
The Winds of Reaction: News of the Socialist Party Convention [events of May 8 to 14, 1920]

Unsigned report in *Communist Labor* [New York], v. 1, no. 6 (May 15, 1920), pg. 3.

Here we have another straw which shows which way the wind is blowing. It's the Socialist Party in convention. And the wind blows toward reaction.

[Louis] Engdahl, [Bill] Kruse, and others who are now and have been attempting to save the Socialist Party from Committing, had a hard time of it at the convention. They do not realize that as a revolutionary entity, this party is not only dead, but also buried. This Engdahl-Kruse faction attempted to buck the reactionary machine which had slated Hillquit for chairman for the first session. Engdahl got 29 votes and Hillquit, 91.

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John M. Work, formerly of the SP National Executive Committee and one of the faithful inner ring who helped to "rid" the SP of Communists last fall, broke the ice and showed which way the river was flowing when in Saturday's *New York Call* [May 8, 1920] he stated that he favored "a working agreement" with the Labor Party, the Non-Partisan League, liberal aggregations, and everything that is for "freedom and liberties." In this he was supported by delegates from Wisconsin, California, and other states.

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In Sunday's *New York Call* [May 9, 1920], Victor Berger had his say. Let's quote him:

His (Lenin's) Communist society — apparently based upon the "dictatorship of the proletariat" — is already a miscarriage....

It was therefore a serious mistake for the American Socialist Party to vote to affiliate with the Communist International in Moscow

...And every American Socialist will agree with me that we have seen enough 'dictatorship' in this country to last us forever. We have had the dictatorship of Wilson... Burleson...Palmer...the mob...the American Legion. We do not desire any more dictatorships... The platform should be in harmony with these ideas. We should use as few revolutionary phrases as possible. Let us discard the Marxian verbiage that has become so hackneyed by continuous repetition the last 30 years... It is not necessary that it (the platform) should explain the entire theory of Socialism or give an account of its philosophy. Let us see whether the party has the courage and stamina not to bow down before the revolutionary phrase.

All this Burger said in Sunday's *Call*, and we guess that is plenty to prove the SP is backing up at a lively gait, isn't it?

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But we have not quoted the oracle of the SP yet. That's Hillquit. The SP opened its Presidential campaign in Madison Square Garden, New York, Sunday, May 9th. In the heyday of this party, this immense auditorium, which seats about 12,000 people, would have been too small for such an event. Yet here was Hillquit, appearing again in public for the first time in 2 years; here was every SP leader in harness helping the SP stage a comeback; and plus the enthusiasm created by the national convention — how many turned up to see the show? *The Call* reports 5,000, and you can bet that's stretching it a few. Well, Hillquit spoke. He is reported to have uttered the following words. We quote the *New York Call*:

The turning of the accusations of the belief in force and violence upon a Democratic administration with a logical visualization of that, by Hillquit, and his assertion that the Socialist Party was now "the only conservative force in American politics" was accepted with enthusiastic approval.

We quote the *New York Times*:

“In this campaign the Socialist Party has the advantage of being the only conservative force in American politics,” said Mr. Hillquit. “We are practically alone in upholding the somewhat antiquated American ideal of government of the people, by the people, and for the people. The Democratic and Republican Parties are revolutionary organizations trying to overthrow constituted American government by force and violence.”

These words were supposed to have been said in sarcasm. Taking this for granted, what meaning can we derive out of this bit of wit? Read it any old way and in the end it means nothing but this — that Hillquit understands the SP to be a party which desires to go back to the good old times when the working class was not revolting and when, as a consequence, the capitalist state did not care a whoop how much free speech the workers exercised. Have you been Rip Van Winkling it for 2 years in Saranac Lake, Hillquit? Can't you understand that the revolution is on? And when the revolution is on do you expect the capitalist state to give quarter, to allow free speech and free press? It is the capitalist state, not sensing danger, which allows these freedoms. It is the capitalist state, sensing danger to its rule, which takes them away. The workers' state must destroy the capitalist state to grant the workers rights. Do you really expect the capitalist state to grant the workers rights while the revolution is on or imminent? Fool that you are! Or knave!

There are many other noises which came out of the convention which show that the wind is blowing the Socialist Party into the field of reaction. Tuesday's session [May 11, 1920] was replete with reactionary noise. The adoption of a platform was the order of business.

