
A Veteran's Appeal for Unity: Address to the Founding Convention of the Socialist Party of America, Indianapolis, IN, August 1, 1901.

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Comrades:—

After having delivered thousands of speeches in German for the cause of Socialism, it is today for the first time that I attempt to speak in English in order to do my part in perfecting a union of socialists for the common struggle against their enemies and a cessation of fighting between themselves.

It is difficult for me to give expression to my thoughts in English, and I would rather have refrained from making this speech, but I am an old man, a veteran of the Social Democracy, and I tremble at the thought that the work of unity here may fail.

I thought that perhaps in consideration of 44 years of service in the socialist army which lie behind me, you might attribute some value to my words and I consider it my duty to at least attempt to bring to bear my influence on the hot-headed in our camp, inasmuch that they learn to know and appreciate the first duty of every soldier of the Revolution — the subordination of personal interests, personal feelings

and thoughts to the common interest of all.

This subordination cannot be extended to the suppression of any personal opinion; it must not have as a sequence the suppression of truth or the liberty to investigate, but it can very well be made perfectly compatible with closed ranks in the presence of the common enemy.

As an illustration let me call your attention to the example of our German comrades.

Moreover, would not the excessively great liberty of the individual lead us to the point where every single one of us would want to form his own party?

We have one truth, which we all without exception recognize; one aim toward which we all strive; one banner which we all follow. We all recognize that the release of mankind from the chains of intellectual and material slavery, its liberation from the claws of the capitalistic vampire, the removal of religious and political superstitions, can be accomplished only by an organization of society in which the means of production shall be common property, a society which

†- **Karl Julius Vahlteich** (1839-1915), born in Leipzig, Germany, was one of 12 founders of the modern German Socialist movement when on May 23, 1863, he attended the organizational meeting of the Universal Workingmen's Association; Ferdinand Lassalle was President of this association and Vahlteich was Secretary (1863-64). Vahlteich was a delegate to the Eisenach Congress (1869) and a leader of the German Social-Democratic Workers Party. Vahlteich was twice elected to the German Reichstag as a Socialist candidate (1874-76 and 1878-81). The Bismarck regime expelled Vahlteich from Germany in 1881 and he emigrated from Europe to the United States. In America, Vahlteich served for a short time as editor of the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* before moving to Chicago, where he served as editor of the *Chicagoer Arbeiter Zeitung*. Vahlteich was a longtime member of the Socialist Labor Party and of the Social Democratic Party (Springfield faction) and was, of course, a founding member of the Socialist Party of America. Vahlteich died in Chicago on Friday, Feb. 26, 1915. His obituary on the front page of the SPA's official organ noted that Vahlteich "was greatly depressed by the war in Europe, but used all his waning strength in fighting the wave of patriotism among the Germans and preaching the international doctrines of Socialism." [*The American Socialist*, March 6, 1915]

offers for uniform enjoyment the rich blessing of the work of all to all.

Of course everyone would like to realize this condition as quickly as possible, and therefore everyone offers his own prescription in the full belief that its acceptance will give us strength and dexterity to advance with giant strides.

I do not deny, but on the contrary, know very well that in the whole socialist world, among hundreds of minor variations, there are two principal views which struggle with each other.

The advocates of one of these views proclaim themselves as loudly as possible to be revolutionists. They live in constant fear that socialism can be stolen from them or "watered [down]" like stocks, or fall victim to corruption. They therefore speak warmly against compromise, and would like to see the socialist army corps guarded against every touch of the non-socialists. They have a keen scent for traitors in their own ranks, mistrust all who are not toilers, and are impatient to deliver the last deciding stroke for the foundation of socialist society.

The representatives of the other tendency also call themselves revolutionists, though not so frequently or loudly. They do not believe in the theory of a catastrophe, but rather in the organic growth of the old society into the new one. Their fighting tactics must therefore necessarily differ from those of the other belief. They do not fear "watering [down]" or corruption of socialism, considering it an economic necessity which will find its way ultimately with irresistible force, and therefore want to grasp every occasion to advance step by step. They do not fear compromises or temporary companionship with non-socialistic parties. They do not want to restrict their activity to participation in elections, but also seek to influence the people in an educational way, especially by furthering the cooperative work.

Will we in spite of this difference of opinion in regard to tactics, make socialist unity in this country a fact?

