
Letter to Eugene V. Debs at Atlanta Federal Prison from Morris Hillquit at Saranac Lake, NY, June 30, 1920

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#177 Park Ave.,
Saranac Lake, NY,
June 30, 1920.

Mr. Eugene V. Debs,
Federal Prison,
Atlanta, Ga.

Dear Gene:—

I have been wanting to write to you a number of times within the past year, and must confess that I can hardly formulate my reason for not doing so. I felt in a vague sort of a way that you were undoubtedly beset with letters of information and advice, complaint and explanation, from all directions, and I did not want to add to your burdens. Probably I was wrong, but I want you to know that there was not a period during all of that year that I did not think of you with true affection and absolute devotion.

I am moved to write you this letter by the account of your reply to the official notification of your nomination as published in the Party Bulletin, which I have just received, and particularly by the reported expressions of your opinion on the platform adopted by the convention, and on its stand towards the International. While every concrete statement of yours with reference to the Party position — political and industrial — meets my views completely, your general statements that the platform does not have your

unqualified approval, and also that you regret that the Party did not affiliate with the Third International without qualification, induce me to offer some explanations. As the chosen standard-bearer of the Party you are entitled to know exactly what kind of a fight you are leading, and besides, I have a personal interest in the matter, as I have been largely responsible for the platform, as well as the resolution on international affiliation, and I should hate to be misunderstood by you, of all men.

Neither the platform nor the Declaration of Principles, nor the resolution on international relations were drawn with a view to making the party more “respectable” or “conservative.” On the contrary, it was my intention in framing the document — an intention which I believe was fully shared by the delegates at the convention — to uphold the radical position which has characterized the Party during the last few years, and to surrender nothing.

The somewhat novel tone of the document was determined by the following considerations:—

With the passing of the war and the beginning of the period of world reconstruction along Socialist lines, the constructive side of the Socialist movement must again be emphasized, particularly upon entering a National Campaign. We have made our protest against the war, and by that protest we stand. The attitude of protest is naturally more vigorous in terms and radical in sound than any proposed positive measures, but we cannot of course get anywhere as a party of mere

perpetual negative protest.

The positive character of our present platform and Declaration of Principles is one of the features which make them appear somewhat conservative to the superficial critic; to my mind, it is just the opposite.

Another ground of flighty criticism of the documents is the systematic omission of our favorite Marxian terminology in the text; this again I consider a merit rather than a demerit. The recent proceedings in Albany and the extensive newspaper comments in connection with it, have completely and convincingly demonstrated the dense and seemingly impregnable ignorance of the average American in matters of technical Socialistic and sociological nomenclature, and his practical inability to comprehend in abstract terms. It is perfectly useless to attempt to explain our conception of such terms as "Social revolution," "class struggle," "proletariat," etc. To the unschooled mind the one will always mean a barricade fight accompanied by terrorism, guillotining, etc. — the other an interminable succession of arbitrary and deliberate strikes and beating up of scabs, and the third, a mass of hoodlums. I am now more convinced than ever that in order to get our message across we must divorce ourselves from the worship of phrases, and talk the plainest possible English.

You are quoted in the Bulletin as saying that in your opinion our platform could have been made more effective if it had stressed the class struggle more prominently, and if more emphasis had been laid on industrial organization. It has possibly escaped your attention that the recent convention [New York: May 8-14, 1920] has made a radical departure from past practices in the matter of platform drafting. In compliance with a resolution passed by the preceding convention of 1919, we have now divided our statement of program into two distinct parts — a Declaration of Principles, intended to be a more or less permanent instrument, for use in campaigns and between campaigns, and containing a concise, but tolerably complete statement of the fundamental aims, methods, and philosophy of our movement, and a political platform dealing exclusively with the special and temporary issues as they confront us at each successive campaign.

The Declaration of Principles adopted by the convention is, in my opinion, a popular concise but

complete and uncompromising exposition of the class struggle theory, and lays sufficient emphasis on the importance of the industrial organization of labor. The platform deals very largely with contemporaneous political issues. As a complete and independent document it would have fully merited your criticism, but I repeat, it was intended to be read and circulated in conjunction with the Declaration of Principles.

You are also quoted as saying that you regret that the convention did not see its way clear to affiliate with the Third International without qualification. I, too, regret it deeply and sincerely, but in the present conditions I do not see how we could endorse the Third International unreservedly without stultifying ourselves and surrendering some of the most cardinal things for which our movement has stood, and for which you and others have fought almost a lifetime.

Like you, I am a determined and enthusiastic supporter of the Soviet Government of Russia. I believe our comrades in Russia are doing the most inspiring work ever attempted in the history of our race. I feel an abiding confidence that sooner or later — and probably sooner rather than later — they will evolve a truly Socialistic order of society in Russia, which will in many ways serve as a model to the entire civilized world.

So long as they fight against international forces of capitalism and reaction, I shall always support them with all the weapons at my command.

This attitude on my part, however, does not imply that I am prepared to take every dictum that comes from Moscow, or from any authorized or unauthorized spokesman of the Socialist Government, as gospel truth, or that I shall abdicate my own judgment as to the needs and chances of the Socialist and Labor movement in this country, and take my programs without criticism or analysis from an international pope or from a Holy International Congregation.

The Communists of Russia have done certain things which their own desperate conditions have probably forced upon them. I do not set myself up as a judge of over them, and do not blame them for such actions. But when, making a virtue of necessity, they attempt to elevate such actions into a general and universal maxim of Socialist conduct in all countries, I must refuse to accept it.

The Third International, moreover, has been very much less fortunate in the choice of its leaders and

spokesmen, than the Soviet Government. Comrade Zinoviev, who as far as I can see, has taken it upon himself to formulate and proclaim the policies of the Third International, has placed the latter in a perfectly impossible position from the point of view of Marxian Socialism. He persists in rejecting cooperation with the Independent Socialists of Germany, the Socialist Party of France, as represented by Longuet, and the Independent Labour Party of England, all of which have stood up very well under the way, and have been unwavering in their support of the Soviet Government. His most recent ban was against the Socialist Party of the United States in general, and your humble servant in particular, because, forsooth, "the leaders of the Socialist Party supported the European War!" and I was am a traitor to Socialism on general principles. He insists upon the Soviet form of government and the dictatorship of the proletariat for all countries, and proclaims it a duty of elected Socialist representatives "to also perform illegal work" and announces that the Anarcho-Syndicalist groups are making overtures to the Third International, and would be welcomed in its fold. The Third International as at present constituted seems to me to prefer the organization of international groups and sects into one body, dictated by Russia, than to the formation of an International of all true Socialists of the world. Under these circumstances unconditional adherence would mean not an affiliation,

but a surrender.

In taking the stand we have, we have practically followed the same course as the Socialists of France and England and the minority Socialists of Germany. We adhere to the Third International upon the condition that we have a voice in the formulation of the basis of such unity, and that we reserve the principle of self-determination to the extent compatible with the creed and policy of international Socialism. Personally I am strongly inclined to think that such action will bring about a sane, healthy Socialist International, which will be an enlargement and an improvement upon the present Moscow organization.

I have made this letter rather long because I repeat, I do not want your to remain under a misapprehension as to my attitude on these important questions, and whether you can accept my stand on all points or not, it is hardly needful to assure you of my complete and unvarying personal affection and sincere best wishes for you.

Cordially,

Morris Hillquit.

MH :::::D

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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