
The National Convention (August 5, 1899)

Comrade Chase is not in favor of the recommendations made by the late conference,¹ especially that relating to the basis of representation.² He was opposed to the conference being held on account of the useless expenditure of money. Let me say to Comrade Chase that there has been no expenditure of money, so far as the party is concerned, for we who attended paid our own expenses, as we have done for the last year.

Comrade Chase is opposed to branch representation and urges state representation instead. On the basis he proposed there will be no national convention next year. It is doubtful if five states would be represented.

The conference took a careful survey of the situation, present and prospective, and decided upon a basis that will make possible a representative national gathering, qualified to adopt a platform and nominate candidates.

Branches have eight months in which to raise money to send a delegate, and most of them will do it. No branch need send more than one delegate, he having votes proportioned to the membership he represents. Our present constitution may not be "fit for use," and it would be easy to say the same of that proposed by the comrades from Massachusetts. The conference, be it said, was influenced in its action by financial considerations. A new constitution, though effective but a few months, would have cost money. Is Comrade Chase prepared to go down in his pocket and furnish it, as the rest of us have done and are doing to keep the national party going?

Massachusetts comes to the front promptly with a big "kick" at the slightest provocation. This is good and I like it. But Massachusetts should also be in when the coin is needed. If other states had done as little as Massachusetts for the national party since it was organized a year ago, we would not have a sign of a national party in existence. I admire Massachusetts, glory in her progress, and rejoice in the victory of her comrades, but she and they are all wrapped up in Massachusetts, and although strongest in membership, have done scarcely nothing for the party at large. They have met every appeal for finance (and these have been made in an

extremity) with a deaf ear, or, as one comrade put it: “We don’t like your appeals for money; they are humiliating to the party!”

We want the advice and suggestions of our Massachusetts comrades, and we also want them to bear their share of the party’s burden. The paltry dues for which *The Herald* is given will not establish a political party. In addition to what is due for the local branch and for the state, something is due the party at large, and this is the point I seek to impress upon Comrade Chase and those for whom he speaks.

I have been candid, but what I have said is prompted in no other spirit than that of comradeship.

In closing, I hope the basis of branch representation proposed by the conference will be adopted by the referendum vote.³

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¹ On July 6, 1899, a conference committee met in Chicago, which decided to send out a five question referendum was sent out to the membership of the Social Democratic Party querying (1) whether the constitution should be continue until the next convention; (2) whether the “demands for farmers” should be eliminated; (3) seeking approval of Indianapolis as the location of the next national convention; (4) Setting the date for opening the convention as Tuesday, March 6, 1900; (5) basing representation at the convention as one delegate for each branch established for at least 45 days prior to the convention, plus one additional delegate for every 50 members.

² Announcement of the referendum brought forth a lengthy response, published in the July 29 issue of *Social Democratic Herald* by Haverhill, MA mayor John C. Chase, who declared the conference committee a waste of party funds, the existing constitution “not fit for use,” the demand for farmers “out of place in our platform,” and who sought a convention location closer to Massachusetts, which was at that time the key center of SDP activity. Chase also called for a smaller convention delegated on the basis of states rather than local branches, suggesting apportionment of five delegates per state. “So long as we are a small party, and poor financially, we will be unable to get a representative convention by branch representation,” Chase argued, provoking Debs’s ire.

³ While the first four propositions passed by overwhelming margins, the fifth proposal, calling for delegation on the basis of local branches, failed by a vote of 210-316, with Massachusetts responsible for about 45% of these negative votes, and the distant states of Connecticut, Maryland, and New York also contributing substantially to the negative result. With 35 branches chartered in Massachusetts alone by August 1899, the paying of rail fare of even one delegate per branch represented a potentially massive expense to the Massachusetts organization — a cost that would be substantially alleviated under a system with fewer delegates, each allotted multiple votes.