
Socialist Party Tactics and Policies: A Speech at Hunt's Point Palace, Bronx, NY — April 4, 1919.

by Louis Waldman

Published in *The Socialist* [New York], May 6, 1919, pp. 1, 5.

Comrade Chairman,
and my comrades of the Bronx:

I enjoyed the speech delivered by my former colleague. I must confess that its revolutionary tone was in a decided contrast with the mild speeches I heard Comrade Gitlow deliver only two seats away from me, at Capitol Hill, Albany. (*Applause.*)

I want to say just a word — just a word — in reply to some things I heard said as I stepped on the platform. No, I am not a “Right Winger.” I don't know what a “Right Winger” means. To my knowledge there is no such thing. I am aware of the fact that there is a group who organized and call themselves the “Left Wing.” There is the Socialist Party and this so-called “Left Wing.” (*Applause.*)

I am here to represent what I believe to be the party position, and I told the committee so. Comrades, I decidedly do not believe the issue was touched. I hope I will not succumb to the evil influence of the other two speakers, and run away from the subject. I hope to treat the question before us with all seriousness, and appeal to your knowledge of the facts.

I will only digress for a moment to correct one of the speakers. Comrade Gitlow said that when the war broke out the workers and the socialists all over Europe had betrayed socialism and betrayed the working class. The working class betrayed the working class! The American Socialists and American Socialist leaders, he said, did not criticize them, did not take a stand against the traitors.

I want to remind you that some American Socialist leaders did criticize the European comrades. They criticized them and their leaders very severely.

Their criticism was louder than that of the entire Socialist Party. And these very leaders who branded the European comrades as traitors, when the test came, when the country was confronted with the orgy of war, have themselves betrayed the Socialist Party to the enemy. (*Applause.*)

Those men who yelled revolution most betrayed the party in its most trying hour. Walling, Simons, Gaylord, Russell, Stokes, and the rest — they, for whom the party was never revolutionary enough — were the first to desert.

Now, I want to get down to brass tacks. I want to get down to earth, for I have no wings. (*Laughter.*)

Comrades, what do we agree on? When are we going to stop fighting? Do we agree upon the following points:

First: I believe we are decidedly agreed that capitalism must go. There is no dispute about that. And the minute we impute to each other present a feeling that we do not wish to see capitalism go, then we have no common ground at all. My friend to the right and my friend here agree with me that capitalism must go.

The second proposition I am sure we agree on is that socialism must take its place — no other system, as far as we are concerned; no anarchism, no syndicalism, but socialism, must take its place. And it is by fixing our objective that we can determine what our tactics shall be. If it is anarchism we wish to attain, our tactics will be decided accordingly. If syndicalism is the system that is going to replace capitalism, our tactics must be such as to culminate in syndicalism.

If, of the other hand, it is socialism we wish to attain — and I take this for granted — our tactics will have to be developed accordingly.

I take it also that we are agreed as to the meaning of socialism. I want to make a definition to which I will refer later. Socialism, as I understand it, means collective ownership of the socialized industry, and their democratic management by the workers.

Industry must be under collective ownership. If an industry is municipal-wide, the municipality is the collectivity which is going to be possessed of the ownership of that industry. If an industry is statewide, in its nature, the state is going to be possessed of that industry. If an industry is national in its character, such as railroad, waterways, coal mines, telegraph and telephones, the nation will own it. The management of industry must be left to the workers themselves within each industry. We socialists are therefore in favor of labor union organizations, developing as the industries develop. The labor unions become the universities, training the workers how to manage the industries, so that once collectivity has taken them over, the workers can run them with success. (*Applause.*)

Now, are we agreed upon proposition number three! I take it that all good socialists agree upon it. Perhaps I am mistaken. Perhaps I do not know the new tactics, the new philosophy taking root in the Socialist Party. But if I am wrong in this, then I confess I am not a fit member of the Socialist Party. I take it that the Socialist Party is a political organization.

And when I use the word political, I do not mean anything else than what the word commonly conveys. There is no sense in trying to employ a legal trickery to define political. I am just a plain comrade who wants to get at the facts. I know that the Socialist Party is a political organization. Assuming that the hazy ideas advocated here tonight become the accepted position of the party, what would happen?

We run Ben Gitlow for the Assembly. Ben Gitlow is elected. Ben Gitlow goes to the State Legislature. A bill comes before the House. The bill concerns those who sent Gitlow to the Assembly. Ben Gitlow says, we have decided uniformly in city, state, and national convention that we will have nothing to do with legislation introduced by capitalist representatives. And he delivers a speech and says: "Your system is rotten. It is no good. The workers are not going to be benefited by your bill."

