
The Socialist Party Convention

Day-by Day

[events of May 21-24, 1932]

by Edward Levinson

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Milwaukee.— No convention of a political party on the eve of power could have witnessed more intense and earnest contests over policies and over leadership than took place at the 17th National Convention of the Socialist Party.¹ The size of the convention, the diversity of delegates, and the utter seriousness of the debates indicated a party on the threshold of a great growth.

The outstanding events of the four days and ten sessions can thus be summarized:

1. The nomination of Norman Thomas and James H. Maurer for President and Vice-President.

2. The adoption of a national platform stating in ringing and comprehensive fashion the Socialist criticism and program.

3. Adoption of a statement on Soviet Russia, modifying previous party positions in favor of an “endorsement of the efforts being made in Russia to create the economic foundations of a Socialist society.”

4. Statement of Socialist position and a program of party activities aimed at bringing closer cooperation between trade unions and party.

5. Adoption of a platform plank urging repeal of the 18th Amendment, the prohibition amendment.

¹ The initial conventions of the Socialist Party of America were not “numbered,” but by the early 1930s this naming system had become common, with the 1932 gathering designated the party’s “17th.” This number appears to have been erroneous, however. Starting with the Socialist Unity Convention at which the SPA was formed, conventions or “congresses” were held in: (1) 1901; (2) 1904; (3) 1908; (4) 1910; (5) 1912; (6) 1917; (7) 1919; (8) 1920; (9) 1921; (10) 1922; (11) 1923; (12) 1924; (13) 1925; (14) 1926; (15) 1928. It appears that this numbering error took place when the 1928 convention was wrongly called the “16th” and the mistake carried forwards.

6. The re-election of Morris Hillquit to the National Chairmanship of the party.
7. The election of a new National Executive Committee.
8. The adoption of a campaign program by which it is hoped to poll the largest Socialist vote in the history of the country.
9. Revision of the national constitution of the party.

Hillquit Sounds Keynote.

The convention met in the city-owned Convention Auditorium as the guests of the City of Milwaukee, whose Socialists did themselves proud in entertaining the more than 500 visitors and delegates. Saturday morning [May 21, 1932], Morris Hillquit called the convention to order with a "keynote" speech sounding the battle cry to the Socialists of the Nation. Mayor Daniel W. Hoan followed with a warm address of welcome and a plea that the convention and the party concern itself in the future more with home affairs than with issues involving foreign nations. Clarence Senior, National Secretary, called the roll, committees were elected, and the hard work was begun.

The Platform Committee consisted of Maurer, Mayor Hoan, Albert Streiff of Oregon, Morris Kaplan of Minnesota, Harry W. Laidler of New York, Oscar Ameringer of Oklahoma, Heywood Broun of New York, Elizabeth Gilman of Maryland, George E. Roewer of Massachusetts, and Joseph Sharts of Ohio.

To the Resolutions Committee there were elected R.B. Green of Illinois, James Oneal of New York, Sidney Stark of Pennsylvania, Walter Polakowski of Wisconsin, Franz Daniel of Pennsylvania, George Goebel of New Jersey, Louis Waldman of New York, John G. Willert of Ohio, and Morris Seakind of Illinois.

The Organization and Campaign Committee was Ross Magill of Kansas, Al Benson of Wisconsin, Norman Thomas, Arthur McDowell of Pennsylvania, William Karlin of New York, William Busick of California, David George of Virginia, Amicus Most of West Virginia, and Marx Lewis of the District of Columbia.

Greetings to Negroes.

With the sending of a telegram of a greeting and solidarity to the National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People, the

Saturday morning session ended. Messages had been read by Secretary Senior from the Labor and Socialist International and from scores of Socialist and labor organizations at home and abroad.

The subject of Russia was taken up Saturday afternoon and not disposed of until the night session of the same day. Five resolutions were presented. The battle for adoption narrowed down to two, one proposed by the New York City Socialist convention, and the other sponsored by Paul Blanshard, who, though attending his first national Socialist convention played a leading part in its deliberations.

Louis Waldman urged a resolution drawn by himself, Charles Solomon and B.C. Vladeck proposing a general statement for recognition by the United States and the right of Russia to work out its own economic and social system without outside interference. Dr. Green favored the New York resolution, as did Judge Jacob Panken, Morris Hillquit, and others, while Norman Thomas, Heywood Broun, and William Toole spoke for the Blanshard statement. Voting on which resolution should become the basis of discussion, the convention gave 111 to the Blanshard resolve, 93 to the New York proposal, 26 to the Waldman statement, and 14 to a statement suggested by Bela Low of New York.

