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# That “Reactionary” International

by Morris Hillquit

Letter to the editor in *The New Leader*, vol. 13, no. 19 (May 7, 1932), pg. 7.

Alfred Baker Lewis has written a letter criticizing some of the editor's [James Oneal's] views on the so-called Militant program. To add force and authority to his arguments he submitted the letter to the Boston Central Branch, which endorsed it “by a vote in the ratio of 4 to 1.”

Knowing Comrade Lewis as I do, I am surprised that he did not go a step further and have his letter acknowledged before a notary public. That surely would conclusively establish the truth of his alleged facts and the correctness of his conclusions.

Comrade Lewis asserts that “every time some comrades do criticize the compromising tactics of foreign Socialist parties, we find within our party a group of members, headed intellectually by our National Chairman (that's me), who defend the compromising attitude of the foreign parties with vigor.” And again:

“The majority of our delegates at the last International Congress, <sup>1</sup> headed by our National Chairman, disregarded the disarmament resolution of our National Executive Committee at Bridgeport (which, by the way, was formulated by the self-same National Chairman Morris Hillquit) and voted for a resolution on armaments which was about as vigorous in its stand for disarmament as some of the utterances of President Hoover.”

In spite of the overwhelming endorsement by the Boston Central Branch, the charges are entirely unfounded.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference is to the 4th Congress of the Labor and Socialist International: Vienna, July 25-Aug. 1, 1931.

I have never defended, vigorously or otherwise, “the compromising attitude” of foreign Socialist parties. Nor have I ever presumed to condemn the practical policies of our sister parties in Europe. I know that they are confronted with critical, fateful, and intricate problems, without parallel in the United States. I am not called upon to solve them. I try to understand them. Perhaps I do not possess the knowledge of fact and clarity of vision that enables Alfred Baker Lewis to pass such ready and annihilating judgment on our European comrades.

The strictures on the disarmament resolution of the recent International Congress and the attitude of the American delegates on that subject are even more interesting. they spring from a wealth of accumulated misinformation which is quite remarkable in a person so young as Comrade Lewis.

I wonder whether he has really read the resolution and knows the circumstances which prompted its adoption?

Here are the facts:

In January 1931 the Preparatory Commission of the Disarmament Conference of the League of Nations, yielding to the pressure of public clamor, finally decided to convene a plenary session of the conference in February 1932.

In view of this decision the Labor and Socialist International and the International Federation of Trade Unions, through their respective committees, adopted a joint program of disarmament. It was not intended as a general declaration on war and militarism, on which both bodies had fully expressed themselves on previous occasions, but as a statement of the Socialist point of view on the concrete questions with which the Disarmament Conference was called upon to deal.

It demanded immediate and drastic cuts in all types of armament at land and on sea, the total abolition of the use of chemicals and aircraft in war as a first step, and the progressive curtailment of armaments leading to total disarmament, “i.e., until all preparations for war will totally disappear from the world.”

The preamble to the program recites that “the working class by its struggles against capitalism, which breeds new wars, and

by its efforts to build a new social order without class conflicts, prepares the complete and final realization of peace.”

With all due respect to the reasoned opinion of Comrade Lewis I am inclined to doubt that President Hoover would have voted for such a resolution.

The resolution was accompanied by an elaborate program of action on the part of the Socialist and labor movements consisting of parliamentary pressure, mass demonstrations, national and international, and gathering of signatures to millions of petitions. It was ratified by the International Federation of Trade Unions in convention and came up for ratification by the Socialist International at the Vienna Congress.

The majority of the American delegation felt that the language of the resolution might have been more determined and vigorous but it recognized that on the whole it was sound in substance and furthermore that there was no way of amending it since it was the joint expression of two bodies, one of which had already ratified it in the precise form and language.

Our delegation therefore decided to vote for the resolution but requested me to make a formal declaration of our sentiments on the subject in open Congress.

This I did in the following language (I quote from the official proceedings of the Congress):

“I rise to make a declaration in behalf of the delegation from the United States of America. We have decided to vote in favor of the resolution on disarmament which is before us. We will vote for it because it expresses on the whole adequately what it undertook to do. It is a practical, concrete program on a concrete matter. Secondly, we support it because it is the joint resolution adopted by the LSI and the IFTU, and we believe it would be inappropriate to reject a resolution which has been adopted and ratified by both parties.

“We are bound to say, however, that the resolution does not satisfy us as a complete expression of the Socialist attitude on the subject. We had hoped that the supplementary resolution introduced by the Commission on Disarmament would at least fully, clearly, and emphatically state the position of the Socialist movement towards war, imperialism, and disarmament, and speaking frankly, we are disappointed with the resolution.

“The Socialist Party in the United States occupies a special position with regard to war. During the World War ours was the only party in the United States that definitely, emphatically, and publicly opposed our entry into it. We suffered persecution from the government on that account. Our press was suppressed, our meetings were prohibited, our leaders were jailed, and our party was shattered to pieces. It has not yet recovered from the ravages of the war. We do not, however, regret our attitude; we would take the same stand if war were declared tomorrow. We know that the time will come when our uncompromising attitude against any form of war will be remembered by the masses of the American workers with approval and gratitude.

“While it may be perfectly true that we cannot adopt a broader resolution in this Congress because of lack of time, I believe that no great Congress of world Labor and Socialism should part without renewing its expression of undying opposition to war in all forms. Particularly is that the case now, when the world is in the throes of economic and political disaster and when war is threatening more menacingly than ever; when 20 million workers are starving through lack of work and billions are being wasted on unproductive war expenditure. We say, therefore, that at least we hope our Executive Committee will convoke a joint conference with the Trade Union International without delay, and that the result of the joint deliberations will be full, fearless, and decisive.”

This is the extent of the betrayal of “our National Chairman.”

May I suggest that Comrade Lewis submit this explanation to the Boston Central Branch for another vote?

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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