
Socialists Have Big Opportunity on War Question: Hillquit at Convention Declares Party is Not Made Up of Pacifists

[events of April 8, 1917]

by J. Louis Engdahl

Published in the *Milwaukee Leader*, v. 6, no. 105 (April 10, 1917), pp. 1, 5.

ST. LOUIS.— “We have a great opportunity before us,” said Morris Hillquit, New York, in the opening discussions of the convention Committee on War and Militarism, which began its session on the second day of the convention here [April 8, 1917], immediately after it had been appointed.

“If we take the proper stand,” said Hillquit, “we can bring considerable clarity on this question to the entire international movement. We can rally to us powerful forces to support our position. Our declaration should be vigorous, definite, and sane — and by sane I do not mean conservative. We can have sanity without being conservative.”

Ought Not Compromise.

Hillquit urged that if the committee showed fundamental differences he did not think it ought to compromise on the question of war and militarism. But he felt that while the early discussions of the committee showed 3 extreme views, he declared that fundamentally the members of the committee represented one view.

“The question that confronts us is not one of nationalism versus internationalism,” he said. “We are not pacifists. Ours is a militant, revolutionary organization. We all fight within the nation for the interests of the working class. We will defend the rights of the workers wherever an attack is made. If we are ready to

fight the ruling class, economically and politically, within the nation, lo we draw the line outside the nation.”

Points Out Danger.

Hillquit pointed out the danger of making general statements. He said it is folly to take abstract positions [such] as the workers have no country, and they will not defend themselves if attacked. He cited the case of the Russians under their present government, protecting themselves against any attempt on the part of the German ruling class to restore the Romanovs, and of the Mexicans, struggling for more democracy, fighting any attempt of American troops to fortify the interests of the capitalists of that country.

“Our country is a certain political and economic organization within which we live and act,” said Hillquit. “Our very object of seeking to conquer the political powers of this country shows we are trying to make this nation ours. It would be silly on our part to say that under no circumstances would we defend ourselves or our country.”

Committee is Named.

The Committee on War and Militarism as elected consists of Kate Richards O’Hare, Missouri; Morris Hillquit, Algernon Lee, and Louis B. Boudin,

New York; Kate Sadler, Washington; Patrick Quinlan, New Jersey; C.E. Ruthenberg and Frank Midney, Ohio; Dan Hogan, Arkansas; Job Harriman, California; Victor L. Berger, Wisconsin; John Spargo, Vermont; Maynard Shipley, Maryland; Walter Dillon, New Mexico; and George Speiss, Connecticut.

Immediately after the committee went into session it was decided to define the discussion to 3 points, as follows:

First — The position on war and militarism generally.

Second — The present war declared by the United States against Germany.

Third — Concrete or constructive program stating our position and outlining our activity during the war.

Take Up First Point.

The committee then went into a discussion on the first point. Berger, Wisconsin, giving his position on the question of nationalism and internationalism.

“Some of our comrades do not believe in nations,” he said. “For myself, I want it understood that I believe in nations. I feel that they are just as necessary as families. Without nations you can not have internationalism. I am both an American and a Socialist at the same time. If I didn’t believe in nations, I wouldn’t be a member of the Socialist Party and I wouldn’t vote. Anti-nationalism is anarchism. It makes a great difference to me whether I am an American or a Chinaman.”

Job Harriman, California, urged the uniting of all the forces opposed to war. He said these were to be found in the American Federation of Labor, the Progressive Party, and the farmers’ organizations, in addition to the Socialist Party.

Oppose Class Rule.

George Speiss, Connecticut, said that while he recognized national boundaries as being necessary, he declared we could not compromise with class governments.

Kate Sadler, Washington, declared that the Socialist purpose is to create a spirit within the nation that will transcend nationalism.

“While we recognize the existence of a nation,” she said, “our purpose is to create a realization of the interdependence of all humans the world over. We must draw the line of class distinctions and no compromise with any class government. All governments are maintained for the purpose of keeping us in subjection.

Walter Dillon, New Mexico, said his instructions were to go the absolute limit against war, even to the point of rebellion. He said this was the position of the farmers in the Socialist Party in New Mexico.

International is First.

Louis B. Boudin, New York, stated his stand on internationalism, declaring that cities, states, and nations were merely passing forms of civilization. Then followed a discussion on the basis of a nation, Berger claiming that the basis of a nation is its language.

“The international comes first and the nation afterward,” declared Boudin. “The Second International has been wrecked on this very question of nationalism.”

Delegate Hillquit broke in with, “Not at all!”

“The German comrades and the comrades elsewhere went wrong by placing the national struggle ahead of the class struggle,” continued Boudin, declaring that the struggle of class should be the fundamental entity.

Algernon Lee, New York, said that while the question of class antagonism is paramount, we must not necessarily be indifferent to all national questions.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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