Adoption of the Blanshard resolution came Saturday night, after numerous proposed amendments, with the exception of three proposed by Thomas, had been rejected. A motion to refer the resolution to a committee for further study and report was rejected by a vote of 94 to 62. At the night sessions James Oneal spoke against the resolution, as did Algernon Lee and Judge Panken. Thomas again took the floor briefly in favor of the motion. Schneid of Illinois also supported it.

The Russian Resolution.

The Blanshard resolution, as adopted with the Thomas amendments, follows:

Whereas:— The Socialist Party recognizes that the Soviet Experiment is being watched closely and with intense interest by the workers; that its success in the economic field will give an immense impetus to the acceptance of Socialism by the workers, while its failure will discredit an economy based upon planned production and the abolition of Capitalism.

Be It Resolved: Therefore, that the Socialist Party while not endorsing all policies of the Soviet Government, and while emphatically urging the release of political prisoners and the restoration of liberty, endorses the efforts being made in Russia to create the economic foundations of a Socialist Society and calls on the workers to guard against capitalist attacks on Soviet Russia. We believe that economic and political conditions in each country should determine the revolutionary tactics adopted in that country, and that the Russian Experiment is a natural outgrowth of the conditions peculiar to that country.

The vote on the resolution was on a roll call vote, the convention having decided at its first session that at the request of 30 delegates voting was to be on roll call, each delegate to cast the party membership of his state, divided by the number of delegates present. The result of the roll call vote on the Blanshard resolution was 9,114-½ for it, and 4,073-½ against adoption.

Hillquit had presided at the Saturday session, with Mayor Hoan as vice-chairman. Senator Polakowski was elected chairman for Sunday, and Jasper McLevy his aide. The convention took up the platform Sunday [May 22], laying it aside at 1:30 pm for nominations of a national ticket.

Short Platform Rejected.

Discussion on the platform opened with an effort by Broun and Ameringer to have the convention adopt a platform of 250 words stated in 20 succinct planks. Objections arose, voiced by Laidler for the Platform Committee, and Hillquit, which held that the Socialist point of view required more than the iteration of a series of isolated demands. Broun held that the only time a platform is read is when it is printed in the newspapers in abbreviated form. "Why let the capitalist copy-readers edit our platform? Let's do it ourselves," he said. The convention did not agree with him and rejected the idea of a short platform.

The preamble to the platform brought a discussion on the clause calling for a "transfer" of the industries to the government. William Busick of California, supported by Arthur McDowell, wanted to substitute the word "confiscation." Waldman, Thomas, and Sigmund Slonim of Minnesota took the floor against the confiscation proposal and it was voted down 168 to 14. It was generally held that the mode

of transferring industries from private to social ownership would have to be determined by the circumstances of the situation.

The nominating session Sunday afternoon was a festive occasion. All day long comrades had been arriving by train, by auto, and younger Socialists by hitching and hiking. Local Socialists swelled the audience in the convention hall to 3,000. Intricate motion picture sound machines, a battery of klieg lights, more than a score of cameramen, and some 50 bustling reporters heightened the excitement.

Waldman Names Thomas.

With a few brief remarks on the importance of the occasion, Senator Polakowski recognized Waldman for the first — and only — nomination for the Presidency on the Socialist ticket. Waldman had nominated Thomas for President in 1928, for Mayor of New York City in 1929. He found new material for his address Sunday in the continued activities of Thomas which had raised him to the forefront of American Socialism. Waldman reminded the convention that the Mayor of New York today faces doom, to a great extent as a result of Thomas's continuous warfare for municipal decency.

“The Socialist Party will present a ticket which will go to a nation discouraged and hopeless with economic insecurity.... As the only real opposition party we have real responsibilities.... Our candidate must have three qualifications. He must be a thorough-going Socialist. He must have a sane and courageous platform of Socialism for our times. This we will give him And thirdly, he must not only be a great Socialist, but his personality must represent the idealism, the integrity and intelligence of the Socialist movement. Our candidate must be one who will compel the nation to think of bread, jobs, and security and to instill in it a fighting desire to win these things.