I say: Yes.

Let it be understood that I do not imagine that we can succeed in preventing the existence of 4 or 5 sects, but we can, with some goodwill, have THE

PARTY which will be recognized as the representation of socialism.

It is necessary that we at this convention reduce to silence by an overwhelming vote those who so far have prevented union, and who at the same time have acted as if they had all the comrades in their pockets.

Do not be deterred from your intentions by the fact that this or that majority resolution does not suit you.† Such resolutions may be altered in the course of time. But the disgrace of separating here without accomplishing any results can never be blotted out; should such happen it would be equal to a crime against our cause which is the cause of the whole people.

But the form can be found in which minor differences of opinion can be resolved in harmony, which the striving for a higher universally acknowledged ideal, common to us all, demands.

Now comrades, our sense of duty must be stronger than our self-will; our love for the cause must make us forget personal injustices we may have suffered; our entire thinking, feeling, and wishing must be consumed by enthusiasm for the work of rescue which we have to perform in common with socialists all over the world in the interests of the human race.

But perhaps one or other among you may say: "These are but words, phrases which cannot stand before the real facts as they exist."

In answer I need only point to the rich experiences in party life of our German comrades, to prove to you that the performance of the duty I request of you is quite within your power. What your German comrades have done, you also can do.

When I as a 17 year old journeyman in the year 1857 began to wander through Germany, I had my Weitling in my knapsack, and with others was of the opinion that upon his — Weitling's — communistic system was based the salvation of humanity.

Now comrades, did this belief prevent us from gathering around the banner held up by Lassalle in 1863, although upon it stood mottoes quite different from those expressed in Weitling's works?

No! There was a movement in favor of the world's disinherited, and we followed, not grumbling and faultfinding, but with enthusiasm.

And afterwards when differences of opinion

†- Reference here is to the Majority Report of the Platform Committee in favor of "Immediate Demands."

could no more be bridged over, because Lassalle's propositions proved impracticable in face of the actual conditions, a fight broke out, much more passionate and malignant than the one we are now engaged in. This fight lasted 10 years amongst the German Socialists, but the end was that we united and built up THE PARTY — as we are now about to do in this country.

Do you believe that this was easy after a bitter fight lasting 10 years?

It was a difficult task. But we performed it, taking consideration of our weakness and prejudices and making mutual concessions.

We were scoffed at by Marx, the great representative of scientific socialism, on account of the compromising program, which obeying the necessity of circumstances [the party] had formulated, but we stood upon this platform united, and could and did work ourselves up to higher and higher supremacy of power.

Nothing can be more instructive than this historical example.

Marx was right when he declared that program of coalition of which I am speaking scientifically untenable — but we were still more right when we made it, for without it the agreement necessary before everything else would not have been brought about.†

From that time on, since 1875, our German comrades have not rested in bringing the party program into harmony with scientific socialism.

There have been controversies and differences of opinion and they exist today more than ever, but never since 1875 have the German socialists given to the world the disgraceful spectacle of political disruption in the fight against the common foe.

I repeat, that what the Germans have been able to do, we are also able to do — if we really want it. The road before us is long and full of obstacles. We must gather our whole strength for the struggle before us, and must not rest till we reach our destination.

Our problem is an earnest, mighty, [world-historical] one. Let us prove worthy of it.

†- Marx expressed his views in opposition to the content of the draft program of the unified Social-Democratic Party of Germany in a manuscript entitled "Marginal Notes on the Program of the German Workers' Party." This material was not published until 1891, when an abridgement ran in *Die Neue Zeit*, followed by a full edition in covers. This material seems to have never been published by the Socialist Party of America or the publishing house most closely affiliated with it, Charles H. Kerr & Co., but it was immortalized in English as *Critique of the Gotha Program* by the Socialist Labor Party and the American Communist movement, both of which groups reprinted it frequently. These organizations regarded Marx's "Marginal Notes" as a fundamental work indicating Marx's unwillingness to compromise with socialists holding to ideologically impure positions; perhaps also as a refutation of the parliamentary obsessions of the Lassalleans — and by extension, the American Socialist Party, which for all its Marxist self-identification was quasi-Lassalleian in actual practice. For the definitive translation, see *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989), v. 24, pp. 76-99.

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