

# **american socialist quarterly**

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# A Basis for a Proposed Program for Revolutionary Socialism

DAVID FELIX

THE responsibility of left socialists is especially heavy today. In all socialist parties of the world there is going on now a ceaseless questioning and analysis of past action and future planning. The world shattering events of the past two years have brushed aside forever the bland optimism of traditional social democratic theory. The irresistible surge of ever mounting socialist electoral majorities has been checked. Where this is not true there is no longer the certainty that this rising tide of votes is in itself enough to assure the attainment of the ultimate objective.\*

This is not the place to point out where the traditional doctrine has failed.\*\* It is sufficient here to point to the turn of events and say, "That path led to disaster. Let us see if there is not another." It is unquestionably true that there is no divine assurance that the new path will lead to the Promised Land, but then, divine assurance is small comfort to radicals and revolutionaries. It is at least comforting to know that the trail is not one that has already proven itself a cul de sac.

A frank confession of shortcomings will go far to disarm criticism. There is no genuine left wing in the American Socialist Party. Detroit proved that beyond dispute.\*\*\* There are

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\* In England there is the open questioning of the Socialist League. Czechoslovakia and the Scandinavian countries are perhaps freer from doubt but there too the spectre of fascism (especially Nazism) has infected at least a larger minority than ever before with the virus of suspicion.

\*\* For an excellent analysis of this important question, see "Germany's New Beginning" by Miles, published by The League for Industrial Democracy.

\*\*\* A striking, if humiliating proof of this assertion is afforded by an analysis of the so-called "left vote". It reveals the utmost confusion and blending of lines on all votes which might properly be considered left and right contests.

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at best "left tendencies". This is hardly an original observation but it can do no harm to repeat it in view of the assertion of some that the left wing is a definite communist force propelling an unhappy party in the unmistakable direction of Moscow.

Beside a lack of unanimity, or perhaps because of it, the left forces suffer from organizational and intellectual immaturity. The right wingers have had, in the past, almost complete possession of the loci of organizational and propaganda strength. Also, with but a few honorable exceptions, the intellectual leaders of the left have been of tender years.

Despite all, there is a very real sentiment for left wing unity and infinite possibilities of socialist achievement once it is realized. There has been already a certain coalescing of doctrine among fractions of the left wing. Examples of this may be found in the two Militant Programs and the Revolutionary Policy Committee's statements. These manifestos are of indisputable value in formalizing the currents of thought and also in provoking discussion. None is complete or satisfactory in itself as a program for a unified left wing. This their sponsors recognize, if not on theoretical grounds, at least for tactical reasons. A broader and more basic synthesis is needed, taking in not only these documents but the voluminous literature now appearing in Europe as well.\* In order to allay suspicion it might be well to state here that this article does not pretend to be such a synthesis. It is hoped, however, that it may serve as a draft

In answer to those who think that theoretical unity is of minor importance today and who would shelve it in favor of organizational problems and questions of practical politics, let it be stated that while there is Engels' word for it that a step forward in the movement is worth more than any amount of disputation over theoretical exactitude, there is equally high scriptural authority to the effect that without

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\* Such a document is the Thesis of the International Left Wing (unpublished). Also Heinrich Ehrlich's "Struggle for Revolutionary Socialism" published in English by the Bund Club of New York.

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a firm intellectual basis the movement may progress rapidly in an undesirable direction. To those for whom citation from authority carries little weight, the examples of other so-called "militant radical" groups with insufficient or definitely bad theoretical foundations may be pointed to.\* Meat as it is for the intellectual rather than the worker, theoretical unity, fortunately or unfortunately, is indispensable.

Before proceeding to an indication, however incomplete, of such a program, there is one more preliminary matter that must be disposed of. To some, the following remarks may seem an impertinence, but honesty, both to the left and the right, impels their observance. It is simply a necessity of describing what the left wing is **not**, as well as what it is; what it is **not** trying to do, as well as what it is trying to do.

