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# Statement in Reply to the Socialist Party's Decision Not to Participate in the July 1923 Convention of the Farmer-Labor Party of the United States, circa June 23, 1923.

by Jay G. Brown

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Many inquiries have come to the National Office asking why the Socialist Party declined the invitation to send delegates to the Farmer-Labor Party convention in Chicago July 3 [1923]. Until June 21 the Farmer-Labor Party was without official information on the subject and could only refer inquirers to the dispatches contained in the press. On the date referred to above the reply of the Socialist Party was received, under date of June 19 [1923], and several days after the major portion of the communication had been printed in the *New York Call*.

The national convention of the Socialist Party [11th: New York, May 19-22, 1923] appointed a committee to draft a reply and, before adjournment May 22, approved it. Exactly 30 days later it was received at the National Office of the Farmer-Labor Party.

The reply sets forth the belief that unless the active support of a majority of the great trade unions of the country can be enlisted, the effort to form a powerful political party would be disappointing. It assumed that this was lacking but did not feel disposed

to accept an invitation (carrying with it no obligation) to send delegates to learn if its assumption was correct. The reply states, too, that the Socialist Party has decided to continue its affiliation with the Conference for Progressive Political Action, and appears to believe this will lead the big labor organizations into a movement for independent political action. The Socialist Party is somewhat more cautious than some of the other bodies affiliated with the conference for Progressive Political Action. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, for instance, does not state that it will be bound by the conclusions reached by the Farmer-Labor Party convention, but is willing to send delegates, learn what happens, and then be in a position to state its attitude intelligently and with a full knowledge of the facts.†

The action of the Socialist Party has been a disappointment to the Farmer-Labor Party. It felt the Socialist Party would be the last group to refuse. No obligation was exacted in advance, no expense was entailed, no pledge to abide by the findings was re-

†- This is a clear dig at the Socialist Party of America, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers being regarded as the most conservative of the 16 allied railway brotherhoods which together helped establish the Conference for Progressive Political Action in February 1922. The Socialist Party's position on the matter of independent political action (that is, by any organization not called the Socialist Party) was complicated by its traditional party law against "political fusion" with other organizations as well as the steady erosion of its membership ranks — an ongoing implosion that had by 1923 cost the organization approximately 90% of its dues-paying membership from the boom year 1919. The situation was further complicated by a related financial crisis that threatened the very existence of the organization. At this moment of extreme weakness rather than charging into a new third party campaign in July 1923, the SPA chose to play it safe by working to build ties with the unions via the CPPA in the hope of inducing leading unions to commit to independent political action before the SPA itself had to leap into the deep end of the swimming pool. The SPA was not a strong swimmer in 1922-23 and might easily have drowned had another party crisis been provoked by premature action.

quired.†

It is possible the big unions might be moved to declare for a labor party if those already committed to the idea could demonstrate their ability to unite and act together to some extent.

To profess a desire for unity and then refuse to discuss means of achieving it is not a very consistent attitude. To withhold sending a communication for 30 days was discourteous; to publish the letter before mailing it was to capitalize the discourtesy.

The Socialist Labor Party and the Socialist Party were the only political groups in the country to refuse the invitation. The former stated with candor and promptness that it did not feel the objects of the Farmer-Labor Party convention, if attained, would meet the idea of a labor party. The latter professes sympathy with the objects of the convention and then sets in motion an active propaganda to prevent its success.

The Socialist Party letter says the time is not opportune to attempt energetic development of a labor party. In New York state the Socialist Party took the initiative something over a year ago in asking other groups to unite with it, which resulted in the formation of the American Labor Party. The New York branch of the Farmer-Labor Party, not lacking in courage and a willingness to try experiments, accepted the invitation and joined in the effort. The American Labor Party in New York, at its 2nd Conference, February 24-25, 1923, where the Socialists were in a majority at a ratio of perhaps 5 to 1, adopted a report saying: "It is the conviction of your executive officials that the time was never more opportune for the building of a political organization of labor in this country."

†- Further, no serious ideological differences could be pretended between the two organizations, with many leading members of the Farmer-Labor Party having previously been members of the Socialist Party. The political analyses, tactical ideas, and ameliorative prescriptions of the two organizations were greatly similar to the point of virtual identity.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.*

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