“The candidate I am about to name has been tried in the crucible of Socialist service, on the picket line, on labor's platforms, before colleges. I am glad that the Socialist Party can boast in 1932 of the only man in public life who has risen from day to day in the estimation of the nation, while the politicians of the old parties become bogged in demagoguery, reaction, and personal political fortune hunting.

“President Hoover won in 1928; Norman Thomas lost. Nineteen-thirty-two will see a reversal.”

An Hour's Demonstration.

The mention of Thomas's name brought a roar of applause and cheers, which continued with a few interruptions for about an hour when a special committee appointed by the convention escorted Thomas from his hotel to the convention hall. A parade of Yipsels,² utilizing the banners carried in Milwaukee's May Day parade, would up and down the aisles. "The Red Flag," "The Internationale," and "Solidarity Forever" resounded time and again through the hall.

Mayor Hoan seconded the nomination of Thomas, with Joseph Sharts of Ohio and Oscar Ameringer following him. The nomination was put to the house, and was declared unanimous.

Assemblyman Darlington Hoopes of Reading nominated James H. Maurer to run for Vice-President and the storm broke out anew. George Goebel of New Jersey nominated Mrs. Meta Berger for Vice-President. The house gave the widow of Congressman Berger a beautiful ovation, but in a gracefully short speech she decline in favor of Maurer. Then followed short acceptance speeches by thomas and Maurer, more formal addresses being reserved for a nationwide [radio] hookup later in the day.

Monday [May 23], George Roewer was in the chair. The day opened with adoption of changes in the constitution enlarging the National Executive Committee to 11, ten and a chairman, in place of nine. The session then continued with discussion of the platform. Monday afternoon the convention devoted to discussing and voting on the National Chairmanship, which resulted in the election of Hillquit over Mayor Hoan by a card vote of 7,526 to 6,984.

Tuesday morning the convention elected B.C. Vladeck its presiding officer for the day and Sarah Limback of Pennsylvania vice-chairman. The delegates then proceeded to the nomination and balloting of members of the new National Executive Committee. Late Tuesday night [May 24], when the results were announced the convention elected five alternates from whose ranks vacancies which may occur in the committee are to be filled....

The platform was taken up Tuesday morning and completed.

The convention placed at the head of its national program federal appropriations of \$5 billion for immediate unemployment relieve, and of another \$5 billion for public works construction in coopera-

² That is, members of the YPSL, Young People's Socialist League — the youth section of the Socialist Party.

tion with state and city governments. The six-hour, five-day week was also put forward under the head of unemployment relief. A farm relief plank proposed “governmental aid to farmers and small homeowners to protect them against foreclosures and non-payment of taxes.”

The socialization of banking, all natural resources and basic industries, including the public utility companies was also favored. Under taxation the platform proposes steeply increased inheritance and income taxes.

The section dealing with constitutional changes urge proportional representation, direct election of President of the United States, curbing the power of the Supreme Court to pass upon Congressional legislation, and the enactment of a “Workers’ Rights Amendment” to the Federal constitution aimed to remove any possible legal restrictions of nationalization of industry [and] the enactment of social services, including unemployment, health, and accident insurance. Economic, political, and legal equality for the Negro race, as well as enactment of an anti-lynching law was favored under the head of civil liberties. This section also asked for federal legislation to enforce the First Amendment guaranteeing the rights of free speech, press, and assembly.

Against the Dry Law.

The United States should favor disarmament and take the lead in reducing its own arms, says the section on international relations. Soviet recognition, cancellation of war debts, entrance of the United States into the World Court and the League of Nations, abandonment of military interventions in Nicaragua and Haiti, and the withdrawal of military and naval forces from China, as well as the relinquishment of extraterritorial privileges in that country, were among the other foreign affairs planks.

A plank for repeal of the 18th Amendment was also written into the platform. Mayor Hoan, Heywood Broun of New York, and Ameringer carried the convention for repeal with a plea for “the Socialist Party to take a definite, courageous stand where the two old parties are dodging,” as Broun put it.

Thomas declared himself in favor of a national referendum on the subject, to which the parties would pledge themselves to abide. In the event of such a referendum his own vote would be for repeal, he said.

The Wisconsin delegation voted solidly for repeal, as did most of the large New York delegation. The vote was 81 for repeal and 71 against. Since the vote was taken amid some disorder, Blanchard moved at the afternoon session for a reconsideration. The repeal plank was again approved, this time by 84 to 77.