It is not now, nor is it trying to become, an anonymous and inglorious appendage to the Communist Party. Nor is it studying for that honor with any of the unofficial communist parties, the so-called "splinter" parties. This point cannot be emphasized too strongly. The ideological leaders of the left wing are not trying to gain the benediction of Lenin by sneaking in the back door. There is a Communist Party for all who want to join it. There are as well, communist prophets crying in the wilderness and leading their little bands hither and yon—each one claiming to be the true fruit of the union of Marx and Lenin—if a desperately mixed metaphor be forgiven. These left wing leaders are not interested in proving their legitimacy and their right to the mantle of Lenin. They acknowledge profoundly the worth of the great leader but they recognize that Lenin will not lead the American Revolution.

There are many radicals, who like the prophets before mentioned, seek to distinguish between the body of doctrine called communism and the present application of that doctrine by the Communist International and Joseph Stalin. Granted that there are differences, still the attempt is not to lay down a communist line for the Socialist Party. Communism has proven its bankruptcy as thoroughly as ever has the tradi-

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\* The various fascist groups, technocrats, Utopian societies, Epic planners, etc.

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tional social democracy, indeed even more so. No matter how deplorable one may consider the present condition of the socialist parties—they are the picture of glowing health compared to the communist shambles. One notes tense ideological struggles in the Labor and Socialist International, struggles between reformism and revolutionary policy, struggles which may indeed split the International asunder, but at least it is a sign of life, of questioning, of searching, a sign that it is reacting to the times. What does one see in the direction of Moscow? The Communist International, a dying man, plucking at the bed covers and mumbling “Social-Fascism”.\* A dying man kept alive by doses of Russian adrenalin. If communism as well as traditional social democracy be discarded as an aim, the query may be put as to whether there is any middle ground.

Kirby Page has answered the query by stating that there is not. With this answer it is permissible to disagree, as indeed the left wing does—not because of a constitutional repugnance for either communism or traditional social democracy—but because of a sincere belief, backed up by indisputable facts, that both have failed and that in this country, at least, the true road lies elsewhere—in what for want of a better name is called left socialism or revolutionary socialism.

It then becomes necessary to face a new challenge. If the premise is true, what hope is there in either party? Why not start a new International, or at least a new party? This thrust is not as mortal as it may at first seem. In the first place, the left forces are growing so fast and so unanimously in the social democratic parties of the world that this step is not necessary. Further, the social democratic parties and, of course, the Labor and Socialist International, comprise the vast majority of the class conscious workers of the world—they are parties of inner democracy (which the communist parties certainly are not).

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\* Since this was written the patient has been muttering this mumbo-jumbo in a lower voice and it is to be hoped that a complete cessation of this invocation will be accompanied by a strengthening of the forces of working class unity. It is too soon, however, to predict.

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It would indeed be foolish to throw away the opportunity to reach, influence and orient these masses just when they are moving and when it is possible to meet them and influence the party programs through inner party democracy.\*

One further word before proceeding to a consideration of the proposed program for left wing socialists. It will be observed that what follows is not simply a declaration of principles but that there is also a good deal of explanatory matter attaching to each proposal. It is believed that this supplementary matter is not only permissible but essential in what is after all, merely a thesis for discussion and elaboration. A finished declaration of principles would be a more polished affair, with more emphasis on positive affirmation and less on the reasoning by which such affirmations were derived.

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Present day democracy affords as good a jumping off place as any in a discussion of left wing principles. It is evident that it is a "bogus" democracy (as far as the workers are concerned), a veiled dictatorship of the capitalist class. It is equally evident to the "Lefts" of today, as it was to Marx and Lenin, that notwithstanding its defects, the bourgeois democratic republic provides the best forum (under capitalism) for the prosecution of the class struggle. It is therefore to the interest of the revolutionary movement to retain this particular form of capitalist dictatorship for as long as it is found necessary to tolerate capitalism itself. It would be madness to fall into the position the communists found themselves in in Germany—admitting no difference between Bruening, Von Papen, Von Schleicher and Hitler.

