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# Keynote Address to the Emergency National Convention of the Socialist Party of America: Chicago, IL — August 30, 1919†

by Seymour Stedman

From the uncorrected *Proceedings of the National Convention of the Socialist Party at Machinists' Hall, 113 S. Ashland Blvd., Chicago, IL. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, micro 2094, reel 1, pp. 11-18.*

Comrades and Delegates:

The second decade of the 20th Century opened with a vast labor conflict in every capitalist country. Rising prices, strikes, and unemployment were universal — a situation which could not be disposed of by the happy phrase of the President that “depression was psychological.” Imperialistic capitalism, straining every nerve in the friction for nationalistic preservation, burst into flame on the very eve of the meeting of the International; and those Socialists best grounded in the fundamentals of their teachings stood aghast to see the workers — many of them drilled in economics by Marx and Engels — marching toward each other for mutual destruction. Nationalism and a false patriotism quickly submerged, suppressed, and crushed the voice of those who rose in protest.

In this country we were free in the early months to look upon the scene from a distance, and the terrible slaughter gave a moral support to our denunciation of the war and our exposition of its economic

and capitalistic background. Soon, however, the United States became a potential ally. Countless thousands of unemployed workingmen in this country were absorbed in manufacturing the implements with which to destroy their comrades in other lands. The unemployed rapidly disappeared. The masters of industry in this country reaped a rich reward in large dividends and profits. Our capitalists grew wealthy from Europe's destruction, and with diminishing human life on the battlefields of the old world, the wages in this country rose and employment offered superior opportunities.

As the war fortunes wavered, the foreign debtors to the great industries of the United States were threatened with a great defeat. Then, over the sacred pledge of the chief

executive, who election was heralded as a triumph for peace, the imperialists started a “preparedness” campaign and organized for the purpose of protecting their foreign investments, and soon induced this country



†- The vote for Chairman of the Day at the first session of the 1919 Emergency National Convention was the initial test of strength between the Socialist Party's Regular faction and the insurgent Left Wing. Regular Seymour Stedman handily defeated the nominee of the Left Wing group, Joseph Coldwell of Rhode Island, by a vote of 88 to 37. As was traditional in Socialist Party practice, Stedman, as first Chairman of the Day, was granted the floor to deliver an address to the gathered delegates.

to become an actual war participant. The President severed diplomatic relations with the Imperial German government and called a Special Session of Congress.

The Socialists of the United States countered this move by calling a convention, fixing April 6, 1917, as the date. Thereupon, the President of the United States advanced the time for the calling of the Congress and war activities proceeded so speedily that the public could not organize its opposition.

At the St. Louis Convention, the Proclamation and War Program was adopted, and this placed the majority Socialists of the United States in mutual alliance with Russia, Italy, Serbia, and minority groups in other countries, who plainly saw the imperial capitalistic design and purpose of the war. Our party sought by every means to bring together the workers of all the warring countries, who had peace in their hearts, to stop the war and prevent this country's entrance into the war. This was made impossible by the hypocrites, who knew that a real peace or real democracy could only come from the working class in every country.

Our action was sufficient to turn against our party the courts, the press, the administrative forces of the government, and a wild, frantic, and unreasoning populace. We who had opposed war for many years and with faith in the value of life became social outlaws. We were not free from the attacks of the mob on the streets, or rage from the bench. Our branches in small communities were stricken and fell from over 5,000 to 3,500. Our membership for a short time dwindled, then turned and began to increase with strong and vital strides.

This served to provoke more desperate measures against us. Our National Office was raided again and again. Small papers of the workers were suppressed; foreign language papers were suppressed. The privilege of the mails was denied to our leading dailies. Our members were arrested, jailed, convicted and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. The liberties which we were supposed to enjoy were throttled, and constitutional guarantees we found to be merely academic declarations.