Broun, who thought the fight settled, entered the hall while the second vote was being taken. When he was informed of what was on the floor, he observed that the repeal plank was "like a tennis cup." "You've got to win it three times before you can keep it," he said.

Trade Unionism Up.

Cooperation with the trade unions and the carrying of the Socialist message into the unions by Socialist unionists was urged by the convention in a resolution on trade union policies. A resolution detailing specific Socialist activities in connection with the labor movement was voted down as too radical and suggestive of an intention to fight the American Federation of Labor. [Powers] Hapgood spoke for the latter resolution.

The trade union declaration which carried was supported by Samuel Beardsley, Judge Panken, John M. Collins, James D. Graham, and Julius Gerber. Schneid, Arthur MacDowell, and Blanshard favored the Hapgood statement, which called for the creation of a national Socialist committee to deal with labor situations. A resolution proposed by Waldman and Vladeck received 13 votes, Hapgood's 62, and the draft No. 1 proposed in the agenda 82 votes. Before it was passed it was amended by Thomas to call for the creation of a permanent strike relief machinery under party auspices.

Four continuous days of deliberations and hard committee work had frazzled the nerves of many of the delegates by the time the constitution was taken up Tuesday night. There was some discussion on the form of application blank for new members. As approved it follows:

"I, the undersigned, hereby apply for membership in the Socialist Party. While I am a member of the Socialist Party, all my political activities shall be in accordance with the declaration of principles, platform, and constitution of the party."

The original draft of the committee, for which Judge Panken and Gerber reported, had a reference to the existence of the class struggle

in it. Hillquit favored the simplified forms, quoting the application blanks of the German, British Labour, Austrian, and British Independent Labour parties to show that simplified forms were the rule. The ILP blank merely stated, "I apply for membership in the ILP." Amicus Most spoke for inclusion of the class struggle reference, but the convention approved the abbreviated form.

The only other discussion of length on the constitution came when Blanshard proposed that the NEC study the possibility of placing dues payments on an income basis. This was voted down.

The New Constitution.

Under the new constitution, national conventions are to be held every even-numbered year. Conventions when Presidential candidates are to be named shall have 250 delegates, the intervening conventions shall have 150. There is to be one delegate at large for each organized state (a state having 3 locals and 75 dues paying members) and the remainder in proportion to the average dues paying membership of the state for the preceding calendar year. In conventions roll call votes may be asked for, on which each delegate shall cast a vote equal to the number of members the delegate represents in the convention. Delegates to international congresses are in the future to be nominated by state organizations, and to be elected by the NEC by ballot.

Article X of the new constitution provides that state or local organizations desiring to cooperate with organizations of labor and working farmers, may do so only after the approval of the NEC has been obtained. The dues to be paid to the National Office shall in organized states be 8-1/3 cents a month, in unorganized states 20-5/6 cents a month, and members-at-large 30 cents a month. State and local organizations may fix the prices for these stamps, but in no case shall it exceed 30 cents by the state organization, or 50 cents by the local organization.

With the adoption of the constitution at about 10 pm, a motion was put and carried referring all remaining business on the program, including resolutions on a score of topics, to the incoming National Executive Committee.

Before adjourning, Chairman Vladeeck called upon four speakers, Morris Hillquit, Mayor Hoan, James H. Maurer, and Norman Thomas. They delivered messages which for moving eloquence were the

high spots of the convention. Hillquit said it was the most exciting convention he had attended since that which saw the party organized.

“There have been sharp differences of opinion, but I am not discouraged. On the contrary. Socialist conventions are never perfunctory. We have no machines or cliques, but we have an intense feeling that we have a great cause to serve. And we have different views as to how we may reach our goal. And when we have our differences we take off our gloves and handle them with naked hands.

“We met under extraordinary, critical, and tragic circumstances. The convention has noted these circumstances and its deliberations have been fruitful. We have a good platform, as clear and as uncompromising as any we have ever had. We have nominated our standard bearers by unanimous votes. The little differences will be forgotten. Let us remember but one thing, that we are all united in one great cause for the realization of Socialism. Your new NEC will meet tomorrow to lay out plans and then the campaign will start. You will all have to bear your share, to roll up a big and impressive vote for our ticket and our cause. This is our opportunity to rebuild our party on a permanent, lasting foundation. We must make up not only for our actual losses, but for potential gains which were lost to us after the war hysteria had well nigh wrecked the party. Let us now forget our bickerings in face of the great compelling cause to which we have dedicated our lives.”