Judging by past experience, it would seem that the over-

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\* Further reasons might, of course, be given, but they are not particularly pertinent for those who are already members of the Socialist Party. At the International Congress of Independent Revolutionary Socialist Parties, held in Paris in August 1933, a delegate, representing the Spanish Communist Federation (opposition) drew the attention of the conference to the fact that both Internationals were quite strong. He did not believe that efforts for a new International would prove successful. To assure the success of a new International, two things were necessary: Some great historical event, and at least, one large party to serve as a backbone. Neither of these conditions is today present. (Struggle for Revolutionary Socialism, p. 43.)

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whelming probability is that when the rising might of the working class is combined with the eventual accelerating decline of capitalism—the ruling class will not hesitate to cast aside the democratic velvet glove and attempt to rule with the mailed fist of fascism—for as long as it can, and today it cannot be predicted how long that would be.

Granted these two premises, the desirability of retaining the bourgeois democratic republic until capitalism itself is done away with, and the overwhelming probability (amounting to certainty) of the attempt at fascism, what is to be the course of socialism?

While it is necessary to continuously emphasize the repressive nature of the capitalist state, to point out that it is the executive committee of the ruling class—it is at the same time of paramount importance not to allow the least diversion from the duty of fighting for and preserving and enlarging civil liberties. This does not mean an eternal compromising to maintain the bourgeois republic. It does mean putting up a determined battle against anyone who attempts to curtail the freedom the workers now enjoy as well as fighting to enlarge this freedom. It does not mean, as it has meant in other countries, granting extraordinary powers to a bourgeois government (by either active participation or passive acquiescence) on the strength of its assertion that it will use these powers to combat fascism.

It **most emphatically** does not mean condoning a curtailment of workers' rights and lowering of living conditions as a "lesser evil" to a future fascism. It means an aggressive fight at all times. The fight to preserve civil liberties is not, by any means, the steady parliamentary retrogression that was witnessed in Germany. The fight for civil liberty is more often an anti-government fight than otherwise. It implies disregarding injunctions, encouraging strikes (at the proper times), leading demonstrations—all of which actions are done in the teeth of governmental opposition.

But socialists must never give up the battlecry that it is they who are fighting for freedom and democracy. Again the



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communist dilemma must be avoided—scorning liberty and then wailing when it is gone. In order to tie up this fight for civil liberty with the conviction of the ultimate necessity of using other than electoral methods to achieve power, it must be made apparent that there is in reality no freedom of choice between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary methods, between peaceful and violent methods.

In this regard it is necessary to adopt the reasoning of the thesis of the International Left Wing Socialists (before referred to) to the effect that the choice between peacefulness and violence, between democracy and dictatorship, is apparent rather than real. The real choice is between who shall rule—capitalists or workers. If the capitalist class is to continue in power, then it will be forced to use fascist methods in order to try to resolve its inner contradictions. If, on the other hand, the working class is to rule, it must be prepared to adapt itself to all methods of struggle.

To recapitulate. The left wing program must point out unhesitatingly the class character of present day democracy. It must nevertheless show the value of this very democracy in the formation of a mass revolutionary movement and the necessity of fighting to retain and enlarge civil liberties. Side by side with this it must emphasize, unmistakably and without equivocation, in the light of post-war events, at home and abroad, and Marxian analysis, implied if not expressed, the probability of having to fight the ultimate battle with weapons other than the customary folded ballots; and the consequent desirability and necessity of preparation and training for this eventuality.\*

The fight against fascism demands that the Socialist Party take the lead in welding a common front against its ever increasing danger. Unity of all groups, even of those that may

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\* Lest this phrase be ravished from its context by unfriendly critics of the right and construed to mean the immediate and forthwith armament of the workers with lead pipes and target rifles and their drilling in tenement basements, let it be said that such is not the intention. Preparation today would be quite sufficient if it extended to enlistment of the mass of the workers into disciplined unions and a political party of their own.

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be opposed for other than strictly socialist reasons, is a crying need. However, no reliance may be reposed in groups that are not working class and anti-capitalist in nature. The others may be induced to relinquish the fight for minor concessions, (racial, religious, etc.), which, while they lessen certain phases of the fascist terror and repression, do not strike at the heart of the monster; its capitalist and anti-working class character.

