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# Advance in Chicago: An Analysis of the March 1937 Special Convention.

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During the course of a militant, glorious life, the Socialist Party of the United States has more than once decided upon a definite readaptation of its tactical line. The victory of the workers in the October revolution caused one such change; the defeat of our German and Austrian comrades caused another. In the same way, the lessons of the LaFollette movement of 1924 and the recent recognition by many elements of the organized labor unions of the necessity for independent political action were each responsible for a re-audit of the party tactics and machinery. It is in this acceptance of the duty of constant vigilance that the party remains a vital and healthy element in American life. So long as it acknowledges that change in tactics may be necessary under different conditions, it offers a vehicle for socialists of various opinions to carry on in the great task before us.

It is such a re-audit that the party has endured since 1931. McDonald's desertion, Hitler's seizure of power, the military defeat of the heroic Austrian proletariat, the general offensive of fascism, accompanied by a recognition of the impotence of a capitalist League of Nations as a positive force for peace and progress, and the failure of the powerful British and Scandinavian movements to make appreciable progress toward the final victory, all led to a gradual but definite theoretical change in the party line from a *laissez faire* policy that Socialism will come somehow and sometime, to the revolutionary position that capitalism and its ruling class must be overthrown

through direct, militant action of an organized, socialist working class.

During this period of theoretical advance, there was no parallel attempt to alter the structure of the party that would translate the new theory into actual party life. Good and better resolutions were passed, but they remained on paper. The party machinery still continued to function as it did through the twenties — cumbersome, indefinite, loose. It was to remedy this that the National Executive Committee of the party called the special March convention at Chicago — to reduce the lag between revolutionary theory and reformist practice, to make of the party a tighter, more centralized organization with greater capacity for discipline.

Along with this period of inner-party discussion and theoretical change, there were occurring realignments in the American scene that vitally affected the party. Within the labor unions there became apparent a revitalization that had for its aim the organization of the workers in the mass production industries. Added to this upsurge were the lessons of the depression and of the common revolt against Hooverism which soon discovered that politicians tied to the capitalist apron strings were disloyal to the glib election promises they had spouted. A movement began which today is in ever higher and higher speed for class political action — “as we fight together, so must we vote together.” How was the party best to channelize this upsurge into preparation for revolutionary action?

Then, too, there was the depression growth of the fraternal and cultural organizations of the working class. Realizing that the “new capitalism” of Carver and other economists (that the workers of today would be the capitalists of tomorrow) was pure “hooley,” the workers began to draw closer together, to recognize their own class interests in cultural and social relationships. But the party was unprepared to work with any degree of intelligent direction toward the spreading of the ideals of Socialism in these organizations. Party members in these groups were frequently unknown to one another and, as each worked in his own particular way to win converts for the cause, were often at cross-purposes and negated each other. Even in the trade unions, despite voluntary socialist leagues and similar groups of party members, occasion arose, over and over again, where party members, all working for the same end, nullified their efforts in individually striving for different immediate positions. This, then, was the second task of the convention, as prescribed by the call for it: determination of the party’s attitude toward mass organizations and the formation of an adequate structure that would enable the party to recruit and enhance its prestige with some semblance of efficiency.

In addition, a third problem was posed before the convention that was not mentioned in the NEC call — that of factionalism. There has been within the party for many years a group that adopted the “purist” position of DeLeon against immediate demands and any fight for reforms within the capitalist system. This group had always been an insignificant minority and was usually laughed out of court as a freakish development of the movement. During the past year, however, especially after the Cleveland convention [May 23-26, 1936], there entered into the party a number of members of the former Workers Party who, through the ego-satisfying device of empty phrasemongering, arrived at the same conclusion as the “single-plankers.” A strange united front

between these two groups was effected throughout the party (for instance, the vote against the Labor Party resolution); through the publication of their own inner-party organ and through the formation of their own membership group, these comrades, essentially sectarian in outlook and practice, raised their status to that of an important minority group.

To this action, of course, there was reaction. Many comrades felt that the seeds of sectarianism, if allowed to grow, would produce a harvest that would mean the eventual decline of the party. There were, of course, differences as to how to abort this growth; some felt that it must be plowed under, others that by allowing it freedom the dandelion would blossom to a rose. This division took place throughout the country; in Local New York, it took the form of an open split in the Militant group that had been the chief force in the fight for a revolutionary theoretical position. The majority in New York, including practically all those who held responsible positions in the mass organizations of the working class, while eager to work with every comrade, advocated no compromise with the policies of sectarianism; the minority, including some who loved labels better than the truth itself, sought to ride both horses. Factionalism immediately became rampant throughout the party; the Local New York minority began the publication of its own internal organ; slander and abuse took the place of comradely discussion; the “red herring” of a possible split was raised by the sectarians (and, parenthetically, it may be remarked that the question of expulsion of this group, to the extent that it became an issue, was a direct result of their own hysteria — the question never even appeared on the floor of the convention); the chief issues before the convention were obscured and false issues placed into prominence. During this period, constructive party work was reduced to a bare minimum; petty bickering and guerrilla factional warfare transformed the party into an inglorious debating sect. Before the Chi-

chicago convention, the question was posed clearly: how to stop this disgraceful condition and restore the party to health.