Mayor Hoan Speaks.

Mayor Hoan delivered a spirited message. He spoke in simple, crisp phrases. “We have one enemy, capitalism. We’ll hand together, or we’ll hang separately. Work like hell and poll millions of votes for Thomas and Maurer.”

Vladeck made a moving talk on a few of his experiences with the idealism of the Russian revolutionary movement, of the joy and battle of the 1905 Revolution which opened a jail door to him. He then called on Maurer, who was in top form. He told of conventions he had attended which were so dull, nobody had a good time. This could not be said of the present gathering. At one convention, there was a stormy session. More cops than miners were present. Jim was scheduled to speak, but the fighting kept him from the floor. Finally he told the convention, he wanted to speak at once so he could get home.

“Why the hell don’t you go home now?” piped up a miner in the audience.

The only objection to this convention, said Maurer, was that it tried to do too much in four days. No more four-day conventions, he counseled. His other regret that all the delegates were either young or old. He’d like to see more in-betweens present. He advised the comrades how to treat him when he came touring. He said he knew they all had beautiful cities, but he would rather not go touring the moment he got to town. “You make believe you want to entertain me, when all the time you want me to entertain you.” The Socialist Party is our child and every Socialist is called to the front to fight for it.

Thomas Addresses Convention.

“I am glad for the inspiration of such a beautiful and noble speech as Morris Hillquit has just delivered,” Thomas said in the closing address of the convention:

“In our daily work for the cause we are sustained greatly by the love of our comrades. There have been differences here, it is true. Four years ago we met in a harmonious convention, but that gathering was not half so promising as this one. There is a different spirit. The nation’s workers are hungry for something. To them we must lift a beacon of hope. It is a great and solemn task. Party work will be the solvent of many of our difficulties.

“This year funds will be few We must multiply their usefulness by our work. On one hand we must meet the issue of Communism, the philosophy of despair. On the other, our greater task is to penetrate the jungle of capitalism, with its economic robbery, its ruthless terrorism over defenseless workers, and its racial hates. Neither race, color, nor creed divides us. We see and strive for a solidarity of all workers across racial lines.

“This is a task for age and for youth. Youth, which fights every war and every crusade, must take its place in our battle to achieve Socialism in our time. Ours is a choice that must be made within the next four years, if not sooner. We must choose the life and joy of Socialism before the dark night of capitalist war overtakes us.”

Vladeck banged his gavel: “The 17th National Convention of the Socialist Party now stands adjourned.”

The Newly Elected National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party.

- **Morris Hillquit, of New York, National Chairman.** A founder of the party, and member of the National Executive of the party since its inception without interruption.
- **Daniel W. Hoan, of Wisconsin.** Socialist Mayor of Milwaukee for 16 years, recently re-elected by a great majority.
- **Leo Kryzcki, Vice President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.** Milwaukee Socialist county secretary. A new member.
- **Norman Thomas, of New York.** The party's candidate for President in 1928 and 1932. Director, League for Industrial Democracy. A new member of the NEC.
- **Jasper McLevy, of Connecticut.** President of the Bridgeport, Conn. Central Labor Council.
- **Powers Hapgood, of Indiana.** Harvard graduate who did his post-graduate work in the mines of half a dozen countries, including our own. A new member.
- **Darlington Hoopes, of Pennsylvania.** Reading Socialist member of the state legislature. A new member.
- **John C. Packard, of California.** Los Angeles lawyer, counsel in many free speech fights in Southern California. New member.
- **James D. Graham, of Montana.** President, Montana State Federation of Labor. A new member, but has served in previous years.
- **Albert Sprague Coolidge, member of the faculty of Harvard.** From one of the real "first families of Massachusetts, whatever that may mean. A new member.
- **Lilith M. Wilson, of Pennsylvania.** The other Socialist member of the Pennsylvania State Legislature.

Alternates.

- **Al Benson, of Wisconsin.** Sheriff of Milwaukee.
- **Paul Blanshard, of New York.** Secretary, City Affairs Committee.
- **John M. Collins, of Illinois.** Chicago trade unionist who made sensational party race for mayor.
- **James Oneal, of New York.** Editor of *The New Leader*.
- **Herman F. Neissner, of New Jersey.** Well known New Jersey trade unionist; present candidate for US Senate.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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