The Espionage Law prepared for Congress was rushed through with a provision which made it unlawful to obstruct the recruiting and enlistment service of the United States, and the word "obstruct" by

the judiciary was given a new and different meaning than that which we had come to know. It meant any statement, any act, any gesture from shaking the head to publishing a document which might "chill the ardor," "reduce the enthusiasm," or make a person less likely to enthusiastically enlist in the army. In effect, this made a crime out of any criticism of the motives of our masters, the jury being the judges — juries impatient and bitter — to them the question was left as to the possible effect of any act or statement. To suggest that the war was for the purpose of making the world safe for hypocrisy; to suggest that upon a popular vote, the people would have voted against the war; to declare that the war was for industrial purposes; to declare that we did not enter the war because of aggressions of Germany upon our trade — all served as a sufficient excuse for prosecutions and imprisonments. In a few days, the civil liberties of the United States — the boast of a century and a half — were throttled and died.

Our party members, nevertheless, keeping faith with the cause, contributed their mites, their dimes, and their dollars to defend the most distinguished and the most obscure in our ranks. Within the reach of its financial resources, the party never failed in any instance. And it did not pause there. When the Industrial Workers of the World were on trial, our party assisted them morally and financially and declared their right to a fair trial, free from bias and prejudice of the public. The Industrial Workers of the World were workingmen, and that was sufficient for us. Wherever the workers were attacked — whether they accept our theories in whole or in part — they became our immediate concern, because they were the working class movement.

In electing delegates to international conferences, we provided strictly that only those conferences should be recognized and participated in which admitted the most revolutionary working class parties of other countries — the Communists of Russia and the Spartacides of Germany. We did not ignore any international conference in which the workers might participate. We only imposed conditions which would admit and bring into the conference those who were most fundamentally grounded in the proletarian struggle.

During the war period, it was impossible for a free and adequate expression of opinion in any con-

vention which we might call because if anyone in the convention advocated the unequivocal approval of the war and our entrance into it, he would challenge the position of the party and the delegates of the convention, who could only reply by violating the Espionage Law. Under these circumstances, where a clear exposition of the international Socialist movement would invite prosecution and lead to imprisonment, a convention became unthinkable.

At the time of the Brest-Litovsk treaty [Dec. 1917 to March 1918], many communications were received by some of the most prominent members of the party seeking a convention to change our policy and to approve the war. Those who were serving on your committee at that time were fully conscious that between working class control in Russia and the Tsar, the capitalists of the United States would prefer an alliance with the latter; that capitalism may resent the expense of maintaining a horde of royalists, but even these they would prefer rather than to surrender the control and the ownership of the industries to the workers. Your committee, in view of this, delayed consciously the calling of a convention at that time, and within 60 days their judgment was vindicated, and to the intelligent and knowing worker the whole tragedy was revealed — that working men who proposed to take possession of the former Tsar's country were considered infamous outlaws, and for Soviet Russia our party did not stint or delay its active support.

With all this staggering weight our party continued keeping the international colors flying on high. Before there was even an opportunity, however, to readjust our party's attitude in conformity with the new and immediate problems of reconstruction, there grew up within the organization those who were impatient of a measured method of procedure. Many, influenced by the rapid changes taking place in Russia and Eu-

rope — and believing that in this country, the richest creditor nation of the world, and with a working class discontented, but by no means revolutionary — these members in our party, misjudging entirely the psychology of the American working class movement, commenced an agitation in the party; not solely to bring before our national convention their propositions, but to declare that they alone held the secret of success and to impose it upon the party; and upon refusal of the membership to accept their proposition to launch a new political party. With many of them this has been carried out in the formation of the Communist Party.

It is probable that in our organization some have leaned too strongly to political action and failed to recognize that political action in itself, without the support and fortification necessary from industrial organization, will fall far short in meeting the needs of the workers in changing the industrial order. On the other hand, there are countless numbers who feel that the stretch of time necessary for the gaining of political control makes necessary the *emphasis* of industrial organization as the sole and *only* weapon for the change, using political activity as a mere cloak or camouflage to conceal their mass action revolution. [These are] serious problems which this convention must meet with calmness and intelligence. Just as the world about us is in a crucial condition, so naturally that is reflected within our Socialist Party. In our deliberations it must be hoped that we shall escape from the nervous impatience, the legacy which the last 4 years of frenzy left us. Some time, with tranquil judgment, this period will be written, and every civilized human being who reads it will do so with profound respect for those brave and sincere comrades who kept the torch burning during the dark years through which we have passed, and through which we are now traveling.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

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