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# Exclusive Story of SP Convention Shows Collapse: Party Disintegrating and in Complete Control of Communists, Milwaukee Delegate Writes [events of March 26-29, 1937] by Frederic Heath

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*The author of this story was a Wisconsin delegate to the national convention of the Norman Thomas-led Socialist Party. Held behind closed doors, this is the only uncensored story that has come out of the convention.*

*Fred Heath belongs to the generation of Victor L. Berger, Eugene V. Debs, Morris Hillquit, and other democratic Socialists and was one of the founders of the Socialist Party now captured by the Communists.*

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CHICAGO, Ill., March 26 [1937].<sup>1</sup>— It has fallen to Wisconsin Socialists to sit in a Socialist national convention and find themselves the only remnants of the once powerful American Socialist Party, surrounded by leering, victorious Communists who have made a complete capture of the movement we have given much of our lives to help build up. We had to take it here in Chicago today, for here was a national Socialist convention completely in the control of the enemy, a miracle that had been made possible by the arch betrayer, Norman Thomas.

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<sup>1</sup> This article seems to have been written in two parts and posted from Chicago to New York for publication following conclusion of the convention.

I am writing to *The New Leader* as, unfortunately, we of Wisconsin have no medium that we can freely use to enlighten each other on inner party matters. It is one of the failures of our set-up and has done us no good. A city daily of general circulation cannot of necessity use space for such matters.

### **A Playboy.**

Thomas sat in the convention today with the delegation of New York Trotskyites and intellectual blatherskites, and I watched the face of that Socialist playboy to see if he did not feel at least some remorse over what he had brought about. He had little to say, avoided taking the floor, and if he had thoughts, he kept them to himself. But the virtual wreck of the Socialist Party was there before his eyes and he could not have felt much satisfaction over it, however thick his cuticle may be.

There are about 100 delegates in the convention and the complexion of things is well shown by the votes that were taken, usually 75 to 25. The Wisconsin delegation, though they had some Communist sympathizers in their midst (from Milwaukee and Kenosha), helped cast the 25 votes. This tells the story.

The Communists made no secret of their capture. They are mostly Trotskyites, for whom Norman Thomas opened the gate, but the Stalinites played along with them in the pinches.

They spoke of themselves as Trotskyites in convention and one self-sufficient genius, [Glen] Trimble of California, while speaking before the "mic" declared: "I am a Trotskyist."

### **Communist Demonstrations.**

The hall arrangements were very poor. The speakers' rostrum was at one end, with the New York delegation seated at the front. Wisconsin was "way back" at the other end, the hall being narrow and long.

Along one side and at the rear were the seats for non-delegates, and these were well filled by the Communists, who demonstrated for the Communist speakers — a young Communist at the door making himself especially obnoxious in this regard.

Even the fact that there were Socialists in the Wisconsin Legislature, adding to its advanced labor laws (laws secured by previous Socialist legislators), meant nothing to these Communist soapboxers

and “misery of philosophy” theorizers. Direct action was the thing, and the ease by which the dwindled 6,000 members of the “Socialist” Party could go out and give capitalism (beg pardon, fascism — capitalism was almost forgotten in the convention) the right-about was wondrous to behold.

### **No Small Potatoes.**

The billygoat who stood on the railroad track and tried to butt a long passenger train into perdition was none of your small potatoes alongside of these voluble, intellectual pygmies, who just as soon as they get around to it, intend to give capitalism (beg pardon again — fassssscism) a flying mare and land it helplessly on its fat back. To the bow-wows with the ballot and parliamentarianism, when direct action is so much easier, especially since it can be carried out by an infinitesimal billygoat minority!

That the Communists felt their victory and were ready to throw off their masks was apparent before the convention had got very far, while outside the hall was a long table of books and pamphlets for sale presided over by the *New York Call* outfit.<sup>2</sup> And here were Trotsky books prominently displayed — *My Life, I Stake My Life*, etc. Inside the door were stacks of the *Clarity* (output of the [Gus] Tylers and [Herbert] Zams).<sup>3</sup>

### **First Underground Step.**

There were more evidences of Communist tactics also. When I reached the hall I found that by ukase of the NEC a closed meeting had been arranged and that it was closed to the press — the first step

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<sup>2</sup> *The New York Call* was the newspaper established by the Militant faction and the Thomasites in New York state as a rival to the Old Guard-dominated *New Leader*. Unsurprisingly, there was bad blood between the two publications.

<sup>3</sup> *Clarity* was a short-lived left socialist magazine, around which a political faction was built. The factions leaders were Gus Tyler (1911-2011), a leading member of the Militant faction, YPSL activist, and ILGWU functionary even at this early age. Herbert Zam was a former Communist who followed party leader Jay Lovestone into the International Communist Opposition. Zam left the Lovestone organization in 1933 with Ben Gitlow and briefly attempted with him to launch a new organization called the Revolutionary Workers Party. In 1934 Zam and Gitlow both joined the leftward-tilting Socialist Party of America.

underground. It was done to please the Communists, who had plenty to hide from press and public.