The phrase "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" is to many the tocsin to battle. They are pathetically eager to do or die—some for, some against it. Nevertheless, as a form of words it does not do to get worked up about it. As a concept meaning the retention of power by the victorious working class against all counter-revolutionary groups, it must be defended by all left wing socialists.

No one can predict what steps will be necessary in order to retain this power, once it is first grasped. No one can predict the ultimate success or failure of any particular line of action. All that can be done is to study the actions of all classes that have come to power after a revolution.

As an example of a working class revolution Marx had only the Paris Commune. The student of today has as well, Russia in 1905 and 1917, Germany in 1918, Austria in 1918 and 1934 and other examples, Bavaria, Hungary, Cuba, Finland, etc. Instruction may also be gained from observation of the successes and failures of enemy groups—the fascists, the White Guards, etc. Not one or all of these can give a definite answer to the question, because of the impossibility of knowing under just what conditions the American Revolution will occur. Lenin, on the very eve of the October Revolution, in his "State and Revolution" conceived of the dictatorship in a very different form from what it subsequently assumed.

However, certain fundamental conclusions can be drawn—and a host of errors avoided. One immediate lesson can be learned, the determination to hold and defend power by whatever means may become necessary, and of equal importance—the value of proclaiming the fact, here and now.

A moment to digress. These is a form of pseudo super-

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revolutionaryism which says:

“We agree on the necessity of holding power and also on the probability of being forced to use extra-legal methods to obtain it—only we are too wise in revolutionary ways to proclaim it. When the time comes, we’ll act. But in the meantime we don’t talk about it. We don’t tip off the enemy.”

At first glance the reasoning seems sound—until it is remembered that these were the very words of Otto Wels and the other leaders of the German Social Democratic Party at the International Congress in Vienna in 1931. Until it is realized that no matter how sincere the holders of this opinion may be, the great masses that follow them are not aware of these valiant plans lying unuttered in their minds. Until it is realized that unless these plans are known openly, and preparations made for their execution—there is not the slightest chance of their being put into effect.

To return to Proletarian Dictatorship. There are grave objections to the use of the word “Dictatorship”. These objections are tactical. The word has unholy and indeed unsafe and misleading connotations. It is impossible to use the word today without calling up visions of Mussolini, Dollfuss and Hitler, as well as any number of cracked-brained demagogues. True, it recalls Russia as well, but the least attractive side of Russia—of that, more later.

The use of this word will make the socialist task doubly difficult, nevertheless if it were the only word that expressed the concept clearly, the obligation to use it would be inescapable. Fortunately this is not so. There is a phrase which properly means the same yet is not open to the same tactical objections. That is “Workers’ Democracy”.\*

Despite all certain people have done of late in attempting to disavow what this phrase means, it remains what it was. It no more means “Social” or “Industrial Democracy” than “Left” means “Right”. It is disturbing that there are members of the left wing who make such essays in philology. At the

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\* There is no lack of other phrases. Marx’s own phrase was “Dictatorship of the Revolutionary Classes.”

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risk of appearing elementary it might not be unwise to state what this term really means.

Capitalist democracy is a method of capitalist rule. Workers' democracy is a method of workers' rule. Just as capitalist democracy sees to it that capitalists control the essential points in present day society, so will workers' democracy insure workers' control. It is not the final stage of socialism—and it must be made clear that it is not—it is the government of the transition period.

There is another reason for preferring "Workers' Democracy" and that is because Russia typifies the Dictatorship of the Proletariat today. Regardless of individual opinions concerning the merits or demerits of the Russian form, it is folly to be bound by it. Russia evolved its own form of proletarian rule—the United States should be at least as free.

It is significant that the Bolsheviks themselves, in agitating for the October Revolution, did not cry:

"Down with democracy. Long live dictatorship."

but rather the opposite:

"Down with dictatorship. Long live democracy."

