
Clearing the Decks:

An Editorial in *The New York Communist*, May 24, 1919. †

Unsigned front page editorial in *The New York Communist*, v. 1, no. 6 (May 24, 1919), pp. 1; 7.

Morris Hillquit has emerged from his long retirement with an article in *The Call* for May 21st, entitled “The Socialist Task and Outlook.” Because of his position in the party, this article must not be taken as the expression of an individual. It is published in *The Call* in just the manner that the pronouncements of James M. Beck are published in *The Times*. It may be regarded as a semi-official declaration, formulated after consultation with party “leaders” of all shades of opinion, of the position — or lack of position — of the element which still controls the party machinery.

Careful reading of this document impresses one immediately with the power of the Left Wing agitation in the party, and its profound roots in the revolutionary feeling of the rank and file. Morris Hillquit is a clever politician; he knows how to gauge the temper of the party membership, as he has demonstrated at St. Louis and elsewhere. His legal training and his experience in party affairs fit him better than anyone else to lead the Center, into whose hands the Right Wing is willing to deliver its power, now that it is unable to maintain itself before the wrath of the rank and file.

We had expected something better from Comrade Hillquit. The document runs away from all important questions; it endeavors to create the impression of dissatisfaction with the behavior of the party, while it carefully avoids any specific statements; it formulates no definite position; it censures Socialist parliamentarism in one phrase and defends it in the next, forgetting to call attention to the actions of our Congressional representative and lesser parliamentarians; it makes provision for a change of front as pressure is

applied, a truly opportunistic position. Now as ever, Hillquit is attempting to carry water on both shoulders; he flirts with the revolutionary sentiment that is now dominant in the movement; he coquettes with Proletarian Dictatorship in Russia and Hungary, while spurning it nearer to home; he implies a mild reproof to the majority socialists of Germany; he mentions the St. Louis platform and immediately sheers away, fearful of this test if applied to the “leaders” of the party.

Unlike many of our local “Socialist” spokesmen, Comrade Hillquit admits that the Second International broke down before the supreme test of the war. But it was not the socialist movements that were at fault, “It was the economic organization of the European workers, and the pressure of their immediate economic interests (as understood by them) that broke the solidarity of the Socialist International,” says Comrade Hillquit. “It was not parliamentarism which was primarily responsible for the mischief.” He goes on to speak of “excessive parliamentarism,” but “on the whole the Socialists in parliament expressed the sentiments of their constituents pretty faithfully.”

This in other words is Meyer London’s justification for his acts in Congress. “I was not elected by a purely Socialist vote, and I must obey the wishes of my constituents,” said London in effect when he was questioned. According to the Communist Manifesto the socialists “are, on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march,

†- The Editor of *The New York Communist* was John Reed; Associate Editor was Eadmonn MacAlpine. The Editorial Board consisted of Nicholas Hourwich, Bert Wolfe, Morris Zucker, and J. Wilenkin.

the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.” But now we learn that the economic organizations, which are organized primarily to safeguard the wage status of the workers, are responsible for the breakdown of the revolutionary movement.

If Comrade Hillquit’s line of argument is correct, how does it explain the continuous flirtation which the Socialist Party, of which he is an executive officer, carried on with the AF of L until Gompers made it impossible? The economic organizations in Europe broke down in 1914. During the two years following, the AF of L flirtation continued, and the Socialist Party made no attempt to point out the necessity for “one working class union.”

Comrade Hillquit says, “The first task of the post-war Socialist International must, therefore, be to organize and reorganize all grades and strata of labor on broad class lines, not only nationally, but internationally. Not as trade unions, not even as mere industrial unions, but as one working-class union.”

But how is this to be done? According to Comrade Hillquit’s own statement “the organized labor movement...was a movement for the benefit of the better-situated strata of labor — the skilled workers.” In other words, the “economic causes” of the collapse of the Second International were “the economic organization of the European workers, and the pressure of their immediate economic interests (as understood by them).”

What guarantee is there in the whole vague program outlined in Comrade Hillquit’s letter — summed up in the phrase “socialist propaganda” — which leads us to believe that the skilled workers are going to forget their “economic interests”?

That there is a fundamental difference of principle between the Left Wing and the dominate “moderate socialism” which controls the party is nowhere more clearly indicated than by Comrade Hillquit’s phrase, “In countries which have passed, or are passing, to a regime of Communist or Socialist government...” This is a recognition of a distinction between the two; this is an implied differentiation between two forms of the Cooperative Commonwealth, which we do not admit.

What is the nature of this distinction? The following quotation indicates Comrade Hillquit’s con-

ception of it:

Shall the socialization of industries and national life be attempted by one master stroke, or shall it be carried out gradually and slowly? Shall the working class immediately assume the sole direction of the government as a working class government, or shall it share governmental power and responsibilities with the capitalist class, at least, “during the period of transition?”

So far as we know, no socialist leader advocates “the socialization of industries and national life — by a master stroke.” Lenin has carefully pointed out that this socialization, on the contrary, must be carried out “gradually.” But this is beside the point. The question at issue is not socialization of industry, but the class under whose rule this socialization shall be carried out. In this respect the final question is pertinent: “Shall the working class immediately assume the sole direction of the government as a working-class government, or shall it share governmental power and responsibilities with the capitalist class, at least, “during the period of transition”?”