"But," answers the capitalist representative, "if you don't like my bill, Mr. Gitlow, will you suggest an

improvement?" What will your answer be, Comrade Gitlow? Will you tell him the Socialist Party forbids you to suggest any improvement to that labor bill?

A while later another bill comes up. Gitlow gets up and again goes through the same performance of telling the capitalist legislature its worthlessness. The first time Gitlow speaks thus, he is a novelty. The second time Ben Gitlow rose to make the same speech against a bill he would be considered a joke. The third time Gitlow would thus distinguish himself as a legislator he would be treated as a nuisance. Ben Gitlow having been in the Legislature ought to know what I am saying is true.

Are you seeking to commit the party to this absurdity?

If you don't want anything to do with capitalism until you get socialism, don't run for office, don't participate in politics. (*Applause.*) But so long as you are organized as a political body, don't try to ride two horses at the same time. You must have a political program.

Now we come to the fourth proposition. Are we all agreed on this — that the present political state must be changed into an industrial state?

If socialism means that the capitalist state is to acquire all the industries — municipal, state, and national — thus establishing a bureaucracy with its red tape, with its oppression, with its obligation to the investors and the banks, it would be nothing short of State Industrial Feudalism, against which every socialist should fight, and fight hard. But socialism does not mean that. Socialism means that the municipality, state, and nation is to use the instrument of government, either through strong minority pressure or through majority power, to transform the political state into the industrial state. Whereas, under capitalism, the state is largely political in its function and secondarily industrial. When socialism comes it will be largely industrial and secondarily political. This transformation need not necessarily be violent; it may be gradual and peaceful. No one has an exact plan how it will come about.

Thus far for theory. Time will not allow me to discuss it in greater detail. How about practice?

Did you hear talk tonight of the revolution? And, oh, what revolutionary phrases. One of my friends when he spoke was way up in the air; the other was

thousands of miles beside the point. I hope to remain on the floor and steer my course.

There was talk of insurrection. There was a lot said about Hillquit, Hillquit.

Aside from Hillquit, Hillquit is sick. Is there anything else we can think of at this time?

Can we stop for a moment and take stock and examine the revolutionary material we have in the United States?

You say the Socialist Party did not captivate the imagination of the workers because it was not revolutionary enough. Very well; what was the remedy? If we are weak because we have not been revolutionary enough, why is it that the SLP, claiming to be the 100 percent revolutionary article, has not only failed to captivate the imagination of the working class, but has gone down to ruin? (*Applause.*)

You claim the working class lost faith in political action. If that be so, why have they not lost faith in Democratic and Republican political action? Look at the results of the Chicago election, the most proletarian city in the United States!

But you say, Oh, no, the working class in the United States are not citizens. Moreover they are employed in the key industries of the country — industries indispensable to the life of the nation. The comrade, Oppenheimer, will tell you how many there are who cannot vote at all. He will rattle off figures how much of the working class of America is disfranchised. (*Laughter.*) Now, your argument is clinched. The only way of getting socialism is advocating Industrial Unionism.

Tell these aliens and disfranchised workers, "Take! Now is the time, and you will surely get it!"

Kindly let me remind you of some unpleasant facts, give you a few figures. According to estimates there are about 18 million industrial wage workers, aside from farm laborers. Out of that number, over 2 million workers are members of the AF of L. There are organizations that are not affiliated with the AF of L numbering about 1 million members, making a total of over 3 million organized workers. How about the other 15 million? Are they organized? Has an effort been made to organize them in industrial unions or craft?

"Well," you say, "don't you know that the reason a greater number of workers are not organized is be-

cause the unions are reactionary — they will have none of the AF of L machine, of Gompers and his lieutenants? You give them industrial unionism and the American working class will take possession of the country's economic institutions and establish Industrial Democracy."

If that be correct, if the only reason the some 15 million workers are not organized is because the AF of L is not revolutionary, what about the Industrial Workers of the World? Why has it not crystallized this industrial revolutionary movement? The IWW had since 1905 to do it. Heaven knows they were not short on revolutionary phrases, if that is what the American working class wants.

I am relating to you these facts not in order to show how pessimistic we should be, but in order to show how we must be prepared to face the reality and not get away into the clouds. Let us get down to brass tacks and see how best we can reach the millions of working class men and women who know nothing of socialism.

But, you say, can you do it by immediate demands? I frankly admit this seems to be the only way at present. But I must ask you to admit that every fundamental cause can only be perceived through its manifestations. The capitalist mode of production and distribution, the fundamental dynamo of modern society, can only be perceived by its manifestations. Child labor is a manifestation of the misrule of capitalism; long hours, small wages, bad sanitary conditions, the taking away of liberties, are all manifestations of the economic system which has misruled this country.