These, then, were the primary issues before the Chicago convention — and any honest evaluation of the convention must be chiefly concerned with the accomplishments of the delegates in relation to these issues. And it is to the credit of the delegates, representing essentially the same healthy, sane revolutionary spirit that has characterized the struggle against the Old Guard, that as a whole they met these issues squarely and spoke forth in unequivocal terms, as best they could.

The party came forth from Chicago with practically an entirely new structure. Although the delegates were alert and vigilant to guard against any attempt to substitute a central bureaucracy for the previous loose autonomy of state organization, they did not blind themselves to the need for a more efficient, more powerful organization. In line with the conception of the party as a continual living force, rather than a mere electoral organization, a resident National Action Committee with wide power was provided. Party membership was transformed from a paper allegiance into a new conception of socialist duty and socialist work. The question of the party press, which plagued the party even in the old days, was answered with a party-owned and party-controlled press, under the direction of the National Executive Committee, which would present a uniform line on the questions of the day. Measures were taken to provide a sound financial base for the work of the National Office. The establishment of a new standard of party responsibility is in itself conducive of a greater, more stable positive party discipline. If we might lift an idea from the magazine advertisements, we would say that Chicago offered a “streamlined party for a streamlined age.”

The changes in party structure answered in part the second question before the convention, that of our relation to mass organizations. The

new structure provides for a more mobile, more efficient party; an organization that can move smoothly and quickly. But, more important, the convention reaffirmed the theoretical position of the party more clearly and decisively than ever before. On the Farmer-Labor Party, it moved a forthright resolution that expressed the necessity of socialists mobilizing their entire forces for the establishment of such a party as the next step for the American workers; at the same time, the resolution clearly declared that the party had an independent role to play within the Farmer-Labor Party for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the socialist commonwealth. On war, the convention warned against pacifism, or the acceptance of “progressive” slogans that would involve class collaboration and the cessation of the class struggle. At the same time, it decisively rejected the position of the minority that would have meant hopeless isolation from the common masses of America.

For the first time in recent history, the convention adopted an unequivocal proposition that socialists in trade unions and other mass organizations are to act in a coordinated manner, serving as the rallying centers of progressive forces within the labor movement. Although the labor resolution as finally adopted is open to criticism, particularly as it walks a precarious tightrope on the Committee for Industrial Organization, it presents what is essentially a healthy perspective — unified work by socialists to make these organizations a fighting force against capitalism and its reactionary spawn.

On the question of factionalism, the convention acted as clearly as it could by adopting a resolution which banned inner-party factional organs and in their stead substituted an official national paper for discussion of controversial theoretical issues. It is significant that this resolution was adopted by unanimous agreement; it is also quite as significant that this unanimity was forthcoming only after it was clearly demonstrated that

the resolution would pass by an overwhelming majority, whether agreement was reached or otherwise. Perhaps one of the most optimistic signs for the future of the party was the reaction of the delegates against the fatal implications of intense factionalism; they rose as a mighty force against its continuance within the party and for a return to healthy mass work instead of internal wrangling.

One important criticism must be incorporated in this evaluation. (It is unfortunate that space limitations do not permit the discussion of other questions that were placed before it.) The experiment practiced with the agenda, which provided two extended debates on each question, meant that the delegates were unable to reach final decisions on many problems which, at the close, were still in committee. It is of the character of irony that a convention, which set before itself the task of bringing efficient mobility into the party machinery, should proceed in so sloppy and roundabout a manner. If the more orthodox method of discussion was somewhat unsatisfactory, at least it provided a means of getting final action. The Chicago convention was the laboratory of a noble experiment — but even guinea pigs have been known to squeal.

In summary, one important point, all-im-

portant, should be emphasized. The true evaluation of the convention, of course, cannot come within the next month; as with every convention, its accomplishments can only be tested pragmatically and in our daily life. Fine resolutions will wither away if left on the paper they are written on; it remains for the party membership to translate these resolutions into their routine activity. Too, under the new structural centralism of the party, a serious responsibility rests upon the personnel of the National Office and the NEC; they have power to negate the party will or else carry out these decisions in a spirit that will make Socialism an important, vital part of the labor movement today. It is necessary to warn that the banning of factional organs does not itself halt factionalism; it is up to the party membership to devote itself not so much to introspection and a growing inwardness but to carry the socialist torch forth to the working masses of America.

The Militants, today the veterans of the party organization, have a steadfast faith that the party membership will proceed in its work now with enthusiasm, the loyalty and the toleration that must be the qualities of every revolutionary party; in this party lies the future of Socialism in America.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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