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# The “Majority Report” — A Criticism

by John Spargo

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## I.

Like my good friend, Morris Hillquit, I can truthfully say that it has been my good fortune to attend and take part in many Socialist conventions, but that the Emergency Convention held in St. Louis [April 7-14, 1917] will, I believe, “always hold a unique place in my memory.” But I shall accord it that distinction for reasons quite different from those which inspire Comrade Hillquit.

I shall always remember that rump convention, illegally constituted (many of its delegates being either self-elected or the choice of party officials, in no wise representative of the membership) as the most tragic event in the history of the Socialist Party. I shall remember it as the occasion when the Socialist Party missed its supreme opportunity.

### “Failed to Meet Opportunities.”

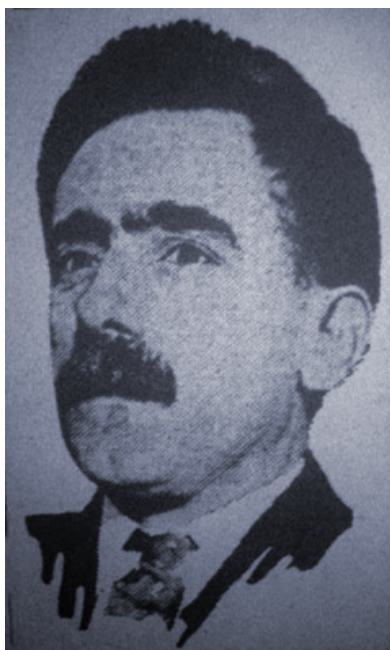
I shall remember it as the gathering of a sect which failed to meet not only the opportunities presented by the national crisis, but every other need and opportunity arising out of American economic and political development.

For it was not only in the war resolution adopted by the Emergency Convention proved itself to be entirely out of touch with American life and American needs, and, therefore, utterly incompetent to build an American Socialist movement. The same fact was apparent throughout. It was just as clearly apparent in the discussions on the party constitution. The few comrades who realized something of the needs of the party were not listened to. In vain did they point out the fact — all too obvious, one would think —

that we have not yet developed a party, but only a petty sect. In vain did they plead for a general unshackling of the Socialist workers to the end that they might be free to work for Socialism. The response of the convention was to tighten the shackles a bit more.

### Acted Ostrich Part, He Says.

Confronted by the challenge of a new force in the shape of the Non-Partisan League movement, a growing force in not less than a dozen states, the convention acted the part of the ostrich, and buried its head in the sand. It had not the elementary common sense to invite the delegates from the states in which the new movement is a force to give their experience and advice. Upon the greatest agrarian radical movement of our time the farmer delegates could not get a hearing. Those who knew nothing of the new



movement, nor of conditions in the states where it has made its way, city dwellers, monopolized the discussion.

The result was the enactment of a resolution which, as the State Secretary of Kansas said to me, means that the Socialist Party cannot live in Kansas. Delegates from the Dakotas, from Oklahoma and other states expressed themselves to the same general effect.

We cannot understand the significance of the

declaration on war policy adopted by the convention unless we taken into account its general attitude toward the problems of American life today. Not only by the resolution on war, but by its entire work, the convention revealed its complete failure to relate its socialist visions and theories to American life.

### **Party in Disrepute, He Thinks.**

There are many of us in the party who had looked forward to the holding of a regular convention in September of this year. It was our hope that by that time it would be possible to get a general recognition of the fact that our party machinery is obsolete, and to bring about the creation of a new form of organization, American in its character. We knew that the Socialist Party is held in lamentable disrepute all over the country, especially by the working class. We knew that, with hardly an exception, the party is weaker in all our large centers than it was 10 years ago. And this is not due to the war. Before the war began, or was believed possible, this decadence was manifest.

