
The St. Louis Convention and Its Anti-War Program

by Morris Hillquit

Published in the *New York Call Magazine*, May 6, 1917, pg. 3

It has been my good fortune to take part in many Socialist conventions, national and international, but the recent Socialist gathering in St. Louis [April 7-14, 1917] will, I believe, always hold a unique place in my memory.



Called together on a sudden impulse and short notice, confronted by a situation the like of which the world had never seen before, deeply conscious of their heavy responsibility to the Socialist movement, and determined to discharge it fully and boldly,

the 200 chosen representatives of the Socialist Party of America brought with them a spirit of high-strung intensity which electrified the atmosphere of the convention hall and spread to the very corridors and lobbies of the big Planters' Hotel. They came from all sections of the country and all walks of life. The farmer from Oklahoma and the Dakotas, the "intellectual" from New York and Massachusetts, the miner from Pennsylvania and Illinois, and the lumberman from the Western coast; workers and clerks, businessmen and professionals, old greybeards and young boys, typical New Englanders, sons of Western pioneers, and immigrants from all countries of Europe — men and women of different physiology and psychology, of different modes of

life, thought, and expression — these were the delegates of the Emergency Convention of the Socialist Party, a true and pulsating cross-section of the people of our vast and diversified country in life and action.

But beneath the superficial differences of appearance and manner there was an essential unity of sentiment and aim, a common enthusiasm for the broad ideals of Socialism, and at that moment above everything else a general opposition to war and all that goes with it.

The convention was called upon to deal with other important subjects. It was charged with the task of revising the party's platform and constitution and of outlining a program of Socialist organization and propaganda, but all these weighty matters received scant attention from the delegates, whose minds were wholly centered on the war. The St. Louis Convention was essentially a Socialist war council against war.

• • • • •

If the convention represented a true cross-section of the American people, its Committee on War and Militarism was certainly a true cross-section of the convention. It consisted of 15 members, and every shade of opinion was represented on it. I never served on a committee that was more impressed with the important nature of its work or that went at it in a more thoroughgoing man-

ner.

The form and general character of the proposed resolution was first discussed around the table, each member in turn stating his views and graciously subjecting himself to searching cross-examination of his fellow members. This was followed by a public hearing, in which no less than 40 delegates took the opportunity to acquaint the committee with the often conflicting but always emphatic sentiments and instructions of their constituencies. The next step was the appointment of a subcommittee of 3 to draft a preamble, and, when the draft, the result of a full day's work, was brought in, the committee as a whole went over it, line by line and word by word, cutting, amplifying, and polishing the instrument until it met the full approval of the majority. The same course was then followed with respect to the so-called program of action appended to the preamble. It is worthy of notice in this connection that, while the preamble was adopted in committee against 4 dissenting votes, the program, which has since attracted a good deal of criticism, was adopted unanimously.

The resolution thus evolved by the committee was subsequently ratified by the convention with very few and unimportant changes, and is now before the membership under the designation of majority report. The 2 minority reports, which likewise emanated from the committee, one submitted by Comrade [Louis] Boudin and one by Comrade [John] Spargo, did not receive sufficient votes on the floor of the convention to go to a referendum. The "minority report" which is being submitted to the membership originated outside of the committee, and goes to referendum on the written request of more than 1/4th of the delegates, under the provisions of the party constitution.

• • • • •

It has been charged against the majority re-

port on the floor of the convention, and outside of it, that it is a "compromise resolution." The charge is true with reference to the form of the document, but not the substance.

At the very outset the committee was confronted with the question whether the resolution to be framed was to be a theoretical exposition of the Socialist attitude to war as a sort of guide for party members or a statement of our position on this war addressed to the people generally. Both seemed necessary. The Socialist Party of this country had never had an opportunity to adopt a well considered and authoritative declaration of principles on the subject of war or a definite program of action in case of war. On the other hand, our party is primarily an organization for propaganda and education, and its declaration would be barren and sterile if they did not aim to enlist the support of the people, and particularly the workers. The majority report seeks to satisfy both requirements, and, I believe, it succeeds tolerably well in accomplishing the double task. Comrade Boudin's draft seemed to be intended for party consumption only, while the minority report is primarily addressed to the public.

Other "compromises" of which the member of the Committee on War and Militarism were guilty were mutual concessions on unessential points and on matters of style and phraseology. With all such "concessions" and "compromises" there is not a statement or a phrase in the majority report to which I can honestly and conscientiously [fail to] subscribe, and I feel certain that the same can be said of the other committee members who signed the report and of all delegates who voted for it.

• • • • •

The main fault which the critics of the majority report find is its alleged ultra-radicalism. Some comrades have even gone so far as to pronounce it "reasonable."

The criticism is mainly based upon the passage of the program of action which reads as follows:

Conscientious, active, and public opposition to the war through demonstrations, mass petitions, and all other means within our power.

Comrade Benson takes particular exception to the use of the words "*public*," "*demonstrations*," "*mass petitions*," and "*other*" in the above statement. I must confess I am utterly unable to follow him in his reasoning. The first three italicized expressions may be objectionable on the ground that they are entirely superfluous. Opposition to war must be public, else it is not opposition. It must express itself in some visible form, not in more silent grumbling; why not in demonstration and in the exercise of the constitution prerogative of the people to petition?

As to the phrase "*all other means within our power*," what means are within our power except the legitimate ones, and then only such of them as the powers that be will care to leave open to us?

The anti-war resolution adopted at the International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart [1907] and reaffirmed at the last congress in Copenhagen [1910] contains the following plank:

Should war break out, it is our duty to work toward its speedy ending, and with the use of *all our powers* to take advantage of the economic and political crisis produced by the war for the acceleration of the overthrow of the capitalist rule.

If this declaration was safe and moderate

even for the Socialists of Prussia, why should our solicitous friends worry about an infinitely tamer expression in this democratic republic?

Another passage of the resolution that has been criticized as extreme is the pledge of support of all mass movements in opposition to conscription. This phrase occurs immediately after the statement to the effect that we will make continuous efforts for the repeal of all conscription laws and must be read in conjunction with it. Curiously enough, the phrase mass movements was insisted on by the "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 of individual hotheads.

There are those among us who honestly approve or, at least, excuse our entrance into the war, and I can fully understand, though I am quite unable to share their sentiments. From the point of view of such Socialists, the majority report is quite naturally extremely irrational and dangerous. But, given an attitude of genuine and uncompromising opposition to war, and particularly to our war, the resolution of the St. Louis Convention is a perfectly sane document — sane none the less because it is strong. As the latest victims of the all-consuming world war, the Socialists of America have had the benefit of the sad experience of our European comrades. It is their duty to themselves and to the new international to come to take a stand free from all uncertainty and ambiguity and to announce the course of action which they propose to follow in clear, direct, and explicit terms.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.