Their reasoning, which appears impeccable, was to the effect that the Provisional Government of Kerensky was a dictatorship, being no longer supported by popular mandate and that the Soviets represented the true democratic institutions. What they did with the Soviets after they came into power is another question—the important thing to note is that as a matter of strategy they used the democratic slogan.

To conclude this point. A left wing declaration must include the concept of Proletarian Dictatorship. It were however better if this term were not used and "Workers' Democracy" substituted instead.

In organic connection with the question of Workers' Democracy is the further question of arming the victorious workers. The strongest barrier to counter-revolution is an armed and informed working class. A socialist party, representing the working class, must have the fullest reliance upon that class. There is no attempt at ruling the workers from

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above and there must be no fear of placing the greatest measure of confidence in them. Consequently, the **first** duty of the party once it comes to power, as the result of revolution, is the placing of the means of defense in the hands of its people. Only in this way will the chances of being overthrown by the armed hirelings of the capitalists be reduced.

The next point in a left wing declaration should be the statement of the **form** of a Workers' Government. The catchphrase is "Workers' Councils" or "Soviets". Socialists are agreed that their first task is not the destruction of the bourgeois forms of government but rather their capture. It is further understood that it is impossible to attain to socialism within the framework of the present bourgeois state. Distinctly proletarian forms will have to be evolved to fit the requirements of the proletarian state. It would be a mistake of the first order to proclaim dogmatically that this proletarian form will be the Workers' Council or Soviet. Here again the word "Soviet" carries with it the inevitable Russian connotation and in this case it would be farcical.

In this regard, a brief review of the history of Workers' Councils in Russia will be illuminating. In the first place—they are a Menshevik, not a Bolshevik invention. The first Soviet, that of St. Petersburg in October 1905, was set up as a council of all the democratic factions—the differences between Menshevik, Bolshevik, and Social Revolutionary as well as other non-party groups were too deep to be resolved in any other way. The first president of the St. Petersburg Soviet was a non-socialist, non-party lawyer named Nosar Khristalev. It was only after he was sent to prison in December that Trotsky as one of the committee became the head.

The anarchists were not allowed to sit in the Soviet and it is interesting to note that Lenin justified this action on the ground that the Soviet was **neither a Workers' Parliament nor the organ of a proletarian system of self-government**—indeed in no sense an organ of self-government—but a fighting organization for the attainment of a definite end.

The Bolsheviks never, until after the revolution of Feb-

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ruary 1917, considered the Soviet as a permanent working class institution of government. It is not necessary now to consider the reasons that caused Lenin to change his mind and proclaim :

“All power to the Soviets.”

What is more important is to take note of what has happened to the Soviets since the October Revolution. The Soviets have become nothing more than a democratic front for the dictatorship of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party. They have **no** real power, they do not govern. What power they have is derived from their hand-picked membership—hand-picked by the Central Committee of the C. P. U. S. S. R.\*

These facts are mentioned for only one purpose—to show that the Workers' Councils are not a Bolshevnik invention (indeed, they are much more a Menshevik patent) and that the Russian Soviets are very poor examples of forms of proletarian government. One thing is evident. It is not now the task of the Socialist Party to build Workers' Councils in order to have something to carry on with after the revolution,—there is no place for them. The labor unions, the central labor bodies and the working class political party absorb all the activity of the workers—there is no room today for an intermediate “semi-political, semi-economic” organization.

A left wing program should state the necessity of proletarian forms of government in the transitional state but would weaken itself if it were to point to the Russian Soviets as an example. It might go so far as to point out the classic form that all workers' governing bodies take—whether Soviets or Parliaments—that is, the combination of the legislative and administrative functions in a one camera body.

No program would be complete without a declaration of its sponsors' position on the vexatious question of working class unity. It is only fair to state that no program has ever been issued without a pious hope for its consummation. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of all these prayers has been,

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\* Vide Arthur Rosenberg, “History of Bolshevism”.