On top of this, National Secretary [Roy] Burt kept repeating to the convention that the handpicked Publicity Committee alone could speak to the reporters, and that delegates in that regard were muzzled. A national Socialist Party convention afraid of the light of day — ye gods! Naturally, the press made the most of this to make hot reading of their reports of the convention from the outside. All in all, Friday [Convention Day 1: March 26, 1937] was a tedious, wearing flow of words, words, words.

### **The “Workers.”**

They all spoke as workers, and this led a speaker of the opposition ([Paul] Porter [of Wisconsin]) to show up some of them, pointing out this and that and the other individual as “Doctors of Divinity” and professionals, and calling their names as he did so. They were deflated for the time being but soon back as fresh as ever.

For good measure, Al Benson of Wisconsin followed this up by a humorous reply to the attacks on Wisconsin that rather took the crowd by storm but could not alter the 75-25 line-up later on.

### **Wisconsin Attacked.**

Wisconsin was attacked from time to time, but most of the speakers made some reference to the way Wisconsin had helped turn the party over to the Communists at Cleveland [19th National Convention: May 23-26, 1936]. The implication was, of course, that but for this, we would have had harder sledding at their hands.

They were particularly critical and even contemptuous of the fact that Wisconsin had succeeded politically. The Milwaukee Socialists were simply office-seekers, with no thought whatever for the “Rrrrevolution.”

It could be likened to no former Socialist Party convention of which I have any recollection. The Socialists in the Wisconsin delegation felt as if they had blundered into an alien gathering to which they did not belong.

## **A Co-Wrecker.**

During the day, Chairman [Harry] Laidler (co-wrecker with Thomas) announced that its National Executive Committee had submitted their resignations to give the convention a free hand. Bad as the old committee has proved, as bad as Norman Thomas himself and almost every one of them, their resignations offer no hope for what's left of the Socialist Party unless a miracle happens, for they would, after all, be no better than the ones such a convention as this would be likely to put in their places.

## **Sunday.**

**[Convention Day 3: March 28, 1937]**

CHICAGO.— Wisconsin was anathema in the convention the first day [Friday, March 26], but a somewhat better feeling appeared later, perhaps because some of those not Communists in fact who had been stung by the direct actionists' tsetse bug had their mental horizon somewhat broadened by the debates.

The caucusing helped a little, doubtless. Wisconsin was able to get in conference with some of the other delegates and the factional situation also helped, especially in the case of New York. While the blud and thunder-dom of the Tyler-Zam faction [Clarity] had the most strength in the convention, others also had influence, so that Saturday morning [March 27] there came to the Wisconsinites a tentative slate, representing the most, perhaps more, than the minority could dare to expect in the matter of compromise. Wisconsin was to have the right to name two of their number as NEC candidates.

## **Old Chappies.**

But in spite of the talk of an NEC that would be working class instead of professional and clerical, the list contained some of the old chappies of the now experienced NEC who have played their shameful part in expelling New York, driving out Pennsylvania, Connecti-

cut, and other Eastern socialist movements, and opening the door to the invasion of Communists.

In the convention today Thomas was continued as National Chairman with a hurrah stampede and when the noes were called for, mine was the only one in opposition. With some few changes, the slate already referred to went through. The YPSL was given the right to also name a member to the NEC, which will, it is believed, mean another Communist to rule the "Socialist" Party. There was some more hurrah egged on by Chairman [Carl] Minkley over making [Powers] Hapgood Vice-Chairman — an afterthought to save that worthy — who had been nominated to the NEC in the regular manner, having been out of the convention city when acceptances were required before balloting. In all, the NEC will include 15, the list sufficiently charged with Bolshies to show the Socialists where they get off!

### **Wisconsin Against Violence.**

In a membership meeting in Milwaukee before the delegates left for Chicago, [Milwaukee Mayor] Dan Hoan secured the passage of a motion to be placed before the convention to the effect that the Socialist Party does not stand for violence or insurrections and making such advocacy cause for expulsion. This was introduced by Max Rasking today with some of its teeth drawn after the Wisconsin caucus had indicated a desire for its moderation.

During much of the convention discussion the criticisms have been mainly directed at the Trotskyites, but the Stalinites came in for theirs when the reports on the Workers' Alliance were made. These were far from reassuring, showing that the Communists were getting control and making it almost certain that that movement will probably be wrecked.

### **Run the CIO Unions!**

Throughout the convention the CIO sentiment has been uppermost, along with the duty to take it in hand and run the trade union movement! It reminded of the old DeLeon days. Still there was some sentiment that while jubilant over the manner in which the CIO wave has put ants in the pants of the rubber, steel, and auto capital-

ists, it is the duty of the Socialist movement to keep on good terms with all divisions of the organized Labor movement.

Where Wisconsin will stand or what it will do regarding the new administration and serious situation cannot be said at this time. There will be no relish, to state it mildly, for a national party with a shipload of Communist pirates aboard and manning the guns.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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