
Death of Al Renner

by John Keracher

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Comrade Albert Renner, one of the real founders of the American Communist movement, died in Detroit on Thursday morning, August 25th [1949], at the age of 63. Funeral service for him was held on Saturday evening [Aug. 27] at 8 o'clock. Addresses were delivered by Brother Morse of the Cooks Union, and John Keracher, National Secretary of the Proletarian Party. There was a large attendance of unionists, members of the Proletarian Party, his relatives, and many friends.

Brother Morse pointed out the splendid record of Renner in the field of organized labor, telling how he had served the Waiters and Waitresses Union, long and faithfully, and stressing the fact that he worked with both the AF of L and the CIO



for unity and greater understanding, and therefore was respected by organized labor in general.

Renner was also President of the Michigan Federation of Hotel, Restaurant and Bartenders Unions, AFL, a position to which he was reelected during his long illness. Brother Morse's fine tribute to his fellow unionist and friend was firmly and effectively presented.

Comrade John Keracher, who had worked with Al Renner in the political movement of the American workers since 1914, gave a short

outline of Comrade Renner's career as a proletarian revolutionist. He pointed out that Al was more than an active labor unionist, that he was also a profound Marxian thinker, and while not devoid of sentiment was a conscious, well informed Communist who did not abandon or betray the high principles which he had proclaimed and upheld so long. Al Renner was a Communist who knew the workers can only reach a permanent solution to their problems by the conquest of political power, that they as a class must become the nation, and use their political supremacy to end forever the exploitation of man by man. In other words, he aimed at a social system which would be entirely classless, one in which the means of production, and the wealth produced, would be the common heritage of the whole people, instead of, as at present, the private property of the rich minority.

While still a young man, his interest in the social advancement of the American workers caused him to join the Socialist Party, in Cincinnati, in the first decade of the century. He came to live in Detroit in 1913. When the first World War broke out in Europe, he definitely took the stand that it was a capitalist imperialist war and he worked within the Socialist Party for it to abandon its pacifist trend and to take up a position of militant opposition to war.

On the eve of America's entry into World War I, the Socialist Party called an Emergency National Convention. It met in St. Louis [April 7-14, 1917] and was in session when the Wilson administration declared war upon Germany in 1917. The SP during the war years, before America's entry, divided into four camps on the war issue. A small number were frankly pro-British. A larger number were pro-German. Others simply took a pacifist position, a non-committal stand, urging that America stay out and work for an early peace, but from 1914 to 1917, the bulk of the membership had developed an anti-war position, confused it is true, but nevertheless, definitely opposed to the war.

Renner and others from Michigan were delegates to the St. Louis Convention, but, as is often the case in organizations where a "machine" wields power from the top, it was difficult for the rank and file delegates to break through official barriers and express their will. Comrade Renner was conspicuous in the week-long effort to put the SP on record in opposition to the war. There was no doubt that the majority of the delegates were behind that decision. He played a strong role, working tirelessly to prevent a back-handed endorsement of the war, or a straddling of the issue, which a section of the leader-

ship sought to do. The result was that the final statement upon the war was not the clearest that could have been drafted, still it was construed by all concerned as an anti-war proclamation, and as such it was interpreted, both here and abroad. The delegates were determined not to support "Wall Street's War."

At that convention the main topic of conversation and controversy, between sessions, pertained to what had just happened in Russia. The Tsar's government had been overthrown, feudalism had fallen. Into its place had been thrust a "provisional government" which was receiving the support of most "socialists." Renner and a very few other delegates (mostly from Michigan) contended that the March Revolution had only given power to the capitalist class of Russia, and that another revolution would be necessary to put power into the hands of the workers, the proletarians, and poor peasants.

This was not a popular stand, as most "socialists" then wished to give endorsement, qualified and unqualified, to the "provisional government." Renner and others stood out against that proclaiming that a proletarian revolution was still necessary. In November of the same year, 1917, the Soviet Revolution, led by the Bolshevik party, placed exclusive political power into the hands of the proletariat and poor peasantry. That was a great triumph. On the night the news reached this country, the small group in Detroit which were looking for it, hailed it as the real thing, as the first nationwide revolution of the world's workers.

The role that Al Renner played in the working class movement is now understood by a few people, but it is one that will stand, and if the true history of American labor is ever written there is a place in the record for his loyal work.

The ultimate effect of the Bolshevik Revolution upon the Socialist Party brought a split in its ranks between pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet forces. Early in 1919 the executives of the SP expelled the Socialist Party of Michigan and suspended several foreign language federations, over half of the membership of the whole party. In June of the same year a "Left Wing Conference" was held in New York City. It was in a turmoil, when it was suggested that the chair be vacated and Comrade Renner put in to whip the Conference into shape. His knowledge of parliamentary procedure was such that he was able to discipline and hold the chair for the best part of the week. The decision of the Conference was for staying in the SP, but nearly 40 percent, including the Michigan delegation, left and called for a Conven-

tion to be held in Chicago on September 1st, 1919, to organize a Communist Party.

Thus the Communist Party of America came into being, with Renner in the chair, by unanimous decision of the delegates. The program adopted was extremely unbalanced, it was, to use a phrase later used by Lenin, quite “left-sick.” About a fifth of the delegates protested the program but did not leave the Party. A few months later the government had thousands of workers arrested in what became historically known as the “Red Raids” or the “Palmer Raids,” during the administration of Attorney General [Mitchell] Palmer.

The Communist Party did not stand up well under the government administered blow. Most of its members quit permanently. A relatively small number went “underground,” became a secret organization.

The Michigan (Proletarian) group refused to go “underground,” without an effort to stay in the open. These differences brought the Proletarian Party into being. It was organized in June 1920, upon a program of Marxian Communism, and has spread from coast to coast. Comrade Renner was one of its founders and was, for many years, an member of its National Executive Committee. Al was a popular speaker and held innumerable street meetings in Detroit and elsewhere. He traveled to many cities and delivered lectures on Marxism. In 1935 he visited the Soviet Union and upon his return he lectured on his experiences there.

During the period of the sitdown strikes in the 'Thirties, he participated effectively and did much to help build the labor movement. He was an excellent man in a large mass meeting, and equally effective on the lecture platform or in the classroom. Up to the time of his death he remained a member of the Proletarian Party, and with its younger members was very popular. Comrade Al Renner is gone from our midst, but his loyalty will long be remembered, and although he is dead his work will live on.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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