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until quite recently, exactly nothing. In order that there may be no misunderstanding, it is as well to state frankly that unity between the Socialist Party and the Communist Party is the sore point. The logic of recent events has changed all this and the prospect of achieving what all recognize as an indispensable prelude to working class victory is brighter than ever before.\*

Left wing socialists must press energetically for such unity on terms which will make possible a vigorous and sincere fight against war, fascism and the other dangers facing the working class.\*\* Ultimate organic unity, however remote it may appear now, is the goal. In the meanwhile, negotiations for unity on specific issues should begin.

That favorite gambit of parlor debate—confiscation versus compensation—need cause no lengthy dispute. It is best approached in a hard-boiled, capitalistic, businessman's way, i.e.: The Workers' State will take over what it wants in the cheapest and easiest fashion. Circumstances attendant at the time will determine the exact procedure. Certainly there is no commitment to compensate anyone. In the case of wealthy owners of large industry there is just the opposite.

Because of the weakness of the Socialist Party at the present time, but principally because of the structure of the United States government, the question of coalition does not appear pertinent. In all probability it will never arise. However there is a corresponding temptation in the guise of fusion. The left wing's unalterable opposition to fusion with capitalist controlled parties would, of course, be a part of any declaration.

Immediate demands are a just and necessary part of any socialist program. To disregard them is to substitute Utopian

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\* There is no need here to recite all the familiar events of the past six months. It is sufficient to state that steps *have* been taken toward unity in France, Italy, Spain, the Saar.

\*\* The most important matter to be disposed of in trying to arrive at unity—more important than vicious personal attacks, than the abandonment of the theory of "Social-Fascism"—is *Trade Union Unity*. If this formidable obstacle could be removed, many of the objections now pleaded by those against united action would collapse. However, no progress can be made unless negotiations are started.

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radicalism for scientific socialism. They are advanced for two purposes. To better the living conditions of the workers and to increase the workers' sense of their own power by rallying them behind these demands. Indirectly they accomplish a third purpose. When capitalism reaches the period of diminishing returns (which it has in this country already) the effect of granting these demands is to further weaken its structure.

There are a few points that would appear in a left wing program that are so evident as to need little or no explanation. They are: a declaration of unalterable opposition to all capitalist and imperialist wars, and a further threat of mass resistance to such wars and plans for such wars—the Detroit declaration. A pledge of aid to Soviet Russia in the event of an imperialist attack (not as a grand gesture but as an earnest promise of all possible help), a declaration of solidarity to the left forces of the Labor and Socialist International in other countries and the setting up of a secretariat to correspond with them.

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The foregoing is submitted as a draft for a proposed left wing declaration of principles. Its purpose would be to solidify all left forces in the Socialist Party and to act as a guide to the next convention of the party, where it is to be hoped that it or a program similar to it will be adopted as the party's program.

The scattered forces of the left must realize that if they are to do more than sound occasional groans of protest at the undeniable tendencies to reformism present in the party, they must themselves unite on a minimum program of action. The present policy of each little group spending most of its energy "exposing" other groups can accomplish little. It is a communist tactic of doubtful value. In the eighteen months ahead, months pregnant with momentous happenings for American labor, theoretical unity in the left wing, on the basis of a minimum theoretical program, will do much to



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strengthen the Socialist Party and make it what it rightfully should be—the instrument for effectuating the Coming American Revolution.\*

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\* It will be noted that nothing has been said here about two problems that are commonly dealt with in all theoretical discussions. They are, 1. The Party's position on the trade union question, and 2. The vanguard versus mass party theory. In answer to the first question, let it be said that no amount of declarations are of much use. Actions speak louder than words, and the actions of the party during the recent great strikes, particularly the textile strike, leave little to be desired. Since there is little danger of the party espousing the dual union policy of the communists it is only necessary to sound a warning against the fanatical A. F. of L. policy of the Lovestoneites. In regard to the second question, this is not a matter for declaration. It is not a question of choosing which type of party is preferred. If the principles of the proposed declaration are adhered to, the logic of future events will inexorably decide whether the party is to be a spear-head or the mass party of American labor. The important thing is to remain the *revolutionary* party.

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