
Letter to the National Committee, SPA from Victor L. Berger, National Committeeman for Wisconsin. [published April 1, 1905]

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To the Members of the National Committee
of the Socialist Party.

Comrades:

National Committeeman [William] Trautmann
of Ohio has submitted to you the following:

The National Committee calls upon the State Executive Board of Wisconsin to proceed at once with an investigation as to whether a collusion, or secret or open understanding in the city of Milwaukee between the Social Democratic Party organization or a member or members thereof, and representatives of capitalist parties; and said State Executive Committee be demanded to ascertain whether the endorsement of state candidates running on capitalist party tickets in a Socialist paper has had the sanction and appeal of the party members. In either case, if parties be found guilty of such a gross violation of Socialist Party ethics, they to be disciplined through the State Executive Committee to the extent required by adopted rules of the Socialist Party.

Now, permit me to submit for your calm and just consideration the following:

First: There could have been no endorsement of any state candidates running on capitalist party tickets in any Socialist paper in Wisconsin. The present judicial election is not a state election, it is a municipal election. It pertains to judges only and is conducted on non-partisan lines.

But the mere insinuation that there is "a collusion, or secret or open understanding in the city of Milwaukee between the Social Democratic Party organization or a member or members thereof and representatives of capitalist parties" is a miserable and cowardly slander. Not even the capitalist politicians in Milwaukee and in Wisconsin would dare to insinuate

such a thing. And it is also a miserable and cowardly slander to insinuate that there was any secret or open understanding with any candidates running on a non-partisan ticket.

The facts of the case are the following:

The Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee decided by a referendum vote of about 4 to 1 against putting up candidates in the local judicial election. The matter was discussed pro and con for weeks — during most of which time I was in San Francisco, attending the AF of L convention, and the overwhelming majority of the party membership finally came to the conclusion not to put up a ticket for the following reasons:

First. We had remaining an election debt of over \$1,000. Our elections are conducted mainly with literature and cost a great deal of money.

Second. The party in Milwaukee being very proletarian, we have hardly any lawyers in our ranks and there is a great lack of suitable judicial candidates, and in order to "hold a court of record" a man must have been admitted to the bar.

Third. An election in Milwaukee means hard work. It means house to house distribution of literature. We have gone through two very hot campaigns in one year and the 5 or 600 workers upon whom the brunt of the battle always falls were completely tired out.

Fourth. We had gained so many votes in the last 2 years that it was necessary to have a short rest, in order to improve our organization and deepen the Socialist understanding of our votes.

Fifth. We could not risk a superficial campaign without losing much of our prestige and vote. If we

went back in votes, it would mean a hard blow to the movement in the entire country.

For these, and many other reasons too numerous to mention, the referendum of the party of Milwaukee decided against putting up a judicial ticket this spring.

Now as to the Constitution. Article 12, Section 3, of the National Constitution reads that "no state or local organization shall under any circumstances fuse, combine, or compromise with any other political party or organization, or refrain from making nominations, in order to favor the candidate of such organizations." Now we have violated neither the letter nor the spirit of this provision. We have decided simply not to put up a ticket, because we did not have the money and were deeply in debt; because we did not have the material for judicial candidates; and because we are compelled to strengthen our party intellectually from a Socialist standpoint before we go into any new battles.

But I have always so construed this section of the constitution, and almost every comrade in Wisconsin coincides with me, that whenever the party has a ticket in the field, it is the absolute and irrevocable duty of every Social Democrat to vote that ticket and vote it straight; but whenever and wherever the Social Democratic Party has no ticket in the field, any member individually has a right to vote or not to vote just as he pleases.

If our members did not have that right, all those who do not live in large towns would be disfranchised, for every election outside of the state and national elections.

Besides, we are a political party, not a politico-religious order. We are not Dominicans nor Franciscans. We want strict party discipline, and there is no man who stands for good discipline more than I do. But whenever discipline turns into oppressive fanaticism, then I oppose it.

So much for the construction of this section.

And the situation of Milwaukee is different from that of any other city. There is, for instance, one paper in this town that prints every day a column of anti-socialist matter. There is another daily paper that continually prints stuff written by that notorious anti-socialist, Father Kress of Cleveland, Ohio. Milwaukee is the National Headquarters of the Federation of Roman Catholic Societies, whose avowed purpose is to

combat Socialism. Here lives Archbishop Messmer, the founder of that federation and their intellectual and spiritual guide. The Catholic church uses every means, and especially the confessional, against us. There is no other element in Milwaukee which fights us so bitterly and so effectively as the Catholic church.