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The Engdahl faction, the faction which counselled the present CLP members to stay in the party and “win” it for revolutionary Socialism, now knows just what “staying in” means. It means nothing more than lending financial and moral support to the counterrevolutionists who have firmly decided to keep the SP label no matter how many members it costs them. Either the Engdahl faction or the Hillquit faction will have to leave, and as the Hillquit faction owns the party machine, only one guess is needed as to who will leave

the party — but here let us state our definite conclusion. Engdahl, Kruse, [Irwin St. John] Tucker, and all the rest of that faction are real Centrists. Otherwise they would not stay in the Socialist Party. That they are not Communists their every move in convention has proven.

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As we said, the question of adopting a platform was up Tuesday of convention week [May 11, 1920]. The contest was between supporters of the Hillquit draft and the Engdahl draft. The Hillquit draft was a pure vote-catching contrivance which did not even breathe the Socialist spirit of the early days, much less the spirit of the workers in revolution. The Engdahl draft consisted of a declaration of principles adopted at the SP Emergency Convention last fall [Chicago: Aug. 30-Sept. 5, 1919], when the party was compelled to vie somewhat with the seceding comrades who were meeting in convention just below the SP convention. Engdahl had taken this declaration and had added to it a clause reading as follows:

In the final struggle of the workers for political supremacy, in order to facilitate the overthrow of the capitalist system, all power during the transition period must be in the hands of the workers in order to insure the success of the revolution.

Around this clause the storm centered. The Right Wingers brought in play all their cunning, all their invectives, all their strength. Hillquit vehemently declared that this clause was not Socialist doctrine. One Right Winger warned that acceptance of this clause would get the delegates nothing but terms in the penitentiary. [August] Claessens called the Engdahl draft a fraud and a fake. Berger repeated his assertions made in Sunday's Call, namely, that he wanted no proletarian dictatorship for he had had enough of dictatorships by Burleson, Palmer, and Wilson. [Usher] Solomon, one of the expelled New York Assemblymen, took advantage of the occasion to declare himself a 100% American.

James Oneal in summing up for the conservative group, attacked the word “dictatorship” and declared that the time and conditions that favored the Russian Revolution must be studied before any attempt was mad to adopt Russian methods here.

“Let it go through the country that you favor a

dictatorship of the proletariat, and you will cease to be a political party,” he said. “Adopt such a resolution, and you must do your work underground, for you will be driven underground by Sweet at Albany and the politicians at Washington.

“Bourgeois democracy with all its shams and illusions, permits in normal times an honest and fair discussion. To espouse the dictatorship program would turn every such democracy into an absolute autocracy.”

There you have it: “Bourgeois democracy ... permits in normal times an honest and fair discussion.” We deny this. We claim that bourgeois democracy is bourgeois democracy; it is class democracy, ruling class democracy. Now then, does Oneal claim that we have normal times at present? If these are normal times, then we want him to tell us about the honest and unfair decisions which bourgeois democracy is granting the SP. Is the Albany ouster an honest and fair decision? Has Oneal received an honest and fair decision from the ruling class in the case of the Rand School? Was it honest and fair of the ruling class to count out Socialists elected in New York City? Has the ruling class been honest and fair in trying to jail Kruse, Engdahl, Tucker, Germer, Berger?

And if these are not normal times (and they are not), then what becomes of the bourgeois democracy that Oneal shouts about? We take it for granted, from Oneal’s statement, that then bourgeois democracy IS NOT honest and fair. If bourgeois democracy is not honest and fair in times that are not normal, then what is the stand of the Socialist Party? **Just this — the stand then of the Socialist Party is not to overthrow bourgeois democracy, which in reality is capitalist class dictatorship, and to establish in its place a workers’ dictatorship, but the stand of the Socialist Party is to cry for the good old times of long ago, to try to reestablish normal times so that bourgeois democracy might again have an opportunity to be honest and fair.**

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On Thursday of convention week [May 13, 1920] the Socialist Party nominated Debs for President and [Seymour] Stedman for Vice President. From what we gained out of the nomination speeches the Right Wingers seemed very satisfied to nominate Debs for he was where he could not make a campaign. Debs

free might talk for the Bolsheviki, for Sovietism, even for the dictatorship of the proletariat while campaigning, for after all, Debs is ruled by sympathies. But Debs behind prison bars is a safe candidate. This the Right Wingers made especially evident when the nominated Stedman as the Vice Presidential candidate. They said in effect that he really would be the Presidential candidate for he would be the one to make the campaign and tell the people what the SP stood for. Stedman, it will be remembered, threatened last fall to leave the SP if it decided to affiliate with the Third International. Stedman, a typical Right Wing Socialist and reactionary, will lead the SP in campaign and it is by Stedman the SP must be judged and not Debs.

