
The Party Controversy

by Norman Thomas

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The Party Controversy.

It has long been my rule, so far as possible in this column, to avoid discussion of Socialist Party controversies. In the present situation, however, it is not only my right but my duty to comment on the NEC decision and the New York situation. I ask you to read that decision in full and the names of the Provisional State Committee appointed to carry it out. You will observe that elaborate care has been taken to guarantee the rights of every single Socialist. A new election such as the Forward Committee and other self-appointed mediators proposed has been ordered in New York City. Every attempt at a Party purge or vendetta has been forbidden. An excellent committee on which the right wing is fairly represented has been set up.

What is there in this to justify Louis Waldman's wail about the unfairness of the NEC and his attempt to compare what it did with conditions in Stalin's Russia or Hitler's Germany? And by the way, Waldman seems to be as much afraid of the one as the other!

What the NEC has done in the name of preservation of the Party in the United States of America is to remove a State Committee which crowned a long list of sins of omission and commission against the Party by the wholly illegal attempt to expel from the Party everyone in any way connected with *The Socialist Call*, a publication which is the official organ of 7 states and has contributed over a thousand dollars to the Party. We would not have been good Socialists if we had not acted to save the Party. We were not secessionists. The Utica Conference [Dec. 28-29, 1935] was not a body planning secession from the Socialist Party of America but the re-assertion of the power of that Party along Socialist lines. The Utica Conference bowed to the deci-

sion of the NEC in setting up its own committee to supervise the work in the state and new elections in New York City.

The Case of the Extremists.

The legal and constitutional case of the extremists, whom I think they will prove to be few in the Party, as against the NEC is curiously like the legal and constitutional case such as the Supreme Court of the United States has laid down in the nation. It rests on a strict construction of our constitution in a narrow literalistic sense and on an exaggerated doctrine of states' right.

Some, at least, of our Old Guard extremists don't really care so much about the constitution and rules of the Party. Look at their own record. See, for instance, how calmly they violated the rule that there should be no united front with Communists without formal approval of the State Executive Committee, even for a single demonstration, when they made a united front, in itself a good thing, with Communist splinter groups last May Day. The Old Guard has not been tender of the constitutional rights of any of us in New York City. This constitutionalism is a cloak.

As a matter of fact, any reasonable construction of the constitution not only permits but directs the NEC to act between Conventions to save the Party, to guarantee its efficiency, to render justice to those to whom justice is otherwise utterly denied. It did not act in the present case without notice and it merely continued jurisdiction which it had been force to assume in New York State matters ever since its meeting more than a year ago in Boston.

In terms of any issue other than a very narrow constitutionalism and a very extreme states' rights position the Waldman irreconcilables have nothing to do except to try to scare Socialists out of their wits by the communist bogey. At Philadelphia [Jan. 4-5, 1936], Adolph Held, speaking for the Forward Committee, admitted candidly that he had not discovered signs of communism or advocacy of armed insurrection or breach of the national rules on the subject of the united front in the groups connected with the 21 East 17th Street organization.¹

Jim Oneal's communist phobia, which is at least subjectively sincere but which is very extreme, only enabled him to find a very few incidents to support it. He made much of the fact that *The Daily*

¹ Address of the "People's House," home of the Rand School of Social Science.

Worker, which under the communist new line is getting to be a pretty fair labor paper, gives sympathetic accounts of left wing positions. This he argues quite illogically must prove a united front. He can see no difference at all between the advocacy of violence and armed insurrection and the Party policy and the discussion within the party of that Road to Power which under certain circumstances might imply the necessity of armed insurrection. He made much of two disciplinary cases where the Old Guard was unable to effect expulsions; first of an individual and second of a group of Yipsels.² He forgot to say that both the individual and the group had formally expressed their willingness to abide by Party discipline. He forgot to say that the individual has since been put under charges by the 21 East 17th Street organization for overt acts — not, however, as the result of witch-hunting!

In this explanation I had to be critical of the collective action of the Old Guard. This collective action has greatly weakened the Party. It has given left-handed encouragement to secession in Indiana, to a Hearst-like denunciation of Russia, to a dozen other things wholly opposed to true Socialism. The cure for this is not expulsion. For individuals in the Old Guard I have a genuine affection. A good Socialist Party must be inclusive. It needs the right wing.

Surely on sober second thought the overwhelming majority of Socialists in America will see that the NEC provision offers the way for a united and aggressive party in New York and that support of the NEC decision is the way to keep the New York fight out of other states and to unite us all in the great fight against capitalism, Fascism, and war.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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² Members of the Socialist Party's youth section, the Young People's Socialist League, an organization dominated by the Left Wing in this period.