledge that they do not agree with each other on many matters. This accounts for vagueness where clearness is desirable.

This was evident in the city convention two years ago when they managed to say in different paragraphs of the same resolution that Marxism is a "realistic approach to problems" and that it is also a "dogmatic theory." Their chosen spokesman at that convention also made such a poor showing and they were so much chagrined that

they deposed him. Since then they have never been able to agree upon a spokesman because of diversity of opinions within the group.

A Left Wing?

A comic aspect of the Militants is that they consider themselves a Left Wing. As a group they are neither Left, nor Right, nor Center. They represent a little of everything, including some old infantile diseases of the past. A few have passed through the Communist corridor and have never fully recovered from the experience. Here will be found Christian Socialism, phases of opportunism and impossibilism; a near-syndicalism and a near-Communism colored with pink reservations; a Socialism that does not want to offend middle class liberalism and free willers who try to reconcile free will and historical materialism, and a number who represent a more consistent Socialism but who disagree with the party on one or two matters. Instead of a Left Wing, the Militants defy classification.

The Militants “decry the present quiescent attitude of the party towards labor union organization,” they want industrial unionism, and desire a national committee to give its time to field organizers who will “seek out situations,” set up permanent machinery for relief, foster workers’ education, and have the party press discuss policies of unionism.

The answer is that the party is the pioneer in workers’ education through the Rand School which, by the way, is ignored in this pamphlet and it has stimulated such education in other parts of the country through correspondence courses and classes. If the party press has not discussed policies of unionism for years we wonder what the Militants have been reading. Throughout its history the party itself, national, local, and state, has served as a relief organization and it has done this work well without any special agency. Moreover, I know of no labor struggles in recent history where the party organization within the zone of the struggle has not responded to its duty in this respect.

With much of the criticism of middle class reform we agree and yet there are signers to this document who have pursued the course that is criticized. One in an upstate city followed a messiah through devious political arrangements for years till the once powerful local, influenced by this policy, became a shadow of what it once was. Another desires to avoid widening the breach between Socialists and lib-

erals, the latter representing the middle class reform trend that is criticized. Still another is devoted to mobilizing general opinion against the corruption of Tammany Hall.

Problems of Internationalism.

The Militants propose election of delegates to International Congresses by a referendum. The party tried this once in electing members to the International Bureau and nominating a Presidential candidate. Those who passed through the experience are not likely to welcome it again. In both cases the result showed that the choices were unsatisfactory to the membership that chose them and in both cases it was a campaign waged for each by freelance publications that resulted in the choices made. [Allan S.] Benson could not have been nominated in a convention where representatives of the membership could confer with each other.... The merits and uses of the referendum require a more expanded treatment than it can be given here but the assumption of some comrades that it is a reliable device for any and all purposes is belied by experience in all democratic organizations.

The Militants are in "complete disagreement" with policies of sister parties abroad when they have been in office, they oppose any coalition policy, would turn any "imperialist war into a class war," and the LSI [Labor and Socialist International] should stress "the immediate struggle for the realization of Socialism."

Take the last item first. The International will not object to us venturing on that "immediate struggle" without delay. Do the Militants say how we shall enter on the job? No! But they want an "immediate struggle." They substitute vagueness for precision. Shall we demand the immediate surrender of the capitalist class? Or shall we go into the streets and proceed with the "immediate struggle" and take that class by surprise? Or shall we carry on the immediate struggle of reaching the working class, awaken the class consciousness of the workers though all the agencies at our disposal until such time as they are fit and prepared for an "immediate struggle?"

The problem is even less simple abroad. At home we have a small group in one of the smallest parties in the International which tells the millions of the working class in Europe to end the policy of coalition. Now we have no doubt that a case can be made out against some coalitions but to assert that the Militant demand can be followed *as a general principle in all circumstances* is to assert something

that must be proved and they do not attempt to prove it. They do not even state the problem that confronts the workers in some nations. Their attitude is an emotional one, not one based upon a consideration of the factors which face the workers in the new Europe after the war.

“Compromises” and Retreats.

The Militant view is based upon the idea that there shall be no compromise *under any circumstances*. Suppose it is a matter of doing what you do not want to do because of external circumstance which you cannot shape to your will; that is, suppose it is a matter of *compromise* for the time being or *death*. Should the movement choose the latter? Now it is just such choices that the workers have had to make from time to time. The Italian movement made a decision in 1922 that had dire consequences. Not a trace of a labor or a Socialist or Communist movement has remained in Italy. There are Italian comrades in this country who supported that decision who will tell our Militant comrades that they had made a terrible blunder.

