
Why the New Party?

by Oakley C. Johnson

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The Left Wing has recently, through its official organ, *The Revolutionary Age*, viciously attacked the project of organizing a Communist Party in America. Incidentally, they have attacked with even greater vehemence the persons at present acting as organizers of the movement, and have freely hurled the epithet “menshevik.” The latter point, however, we can afford to ignore, for, as Fra Elbertus [Elbert Hubbard] once said: “If your opponent defeats you in an argument, all is not lost; you can still call him names.” We leave this last resort of the debater to our friends of the “Left.”

But these would-be revolutionists shout “All power to the Left Wing!” What a miserable paraphrase of the Russian slogan “All power to the Soviets!” The comrades now organizing the Communist Party prefer to be something more than a mere “wing.” At a time such as the present, when the most momentous turning point in the world’s history is before us, we cannot dilly dally along as a mere faction within a party. We cannot longer handicap ourselves in such a way, but must build up NOW an organization which shall function efficiently as “the most advanced and resolute section of the working class parties...”

But, remonstrates the “Left,” why not wait 2 or 3 months, try to capture the NEC convention on August 30 [1919], and THEN, if we can’t capture it, organize a new party? This sounds very

logical on paper. But the facts show how fallacious is such a proposal.

Note the following:

What the Facts Are.

First, it would be practically impossible to capture the old party, for at the time of the Left Wing Conference [New York: June 21-24, 1919] the National Executive Committee had already expelled one state (Michigan) and suspended 7 Language Federations, and has since expelled Massachusetts, as well as suspended or expelled various isolated Locals and Branches throughout the country. None of these organizations could elect delegates to the August 30 [1919] convention with any real hope of being seated. There would, therefore, be scant chance of “capturing” the old party.

Second, even if it were possible to capture the old Socialist Party of America, it would be inadvisable, to say the least, for such a capture would gain nothing but the reputation the Socialist Party has built up in the last few years — not a very useful asset to any revolutionary group. So reactionary has that party been, that it was not even invited to attend the Communist International at Moscow, although many other groups in this country, most of them not over-scientific, received such invitation.†

†- Johnson actually here misrepresents the invitation extended to American radicals. The call for the founding of the Communist International, drafted by Leon Trotsky and published January 24, 1919, included the following: “...(33) Socialist Labor Party (America); (34) left forces of the American Socialist Party (especially the current represented by Debs and that represented by the Socialist

Third, we don't need to remain in the old party to reach the rank and file with our message, for most of them have already heard it, and are now with us. What is needed now is not continued procrastination, but the stirring call for action, in order that the Socialist Party membership may awaken to its needs and its responsibilities. To do otherwise would be to deliver the party membership — and they are what count — over to the old officialdom for another year, bound hand and foot, thus betraying the proletariat in its present struggle for a clarified movement.

Fourth, a period of 2 or 3 months, although it may seem a small matter to the procrastinating "Left," is nevertheless an important period, for what is done in this time will vitally affect the progress of socialism for the next decade. This is the psychological moment, and to delay 2 months might mean indefinite delay. Moreover, it would give the National Executive Committee an undue advantage, which they would be sure to utilize. It is of utmost importance that machinery for communist party organization be set in motion immediately, so that the crisis that is bound to come in the affairs of the Socialist Party of America on August 30 [1919] may not find revolutionary socialists unprepared.

Is a Split Necessary?

Now some comrades, we are aware, will regret that the Socialist Party should split, and they will especially deplore our split with the Left Wing. It is indeed regrettable that working class ranks should not be firmly united, but if they were, capitalism could be immediately abolished without further argument. What is needed is a revolutionary party, small if need be, but united upon Marxian principles, thus forming a nucleus around which the working class can unite. It is impos-

sible efficiently to unite conflicting programs, to harmonize unharmonious principles. The only party that can function in a social crisis is one absolutely united on principle and method. The old Socialist Party, of course, is not even revolutionary, and the Left Wing at its conference in New York City exhibited the most diverse aims and tendencies. The "Left," as represented by its present leaders, is merely a heterogeneous mass held together by a mere name and by a few revolutionary catchwords. The outstanding fact of the events of the past few weeks is that the Left Wing is not a unit in any proper sense of the term.

It was necessary, therefore, to split not only from the old party but also from the dilatory "Left." No matter how regrettable, this splitting up is historically a necessary process. The same thing has happened in most of the countries of Europe, notably in Russia. In the latter country the Socialist Revolutionaries split into Maximalists and Minimalists, and the Social Democrats into Bolsheviki and Mensheviki. Out of these 4 (and more) socialist parties in Russia, the Bolsheviki finally emerged triumphant. This same process of splitting, which preceded the formation of a real socialist party in Russia, is now taking place in the United States. The question is not "How shall we stop the split?" but, "Which faction is historically correct from the standpoint of scientific socialism?" The Communist Party calls for endorsement only on this proposition.

The "Stolen" Platform!

As to the contention of the "Left" that we appropriated their platform, it is a piece of petty argument. The minority of the Left Wing Conference did not make use of a part of the work of the Conference, but this part was the common work of all the delegates, insofar as they could agree

Propaganda League); (35) Industrial Workers of the World (America);... ["Letter of Invitation to the First Congress of the Communist International," in John Riddell (ed.), *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power: Documents: 1918-1919, Preparing the Founding Congress*. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1986), pg. 451.]

at the time, and the Minority has as much right to it as the Majority. Furthermore, the Minority expended its best efforts in attempting to get the Conference as a whole to take a revolutionary stand, and only near the close of the session, worn out by the strain, did they at last draw up a call and a manifesto. In this call they made use of such portions of their common work in combination with original material as would best serve as a working basis for the calling of an organization convention, and as a tentative outline for its work, but it is a basis for *getting something done*, and the September 1st [1919] convention will give ample opportunity for its amplification.

Can We Do It?

The final question is “What chance have we for success in organizing a new party? Is there sufficient support?”

There is, without question, practically unlimited support for a Communist Party. The election returns which resulted in the first series of expulsions by the NEC show that the Socialist Party of America officialdom has scarcely a shred

of power remaining. Only a definite move in the direction we are taking is needed to shake down their house of cards. As for the “Left” wing, it represents only a small clique in New York and Boston. The vast majority of the Left Wing still remaining nominally with them are simply waiting to see what will happen. The Minority of the Left Wing Conference numbered 31 delegates, a good third of the entire number. Furthermore, the Minority were more widely representative of the entire country than the Majority, for in the Minority were delegates from all the important socialist centers, including Chicago, New York, Detroit, Buffalo, Rochester, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee. The entire state of Michigan, whole Federations (including the Russian), and Locals and Branches all over the country joined in a body. The Ukrainian Federation has lately voted to join the Communists, and an expelled Bulgarian branch from the Socialist Labor Party has also applied for admission. With the communist movement growing daily, there is no danger of lack of support.

All Power to the Communists!

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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