To this question there is but one answer for a scientific socialist. In the words of Marx (Gotha Program) “This corresponds to a political transition period, during which the government cannot be anything else but the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

It is true that Comrade Hillquit declares that the Socialist International must support the dictatorship of the proletariat in all countries in which the working class seizes the power; but he still further emphasizes his doubt of this course of action, and implies a serious criticism of Bolshevik and Sparticide tactics, when he says:

“Whether we approve or disapprove of all the methods by which such proletarian government has gained or is exercising its power is beside the question.”

The socialists of the world must not support intervention in Russia, or actively oppose “that government” (the Soviet Government) “in the face of its life-and-death struggle with international capitalism and imperialism.” The same with Hungary. But he does not say that we must support the Soviet Governments of Russia and Hungary — which is our Left Wing position.

In countries like Germany, however, “in which the struggle for mastery lies between two divisions of

the socialist movement, one class-conscious and the other opportunist, one radical and the other temporizing,” we must support the class-conscious, radical movement., but in America, where the same struggle over principles and tactics is going on in the ranks of the socialist movement, we must support the opportunists and temporizers!

Comrade Hillquit admits the necessity for the 3rd International, but he is by no means specific as to the reasons. He admits that the 2nd International is broken, but the inference is that he would put together the pieces and give it a new name. He repudiates Berne, halfheartedly, and he also repudiates Moscow, as not having advanced “the process of reorganization of the socialist movement of the world.” He continues, “The task of organizing the 3rd International is still before us. It must be accomplished on the basis of principles and conduct, not on that of personal likes and dislikes. It is the common task of all international Socialists.” If this is Comrade Hillquit’s position, why did he not oppose the National Executive Committee’s acceptance of Berne? Why did he wait until Berne had discredited itself even in the eyes of Liberals, until it had shown itself as an offshoot of the conference taking place in Paris?

He carefully refrains from stating what he considers should be “the basis of principles and conduct” for the 3rd International. Yet it is just this that is dividing the socialist movement the world over. Does Comrade Hillquit think the acceptance of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat should be one of the requisites for admission to the 3rd International, and if so, will it be sufficient to accept it abroad and accept the principle of “sharing governmental power and responsibilities with the capitalist class, “during the period of transition” at home?

When Comrade Hillquit uses the term “international” to qualify “Socialists,” does he mean it as a synonym for “revolutionary?” Would he exclude Scheidemann and Ebert from the 3rd International? If so, would he then exclude all other “Socialists” whose acts during the war were dictated by the same opportunism as actuated these two gentlemen, and who during a revolutionary period would inevitably act in the same way as has disgraced the name of Socialism in Germany? If not, does he expect the Spartacans to meet with the German Social Democracy in a Congress of

international solidarity? Comrade Hillquit answers none of these questions, he dismisses the question of the 3rd International in a glowing generality!

What, according to Comrade Hillquit, is the function of the American Socialist Party in the immediate future? The United States emerges from the war the strongest capitalist country in the world; our “liberal” administration has become reactionary; the “progressive” element in politics and social reform has collapsed like a house of cards. The “only voice of protest and the only vision of progress have come from the Socialist Party and a negligible group of industrial workers and radical individuals.”

The implication is that the Socialist Party is to take the place of this bankrupt “element,” to continue, as it has been in the past, “a voice of protest” and a “vision of progress.” Protest against what? Why against the failure of the capitalist government to be “democratic” — to protect the working class against itself. Vision of what? Of an infinite accumulation of petty bourgeois social reforms, such as were advocated in the Congressional platform for 1918 — which Comrade Hillquit must mean when he speaks of the party during the war as a “vision of progress.”

It appears that the failure of peace, the governmental persecution and repression, the obscurantism of the capitalist press, terrorism, unemployment, and intensified exploitation will soon awaken the American workers. Then will come the opportunity of the Socialist Party to convert them to Socialism — whatever that is, for Comrade Hillquit doesn’t say. But in order to prepare for this, we must concentrate on propaganda and organization — “propaganda through all methods available, including political campaigns and legislative forums.” This is the Left Wing position; this is the Left Wing’s idea of political action — for the purpose of propaganda, and for no other reason.

But propaganda for what? Comrade Hillquit has pointed out that there are two theories struggling for control in the socialist movement — that of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that of “sharing governmental power and responsibilities with the capitalist class...during the period of transition.” It is all very well to plead for a “harmonious plan of action” — but what shall it be? Comrade Hillquit does not tell us; but he hints that we shall embrace the second of these two plans of action, and he proposes to read out of the

Socialist Party all those who disagree with him.

In its particular application to the present situation within the party the document is a blanket endorsement of the tactics of the Right Wing in Local New York. Hitherto the cry of all “leaders” has been unity, now Comrade Hillquit wants a split. Why? After months of agitation the Left Wing has broken down the opposition and succeeded in having a referendum taken on the necessity for a National Emergency Convention. The present attitude of the rank and file forecasts that such a convention will be another St. Louis, and Comrade Hillquit and the other “leaders” doubt whether they can weather another storm. The only thing left is to split the party before the convention.

This is exactly what Local New York is doing. This is why the “reorganization” of branches goes on apace. Disfranchise the revolutionary section of the membership, expel its spokesmen and the party is safe for the official junta! The party officialdom has found that it is unable to accomplish this purpose in time to save the National Executive Committee, hence the “leaders” call for a split.

But we refuse to split the party, that is not our purpose. We will capture the party and if the Right Wing wants to split, it must do the splitting, it must break away from the party. The rank and file is behind our position, we are the party, and when the time comes for clearing the decks we will handle the mop.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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