Now, among the half dozen different judicial positions that are to be filled this spring is that of a County or Probate Judge. The present incumbent of that position, Judge Paul D. Carpenter, was converted to Catholicism some few years ago by the Paulist Fathers. Since then, the man has become a Catholic zealot. He has not only made speeches against Socialism, but has also used his judicial position to give the Catholic priesthood every possible advantage. Contrary to old usage and custom in Milwaukee, he committed children that were brought before him to religious, and especially Catholic, institutions. He did everything possible to make himself obnoxious to every liberal-minded citizen and especially to the Social Democrats, whom he bitterly assailed, and did all in his power to make himself loved by the Roman Catholic clergy.

And now to the sin or heresy that I am supposed to have committed. Enclosed you will find a translation of the three editorial squibs which I have written in the *Wahrheit* and the *Vorwaerts*. And it is a perfectly correct translation, not a doctored one, as some I have seen.

I want the comrades to read the article in the light of what I have said here, and then pass their judgment.

I also want the comrades to consider that hardly 10 percent of the readers of the German paper are dues-paying party members. Hardly 10 percent of them are under the rule of our constitution, even if you should construe it differently than we do. The other 90 percent are Socialists and loyal voters of the Social Democratic Party, but they are not party members. They look to their paper for a cue or a hint on the situation. It was my duty to give them that hint. It was my plain duty to advise them to vote against Paul D. Carpenter because he is an enemy of Socialism and of those American institutions of which Socialists approve.

Besides, before printing the articles in question, I stated my position to the City Central Committee of the Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee. I told

them what I was going to do. After a spirited discussion, my position was endorsed by the votes of all excepting 5 (about 70 members being present).

Now, comrades of the National Committee, you are in possession of all the facts. I have given them to you to my best knowledge and ability.

According to Article 12, Section 4:

In states and territories in which there is one central organization affiliated with the party, the state or territorial organizations shall have the sole jurisdiction of the members residing within their respective territories, and the sole control of all matters pertaining to the propaganda, organization, and financial affairs within such state or territory; their activity shall be confined to their respective organizations and the National Committee and subcommittee or officers thereof shall have no right to interfere in such matters without the consent of the respective state or territorial organizations.

According to this, the National Committee has no jurisdiction in this matter. If Trautmann has any grievance against Victor L. Berger or anybody else, let him lodge his complaint with the State Executive Board of Wisconsin.

Yet I will say this: To please Trautmann of Cincinnati, I am myself willing to ask the State Committee of Wisconsin to investigate the matter — although there is nothing to investigate — that is, after this matter has been rejected as it ought to be by the National Committee.

And in closing, let me say: Milwaukee has by years of hard work of some self-sacrificing comrades built up a movement which ought to be the pride of the comrades of the United States. We have distributed many millions of pieces of good literature. We have built up an excellent organization. We have elected members to the Common Council, to the Assembly, and to the State Senate. In short, we are *not* merely *repeating hollow phrases*, we are doing things in Mil-

waukee.

Why should we now be disturbed by heresy-hunters?

Comrade Trautmann takes exception to the Wisconsin platform. I should be willing to submit this platform to Karl Kautsky or any other Socialist scientist, but I am not willing to submit it to Trautmann, who understands little or nothing about the science of Socialism.

As to the Sheboygan affair, we have handled that without Trautmann's assistance.

Trautmann is simply bitter, because I refused to endorse his plan of splitting up the national trade union movement. After trying to split the economic movement of the working class, Trautmann would like also to split up the political movement of the working class.

Trautmann proudly admits that he has "developed" to the DeLeon standpoint, to the standpoint of the Socialist Trades & Labor Alliance, which was the curse of the Socialist movement for several years. What business has Trautmann in our party?

And can you not see clearly the motive of this so-called charge?

Comrades, if you have the movement of the American proletariat at heart, act calmly and deliberately and put the Trautmanns where they belong.

And now permit me to thank you one and all most heartily for the kind consideration you have shown me, one of the oldest comrades in the movement, by granting me a hearing before casting your vote on this question.

Yours fraternally,

Victor L. Berger,

National Committeeman for Wisconsin.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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