Now it is stupid for a movement in certain exceptional situations not to retreat, not to concede something, not to compromise, if failure to do so means to *deliver the movement and the whole working class into the hands of the enemy*. To deliberately walk into an ambush is simply folly. To retreat in order to consolidate your forces for attack under more favorable circumstances and to avoid having your enemy put his feet upon your neck is sometimes necessary.

The problem is so important that it justifies further consideration. In the early '70s Engels criticized a similar point of view presented by a group of Blaquist Communists who wanted an “immediate struggle” and condemned compromise. The Blanquists, said Engels, “imagine that, since they want to leap over intermediary stations and compromises, the cause is as good as won,” and added: “What childish naivete — to put forward one’s own impatience as a theoretical argument!”

But even modern Communists do not subscribe to the police of no compromise as a *general principle*. Lenin had to take certain German Communists to task for their assertion of this view, pointing out that the Bolshevik peace at Brest was an “imperative” compromise with imperialism. He also justified compromises “extorted by objective conditions” that arise independent of the will of revolutionaries

and this is precisely the situation in Germany. Lenin enumerated certain political blocs and alliances formed by Communists even with bourgeois groups that were justified in certain extraordinary circumstances. To bind our own hands when the enemy has a big advantage and tell him “whether or not we shall fight him is stupidity, not revolutionism,” said Lenin to the German Communists.

What is striking in Communist polemics, however, is that they justify any compromise that external conditions force upon them and denounce any such action by Socialists as “treason to the working class.” At the same time in Germany they have cooperated with the Fascists in the Prussian referendum and in the Reichstag on important measures.

Freedom of Discussion.

The Militant program declares that some comrades are “unfriendly” towards the Soviets. As editor I have received some letters demanding that those who do not accept the Militant view on this matter should be excluded from *The New Leader!* *Not one letter has been received from the other side demanding the Militants should be excluded.* In other words, some of the Militants have reached a stage on this matter that some foreign language federations had reached before the split in 1919.

In practice their view is this. Members may express critical judgment of their own party, its policies, the International, the parties affiliated with it, and other sections of the labor movement, but one thing is sacred — *the Five Year Plan!* An opinion that disagrees with theirs is “unfriendly” or due to “prejudice” or to a desire to “score points” rather than present “constructive criticism.” Of course, their criticism, especially of the International and its affiliated parties, is not “unfriendly” or due to “prejudice” or a desire to “score points.” When they express a critical judgment it is a virtue; if others do it, it is a vice. We suggest that the Militant comrades take up a study of the elementary principles of logic and avoid making one rule for themselves and another for others.

The Russian revolution is being freely discussed in the party press all over the world. In Europe Kautsky, Bauer, and Adler represent three trends of opinion and other shades of opinion are being expressed. We doubt whether the Militants have the final truth on this or any other issue, but in any event it is important that the channels

of discussion be kept open and that the discussion be kept on a plane of tolerance and a willingness to give and take. It would be as anti-Socialist to suppress the views of the Militants as it would be to suppress the views of any other members so long as the views are expressed in good faith, without bitterness and questioning of motives, and with a sincere desire to enlighten the whole membership.

The Study of Socialism.

The Militant program closes with a section on the need of a Socialist culture and we doubt whether there will be any disagreement with the sentiment expressed. One of the first things many of us learned when we joined the movement was that we had much to learn and we turned to years of study. This eagerness for a knowledge of fundamentals in economics, philosophy, history of the working class movement, etc., I am sorry to say, is not conspicuous today.

We have had quite a number of new members, after a short sojourn in the party, instead of turning to this study begin by calling themselves Militants. Knowledge is superfluous and party experience at a discount. Perhaps these comrades have superior abilities and can equip themselves with knowledge and experience in a few years. If so, it is the first time in history that this rare type has appeared on the scene. Knowing the lives and work of Debs, Hanford, Berger, Meyer London, William Mailly, and others who spent years in groping for light and in the process indulged in many illusions over which in later years they smiled, I am convinced that all others will repeat this history in the early years of their membership in the party.

This applies to members of all ages, both sexes, and regardless of their education, even though some may have passed through the university. The writer was a utopian who once hoped to colonize the state of Washington and build a miniature cooperative commonwealth and five years after having joined the movement he was a howling impossibilist but he lived to learn. His sad case is commended to our Militant comrades.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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