

The Task of the Convention

by Morris Hillquit

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The approaching Indianapolis convention will certainly eclipse all preceding socialist conventions in this country in the magnitude and importance of the task before it.

For the first time in the history of this country socialism bids fair to assume the dimensions of a real national movement. The closing years of the last century were replete with many glaring manifestations of the class struggle on the political and economic fields which did not pass unheeded by a large number of intelligent workingmen. In almost every state and territory of the union there are indications of a complete revolution in the minds of these workingmen; they are beginning to lose faith in their old political views and parties; hundreds of them are joining the socialist camp every month, and thousands of others are ripe for socialism. The only thing required to shape those popular currents and to organize these elements in a well directed battle against the forces of capital is — a socialist party abreast of the times.

The Indianapolis convention will either create such a party, and thus become one of the greatest landmarks in the history of our movement, or it will miss the splendid opportunity and thus become a lamentable failure. Whether it will do the one or the other the future will show. The one assertion we can make at the present stage is that the convention will certainly contain all the necessary material and elements to make it an unqualified success. If present indications do not deceive the representation will be larger than at any preceding socialist convention; the delegates will be composed of some of the most active and intelligent workers in the movement, and they will have more freedom of action than ever before.

The recent troubles within the ranks of the socialist parties have served to weaken the authority of former forms of party organization and administration; the delegates will be unhampered by party ties and traditions, and free to create a practically new party adapted to the needs of the times in all respects.

How can such a party be created, is the question of paramount importance facing the convention. The question has been vigorously

agitated in our party press for the last few weeks, and I will now contribute a few suggestions to the discussion.

The ideal socialist party is one which has: First, a clear and definite understanding of scientific socialism as applied to the social conditions of the country in which it is organized., and knows how to express its views tersely and lucidly — i.e., a *good platform*; 2. An intelligent, active, and enthusiastic membership working in unison for the propaganda of socialism on a well planned system of division of labor and in complete harmony with each other, i.e., *an efficient form of organization*. Let us consider these propositions separately.

The Platform.

Much has been said and written of late under that head which betrays a somewhat superficial conception of the subject. A socialist party is more than an ordinary political party. It is also a party of propaganda and education, and its platform is more than the platform of an ordinary political party. It is also a declaration of fundamental principles and a program of action. While the platforms of purely political parties are merely called upon to comment upon passing conditions and outline a line of action and demands suitable to those conditions as a kind of prospectus for voters, a socialist platform is at the same time also a test of qualification for membership and a guide for the actions of any representatives it may elect inside or outside of the party.

Socialism denotes a state of society as well as the movement to realize that state of society, and a well drawn platform should contain a full and lucid definition of socialism in that dual meaning, i.e., it should contain a terse description of the material basis upon which the movement is founded — the present industrial system with its most salient concomitant features, such as the class struggle, concentration of capital, growth of the proletarians, etc.; the tendencies of that system and final stage of its development — socialism; and also the ways and means by which we expect to reach that stage — our plan of action.

The first portions of that declaration are contained in the body of the platform and the last portion in the “immediate demands.” One is just as much an organic part of the platform as the other in the same way as socialist views are just as much part of socialism as socialist activity, and vice versa.

From this point of view I am unable to agree with those who would like to see the platform boiled down to such a size that it could be printed on an envelope or postal card, as well as with those who advocate the striking of all immediate demands from our platform.

The fear that middle class reform parties may steal our thunder by purloining some of our immediate demands is no reason why we should drop them, or, to be consistent, we would have to give up our agitation and activity in the lines indicated by the immediate demands because other parties may also take up those issues, and we may remain inactively waiting for the social revolution in company with our anarchist friends.

Our platform should be just as brief as consistent with clearness and completeness and no briefer. It should be neither a tedious philosophical discourse nor an offhand dictionary definition.

Form of Organization.

In devising a new plan of organization, it will be proper to bear in mind that the convention is not called upon to frame laws for all times, but merely for the short period until the next convention.

An invariable form of organization will be a matter of impossibility at least until the socialist movement in this country will have developed to its full extent. While the party is weak and scattered in small organizations all over the country, a central administrative body with large powers is the only thing that will unite these scattered bodies into one compact party, and extend and strengthen the organization. A very strong national committee is the mark of a very weak party. The more the organizations grow in any one state the less is the intervention of the national committee in its internal affairs necessary or even useful, and whenever all states of the union will be well and fully organized, so that each state will be capable to take care of its own affairs, the functions of the national committee will of necessity be limited to the management of national campaigns, representing the party in external matters, and perhaps serving as a means of communication between various state organizations.

But have we already reached that point? The most sanguine of optimists will not say that we have. As yet there are many states totally unorganized, and many others too weak to take care of themselves. To spread our movement to the unorganized states, and to assist the weaker states is a task which only a national committee, a committee with funds

and an income, and meeting at frequent intervals can perform. The cry of "state autonomy" has its justification in a very limited sense so far. The result of leaving each state to its own resources at the present stage of the movement would be the retarding of the movement in a considerable part of the country.

It is true, however, that the state organizations have gained much strength of late, and the convention should recognize that fact by increasing the powers and revenues of the state committees. For instance, the state committee should retain a larger proportion of the membership dues than heretofore. It should issue its own charters to locals within its territory, etc. Should it appear within a few years that the useful duties of the National Executive Committee have become merely nominal, we may trust the next convention to further limit its powers and extend those of the state committees.

As long, however, as the National Executive Committee has necessary work to perform, organize it on a working plan and provide it with the necessary means. And in connection with this I believe the plan advanced by Comrade [Job] Harriman is in so far the best as it provides for a working body subject at all times to the control of the party.

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