From the point of view of those who realized these conditions and hoped for change, the St. Louis convention was a disaster. It put an end to all hopes of change. We must go on as before, and while Socialism rapidly increases its hold upon the minds and consciences of the American people, the Socialist Party must decline and wilt. We must still retain our complex, antiquated machinery, and be like the man who owns a motor car, but never has a chance to ride in it because he must spend all his time underneath "fixing" it.

## **II.**

Comrade Hillquit is quite correct in saying that the important matters on revising the party platform and the constitution, and of outlining methods of organization and propaganda, received "scant attention" at the convention. The stenographic report of the discussions, if it is ever published, will abundantly verify that statement. It will also show that the convention paid almost equally "scant attention" to the real issues involved in the resolution on war policy. Stump speeches against war, avowals of militant class-consciousness, wild denunciations of the makers of war,

and so on, were common enough. There was very little serious discussion of principles.

The result is a resolution, the majority report, which the membership of the party will no doubt vote down by an overwhelming majority, in favor of the alternate report submitted by more than a quarter of the delegates to the convention.

### **Scores Majority Report.**

I have too much respect for the intelligence of the party membership to believe that it will approve the majority report, which is ambiguous and evasive where definiteness is most needed; unsound in theory, especially in its treatment of the causes of the war; inaccurate and misleading in its statements upon matters of fact; out of harmony with Socialist principles; ethically reprehensible and demagogic in the character of its appeal.

A formidable indictment, truly. If the space were at my disposal I feel quite certain that I could adequately sustain each and every one of its counts.

### **"Ambiguity Not Accidental."**

The ambiguity and evasiveness of language is not accidental. As I pointed out at the convention, when Victor L. Berger, a strong nationalist, who believes in the right and duty of Socialists to defend their nation and advocates military preparedness to that end, signs a declaration on the subject of war policy with those who declare that the workers have no nation, that they have no choice to make between democracy and autocracy, and that they would not favor any attempt to repel any invasion of this country, no matter by whom attempted, you can be quite certain that the words of their agreement have been skillfully woven to evade the issue between them, or trickily designed to deceive the one party or the other.

The majority report attempted a twofold task — to formulate a theoretical exposition of Socialist principles as they relate to war and kindred subjects, and a definite program of action to be adopted in the existing circumstances. In the light of that twofold purpose, which Comrade Hillquit acknowledges, it is pertinent to inquire how, if at all, the report answers those many perplexing questions which have beset our

minds for the past 3 years. Are we peace-at-any-price pacifists? Would we under any conditions fight to defend the nation from invasion? Were our Belgian comrades wrong in joining with all other Belgians in defense of their national sovereignty?

### **Report "Begg the Issue."**

The majority report makes no attempt to set forth a carefully reasoned statement of Socialist principles governing these important and vital questions. It begs the issue in a shameless manner. Declaring that we are opposed to "the system of exploitation and class rule," it proceeds: "We, therefore, call upon the workers of all countries to refuse support to their governments in their wars." If this passage means anything at all, it means that the Socialist Party of the United States would call upon the workers of Belgium to "refuse support to their government" — a policy which would make them allies of the most diabolical military despotism in history. It means, if it means anything, that in the not impossible event of an attempt by this or some other nation to subjugate Mexico, we, the Socialist Party, would call upon the Mexican workers to "refuse to support their government." If this country should be invaded by Japan or any other nation, without any justification, we would, according to this crude, anarchistic, and anti-Socialist doctrine, call upon the workers of this country to play the game of the enemy by refusing their support to the government in its attempt to repel the invader. Precious little chance would there be of our call being heeded!

Now, I know perfectly well that some of those who signed the majority report absolutely and unreservedly reject the doctrine contained in the passage quoted — the doctrine, bear in mind, that is fundamental to the whole report. Victor L. Berger, for example, does not accept it. He cannot.