And if I am going before the mass of working people, if I am an educator or an agitator, the things I will draw the worker's attention to will be the manifestations of capitalism. I will say: These are the things capitalism breeds, and this is the way we socialists intend to do away with them.

And you cannot say to the returned soldiers looking for jobs: "Wait until we get the Social Revolution." You cannot tell the children employed in the mills: "Wait until we get socialism." You cannot tell the women demanding the vote: "Wait until the revolution." You cannot tell the workers demanding an eight-hour day: "Wait for the revolution, for socialism." Assume this attitude and the workers will never listen to you. You must speak to the people every time a law

violates their constitutional rights, every time the economic shoe pinches. The people can best understand the concrete thing. The only way to teach socialism, to attract the attention of the victims of capitalism, is by explaining how they are victimized, and the only way we are going to win is when we have gotten the attention of the victims of capitalism. (*Applause.*)

We are hysterical. I do not know but that the world situation has made some of us hysterical, and “Left Wingers” have been susceptible to that influence. The greatest human minds cannot perceive the things raised by our social upheaval. The war has been fought on a wave of hysteria. The war ended, leaving the world hysterical. We, too, are hysterical.

When you talk revolution, insurrection, mass action, remember the facts. If the time were here to be on the barricades, I would be the first one to be there — but I know where the “Left Wingers” would be. (*Hisses and applause.*) They would be where all phrase revolutionists are when the test arrives.

Now, I will come to the practical situation. I want to tell you cynical comrades we live in a time when we have not got the courage to face reality and our own convictions. We live in a time when we are afraid to listen to the truth. We deliver revolutionary speeches in a time when we cannot train ourselves in revolutionary action. And that is the trouble with us. That is what the party is suffering from.

I do not belong to any Centers. I despise a comrade at this time, when the movement needs his energy and attention, who stands in the Center. I chose my position three months ago. I will choose it every time. If there should remain only a dozen in the New York Local who agree with me, I would defend my beliefs, and that is why I take this position. Numbers and loud howls do not determine what is right.

Now, as to the “Left Wing” proposition. I want to warn you of something — more than to warn you. I think it may be well to speak a little of that. The Socialist Party is in something like the following position:

The United States government is, perhaps through men like Simons, Gaylord, and Walling, being informed as to how to destroy the socialist movement. These men know the inside of the socialist movement. They know the present socialist movement. They know the ability of the socialist movement.

And it is these gentlemen, perhaps, who are singling out those individuals who must be arrested, those individuals who must be put in jail, and those individuals who should be kept from speaking. And while Gregory, while Gregory was taking the National Executive Committee, five of them, all characterized as reactionary by Comrade Gitlow — while they arrested and convicted Victor Berger, Tucker, Engdahl, Germer, Kruse — while Debs is being put in jail and Shiplacoff indicted — while indictments and convictions were secured against the active workers in the party, paralyzing the party’s activity — while the National Executive Committee that “betrayed the Socialist Party” has been picked by the capitalist government for destruction, has been paralyzed, has been taken away from action for the working class, the “Left Wingers” are permitted to yell revolution; they are free; their leaders are not well on the way to jail. (*Applause.*)

I want to know how at the time, in the words of you comrades who speak revolution, who say that the capitalist system must go at once, who say this is the time to crystallize all the discontent, who say this is the time to force a split in the fortress of capitalism, you have chosen to tie our hands, destroy our effectiveness, and paralyze our energy. Why did you select a time to divide our ranks when solidarity is indispensable? Of all times, why at this time? That is the important question about the “Left Wing.”

The Revolution is not here. (*Voice: It is coming.*) It is coming. I agree with you. May God speed the day. But know that the revolution is not here, tomorrow.

I am not saying it is not coming. It is coming. But the revolution is not here, and the question at issue is not the dictatorship of the proletariat. The question at issue is how best to reach the working class of America (*Applause.*) and on this issue you people are trying to paralyze the Socialist Party.

If there are differences amongst us, if our platform is not revolutionary enough, if our resolutions are not revolutionary enough, the thing to do is not to destroy the party, but to change them, as party members, within the party, and not as an outside organization foisting its will on the party. (*Applause.*) (*Voice: There is no organization!*) That is not true. You have an organization and by sheer organized force seek to jam things down our throats. That is what you are

doing. (*Hisses.*)

I have seen the “Left Wing” at work, and I know what it means to organize district for district, local for local, state for state, ready to perform the coup d’etat in the party.

One more word, comrades. That the world is hysterical is not the fault of the socialists. Capitalism brought that. Rational thinking or reasoning is almost impossible in such hysteria. But to fan the hysteria, as Gitlow did, as other leaders of the “Left Wing” do, when conscious control is necessary is criminal. Between the position I took and that of my former colleagues, let history render the verdict.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.