
Letter to Sen. Paul O. Husting in Washington, DC from Winfield R. Gaylord and A.M. Simons in Milwaukee, WI, April 17, 1917

First published in the Congressional Record, May 11, 1917.

Reprinted as "The Gaylord-Simons Letter," *New York Call*, v. 10, no. 139 (May 19, 1917), pg. 2.

Milwaukee, Wis., April 17, 1917.

The Hon. Paul O. Husting,
Washington, DC

My Dear Senator:

In the midst of this general hurly-burly of the war situation there has been thrust upon me another and more immediate perplexity, growing out of the situation resulting from the action of the Socialist Convention at St. Louis [April 7-14, 1917].

The enclosed copies of documents will help you to understand the gist of the opposing positions, as expressed at the convention. The clipping from the *Milwaukee Journal* will give you some insight into my attitude on the general questions involved.

But there is another issue coming to the fore, and on this I feel that I must act, for the saving of the lives of some of my well-meaning but short-sighted comrades with whom I do not agree.

It is a significant fact that up to date the majority resolution adopted by the convention on the subject of war and militarism has not been

printed in its complete form, nor in any form which includes the statements as to "mass" action, in the *Milwaukee Leader*.†

Nevertheless, from statements which I overheard Victor L. Berger and Emil Seidel made on the train returning from St. Louis, I know that they expect that there will be "resistance" by the "fanatics" along the lines indicated.

Most significantly, just now, is the fact that this irregularly called convention, having only 185 delegates out of a possible 300, by a majority vote ordered printed for distribution generally the majority resolution, before it is acted upon by the referendum of the party.

The only purpose of this must be to secure "action" against the government in some "mass" form, to embarrass the administration in its prosecution of the measures necessary for carrying on the war.

It is not my desire to prevent the majority resolution being put to the test of the referendum. That should be done. I am frank to say that if it is adopted I shall have to leave the party organization that can put forth such a statement.

It is not my belief that this will be adopted if it is fairly put before the party membership and

†- The *Leader* was the Socialist Party daily newspaper published in Milwaukee by Victor L. Berger, the *Journal* was the *Leader's* principal competitor.

the issue is made clear.

But meanwhile much harm may have been done by the stirring up of ignorant prejudices among the syndicalist element on the one hand and the racial pro-German and pro-Austrian elements on the other hand by the circulation of this leaflet. In my opinion, it will certainly lead to exactly what is spoken of in the text, namely, "mass action." This phrase is well known among the syndicalist and anarchist element in this and every other country to mean "extra-political," i.e., action by force through the gathering of large crowds.

There should be no need of abridging the customary liberties of free speech, free assemblage, and freedom of the press. But this thing is tricky, unauthorized by any proper organization, furtive in its handling — as in the failure to print it here — and is calculated to play directly into the hands of the enemies of our government.

What should be accomplished, in the interests of fairness and for the protection of the public peace, is the withholding from circulation generally, for any purposes other than the referendum of party members, of this majority resolution document....

There is no need of estranging the great mass of Socialists and those who sympathize with them by any drastic action. There is occasion for the discreet use of authority for the prevention of general circulation of this pernicious propaganda.

Victor L. Berger did not take the floor in the convention in support of this measure. Nor did any other open advocate of nationalism but Morris Hillquit, and he reported for the committee. But they voted with the syndicalist element

solidly.

By the close of the convention there were 60 delegates who had so far recovered from their hysteria that they signed the petition for the submission of the alternative declaration to the referendum along with the other. There were only 5 who stood for an opposite position on the first test vote.... What I am concerned about is the fact that the distribution of this document prior to its submission to the party referendum will not only commit the Socialist movement to a doctrine which it has nowhere adopted, but will probably lead fanatical and uninformed members and sympathizers to undertake the thing that is called for in the program, and so lead to bloodshed. As usual, those who will suffer most will not be those whose brains planned the thing.

Some of our Socialist attorneys have considered the possibility of a restraining order along these lines. That would be expensive and take time to get the movement for it organized. We have started some correspondence about that, but meanwhile the orders are probably going to the printer....

Yours very sincerely,

W.R. Gaylord.

I have read this and agree with it, and join in the hope that some action may be taken to prevent violence.

A.M. Simons.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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