### **Berger for National Defense.**

His signature to the report was hardly dry when he told me that he believed as strongly as ever in "the right and duty of national self-defense," and in measures for such defense. He told the Committee on War and Militarism that he agreed fully with my views on the relation of nationalism to internationalism and on

the right and duty of nations to defend themselves. He stigmatized the very views which are the fundamental basis of the majority report as anarchistic and contrary to Socialist principles. Other members of the committee expressed similar views.

Upon what grounds of Socialist theory is this declaration in the report based? The answer to this question is contained in these words: "The only struggle which would justify the workers in taking up arms is the great struggle of the working class of the world to free itself from economic exploitation and political oppression."

At first blush this seems to be the old Socialist doctrine — the application of the class struggle theory to war. In point of fact, it is a radical departure from the accepted Socialist doctrine. It is based, not upon the class struggle theory, but upon a fantastic perversion of that theory. The words "and political oppression" make the statement quoted ambiguous and capable of interpretation utterly at variance with the spirit and letter of the resolution. Belgian workers, struggling to resist German invaders, and Serbian workers, struggling against Austrian tyranny, would be justified by a rational interpretation of these words, for they were and are struggling against "political oppression." That same interpretation would justify American workers joining in the struggle against any invader. These words apparently made it possible for Berger and others to sign the declaration, which, without such an interpretation of the language employed, they could not honestly do.

### **Hits "Oft-Exploded Fallacy."**

But we may be certain that any such interpretation will be hotly contested and vigorously denied by the majority of those responsible for the report. The words I have quoted are followed by these: "We particularly warn the workers against the snare and delusion of defensive warfare." Clearly, what the authors of the report believe and sought to convey is that no struggle except that between the wage-workers of a nation or group of nations can ever merit the active support of the workers. Here we have the old, oft-exploded fallacy that the workers and the capitalist class can have no common interests. It is not true. Belgian workers and Belgian capitalists have a common inter-

est in gaining their national independence from German oppression. Finnish workers and Finnish capitalists rightly made common cause to overthrow tsarism in Finland and gain constitutional rights. Bohemians of all classes have united in the struggle for national independence and will again in the future. Even the recent revolution in Russia proved that the workers and the greater part of the capitalist class had a common interest.

If this resolution is a correct statement of Socialist principles, we must condemn the action of the Belgian working class, the Finnish working class, the Russian working class, the Bohemian working class, and, in short, the working class of all the nationalities now engaged in struggles to cast off foreign rule. I assert that the resolution is not a true statement of the Socialist position. It is the promulgation in the name of Socialism of a vicious and reactionary doctrine, subversive of the great struggle for freedom.

There is something pathetically puerile in the statement of the causes of the war in Europe. It was "caused by the conflict of capitalist interests in the European countries," we are told.

#### **"Only Partial Truth."**

That this is only a partial truth every reasonably well-informed student of contemporary politics knows. Even more potent than the capitalist interests (the influence of which is not questioned) were the dynastic aspirations of the monarchies of Central Europe. "Mittel Europa" has been a dynastic ideal and vision primarily. The great empire stretching from the North Sea to the Persian Gulf, inspiration of Hohenzollern and Hapsburg, was not primarily a capitalist conception. Serbia's tragic fate arose from the fact that she stood in the way of the Berlin-Baghdad railway. The influence of the autocratic monarchies and the great military classes of Germany and Austria are passed over as being of no account in summing up the causes of the outbreak of the war.

We have grown so used to offering the phrase, "it is the outcome of the capitalist system," as a sufficient explanation of all social and political phenomena that we have apparently lost the sense and spirit of open-minded investigation.

#### **Resolution "Hysterical."**

It has been wittily said that there are two schools of Socialism — the historical and the hysterical. Our resolution unmistakably belongs to the latter. It proclaims that the entrance of this republic into the war was "unjustifiable," "dishonorable," "a crime against the people of the United States and the nations of the world." This hysterical screaming is not sufficient. We are told that "in all history there has been no war more unjustifiable than the war in which we are about to engage."