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Oratory flowed profusely while nominating speeches were made and many gems were uttered by those who could get the floor. This one from Hillquit topped them all: “The Socialist Party of the United States has not changed and does not intend to change.” Hillquit wanted the delegates to believe that he felt peeved because of the abundance of praise the New York papers bestowed upon the party for remaining conservative and wanted also to assure the delegates that the SP was as revolutionary as ever, that the present convention did nothing to make it more conservative. Very well then, the Socialist Party is just as it always was and it has not changed its stand. That’s just what is the matter with it. The general world situation IS NOT what it always was and has changed considerably. The world war has created the period of capitalist dissolution. We are living in revolutionary times. And the Socialist Party does not know it! Yes, we believe Hillquit. The SP has not changed and does not intend to change. Because of this it is indicted as non-revolutionary by the revolutionists here and abroad.

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Friday’s session [May 14, 1920] marked the convention indelibly as Mensheviki. Remember the cartoon we published a few issues ago, in which the Socialist Party was pictured as a woman grabbing at a bit of everything and not knowing what she really wanted? That’s the SP to a T. The question of international relations was decided at Friday’s session. We print the resolution upon international affairs elsewhere. Study

it and then read again the letter to the Independent Labour Party of England written by the Amsterdam sub-bureau of the Third International, which appears in this issue.

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The report of the Committee on International Relations reads in part: "...to participate in movements looking to the union of all true Socialist forces in the world into one International, and to initiate and to further such movements whenever the opportunity is presented." And that "no formula for the attainment of the Socialist Commonwealth be imposed or exacted as a condition of affiliation with the Third International."

The adoption of these clauses means but one thing. That is that the Socialist Party of the United States is truly hypocritical. We admire the honest stand of Berger, who frankly claims that there is a wide difference of principle between old line Socialists and Communists and that because of this the SP should not seek to affiliate with the Third International. But Hillquit and his wing are of slicker clay. They do not want to subscribe to the principles laid down by the Third International, they want to affiliate with the Third International, they want to organize a Fourth International — and so you see, every element in the party, from Engdahl to Berger, receives a sop and yet received nothing.

Says Hillquit: "Down with Parliament, Up with the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in the form of Soviet power' is no slogan for Socialism." And again: "Marxian Socialists could not accept a program and conditions which sought to disarm, disfranchise, and outlaw opponents." No use commenting. A minority report was proposed by Engdahl which only reaffirmed the allegiance of the SP to the Third International. Hillquit won 90 to 40.

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The question of unity also received attention this day. It was proposed to invite all locals, states, and federations back into the SP and that dues stamps or other evidence of membership in the CLP and CP be recognized as evidence of good standing in the SP during the time involved since the split. This was voted down and a resolution adopted welcoming the return of all locals, states, and federations who left the party last fall because of tactical differences, on the basis of the SP platform and constitution. The same resolution lays the beginning of compromise with labor and liberal *<one line missing>* as to acquaint Communists with the real color of the organization which now asks their return into the counterrevolutionary camp.

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How completely the yellows in the SP controlled the convention is shown in the election of the National Executive Committee and International Delegates. The National Executive Committee is composed of [Bertha] Mailly and Oneal of New York, [Edmund] Melms of Wisconsin, [William] Henry of Indiana, [William] Brandt of Missouri, [John] Hagel of Oklahoma, and [George] Roewer of Massachusetts. International Delegates, Lee, Oneal, and [Joseph] Cannon. International Secretary, Hillquit. The Engdahl-Kruse Centrist faction did not win a single office. It thinks it is Left Wing, but it's not. It will be kicked around by both reactionary and revolutionary groups because it belongs to neither one.

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That settles the Socialist Party. The doubters gave it another chance in convention. This chance proves it reactionary to the core. The issues are clear, in fact, were long before the split last fall. And now that Hillquit has said, "the Socialist Party has not changed and will not change" — what more is there to say? That settles the Socialist Party.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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