This is not history, but sheer jejune nonsense. One might be ever so opposed to the entrance of this nation into the war and yet retain some vestige of sanity! It is grotesquely untrue to say that there never was a more unjustifiable war. I could name offhand a score of wars which were entered upon for less cause than the sinking of the *Lusitania* alone.

The other fact is that no nation with power to defend itself has ever, in modern times, borne so many violations of its undoubted rights without resorting to war to protect those rights. Sensible people, not obsessed by fanatical anti-nationalism, will remember this when reading the hysterical statements I have quoted from the resolution.

#### **That "Mass Action" Plank.**

The resolution pledges the party to unyielding opposition to conscription, both military and industrial. (The absence of any discrimination between the two is interesting!) Even when conscription has been adopted we are to continue our opposition. More than that, we are pledged to the support "of all mass movements in opposition to conscription." Hillquit tells us that, "curiously enough, the phrase mass movements was insisted upon by 'conservative' members of the committee in order to make it clear that the party would not stand sponsor for any ill-considered and irresponsible outbreak by individual hotheads."

Since Hillquit tells part of the history of the plank, I may tell the rest, I suppose. The formulation was adopted in spite of the fact that one of the delegates who appeared before the committee and made a vigorous appeal for "mass action," taunting the committee with its fear to trust "mass action," citing as an

illustration of what he meant by that phrase the fact that in his state a resolution had been passed that on the day conscription should be declared all Socialist Party members should be summoned at once to assemble in their respective county seats, and intimated in the clearest possible terms that they would by force of arms resist the attempt of the authorities to enforce the law. In the face of such a clear statement, by a delegate to the convention, of the nature of a "mass movement" already under way, that plank in the program was adopted!

### What Resolution Would Do.

In other words, we shall, if we adopt the majority report, have signed a blank check and placed the entire credit of the party at the disposal of any group of anarchists who see fit to initiate a riot. And we are in no position to help the victims of such movements who have relied upon our pledged support.

*The majority report ignores the fact that, as at present constituted, the struggle is between the most autocratic nations in the world on the one side and the most advanced and democratic on the other. Yet that must be a fact of cardinal importance to an efficient international Socialist movement. The majority report ignores completely the persistent assault by the Central Empires upon the fabric of internationalism already woven. Socialists whose anti-nationalism had not completely submerged their Socialism could not have been silent upon these matters.*

The fact is, for several reasons, our party has been utterly pro-German from the beginning of the great war. For one reason and another, it has consistently advocated every policy advocated by the German government; it has repeated all the miserable evasions and excuses of that government and its apologists; it has

been silent upon precisely the points upon which that government and its apologists have been silent.

### "Report Pleases German Rulers."

In the discussion at the convention one delegate very earnestly suggested that the minority report which I presented would cause all the capitalists from Maine to California to grin with delight. I did not reply to that taunt with another, though the temptation to do so was strong. To a comrade on the floor of the convention I said of the majority report, which my critic approved, what I here repeat, that it was calculated to cause grins of delight to wreath the countenances of the two kaisers of Germany and Austria, the tsar of Bulgaria, and the sultan of Turkey, as well as of all the capitalists of those countries.

If we should be foolish enough to adopt the majority report, and become virtually the allies of the autocratic rulers named, we should effectually shut the door against every opportunity to serve the cause of Socialism in America. The American people would not listen to our propaganda again "so long as grass grows and water runs," as the old Indian phrase goes.

Those of us who oppose the majority report are taunted by some of our comrades with being "Scheidemanns." The taunt comes with ill grace from the upholders of a report which Scheidemann, under orders from his imperial master, could well sign. The difference between our position and Scheidemann's is immeasurable.

*Whereas, Scheidemann supports an autocratic government in a course which he knows to be contrary to Socialist principles and the dictates of humanity, we have justified the most democratic government in the world, however imperfect it may be in defending the elemental rights of nations and the internationalism already achieved.*

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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