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# THE SOCIALIST PARTY CONVENTION

BY WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

A COUPLE of years ago, in my pamphlet entitled *The Crisis in the Socialist Party*,\* I pointed out in detail that the basic cause for the failure of the Socialist Party, expressed graphically by its lessened mass influence and by the fact that the party has fewer members than when it started out in 1900, was because the Socialist Party had never followed a true class-struggle policy. That is, dominated since its foundation by opportunistic lawyers, doctors, writers, preachers, etc., it had failed in the two essentials necessary for its growth into a mass revolutionary party, namely, (a) it had not given a militant and practical lead to the workers in their daily struggles, and (b) it had not educated a solid core of clear-headed Socialist fighters trained in the principles of Marxism-Leninism.

In the same pamphlet I also pointed out that in the change of Socialist Party leadership and policy which was then taking place in "the Leftward turn" of the party, the Socialist Party was not ridding itself of the opportunism that historically had prevented its growth, but was merely giving this opportunism new forms. Thus, in place of its traditional open Right opportunism, the Socialist Party was de-

veloping a "Left sectarianism." The Socialist Party was also at the time injecting into its veins counter-revolutionary poison by accepting the Trotskyites into its ranks.

Together with other Communists, I stated that if this situation were not corrected, the decline of the Socialist Party would continue and that that party would be still further isolated from the masses. These warnings have turned out to be quite accurate. The Socialist Party leaders, deaf to friendly Communist analyses and admonitions, have plunged deeper and deeper into this ultra-Left course. It is true that they expelled the Trotskyites (whom we advised them not to accept in the first place) but they are nevertheless more and more permeated with Trotskyite and semi-Trotskyite policies.

The heart of the Socialist Party's present-day "Left" sectarianism is that the party rejects the central immediate issue of mass struggle today—that of democracy versus fascism—and tries instead to substitute for it that of socialism versus capitalism.

The "Left" sectarianism of the Socialist Party, more and more permeated with counter-revolutionary Trotskyism, also leads that party to reject the lessons of the Russian revolution of the revolutionary teachings of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Dimitroff, and

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\*William Z. Foster, *The Crisis in the Socialist Party*, Workers Library Publishers, New York.

to rely upon the pseudo-revolutionary nonsense of Norman Thomas and Herbert Zam. Consequently, the Socialist Party still fails in both essentials for building a revolutionary party, that is, it does not work out an effective policy of mass leadership in the daily struggle, and it does not build up a trained body of socialist fighters. The inevitable outcome of its new Leftism, as we foretold, has been a still further decline of the party's numerical strength and influence.

The continuous decline of the Socialist Party was clearly to be seen at its 21st Convention, held April 21-23 in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The official figures claimed a dues-paying membership of only 6,194. Even accepting these low totals at face value, it would show a two-third drop from the party's membership of 19,121 in 1935. But in reality, the situation is still worse. The convention figure of 6,194 members was based on dues paid for the year ending Nov. 30, 1937; but since then further membership losses have taken place through splits in Reading, Connecticut, and California, and by the expulsion of the Trotskyites. Actually, the Socialist Party at present, by a generous estimate, has not more than 4,000 paying members, and the Young People's Socialist League, practically bankrupt, has only about 300.

The fall in the mass prestige of the Socialist Party has also proceeded apace. Its trade union influence is now almost negligible. Its political following, a hangover from its old traditions, is also manifestly diminishing. At the Kenosha Convention no reports could be made of important mass activities in any field. A significant indication of the declining influence of the Socialist

Party was the fact that its convention was almost completely ignored by the labor, liberal and capitalist press, which in previous years always widely publicized Socialist Party conventions.

The work of the convention, in sum, only served to plunge the Socialist Party deeper into Leftist sectarianism. The convention did not analyze what is the matter with the policy of their party; it did not work out a program of practical mass leadership; it did not develop a perspective of revolutionary education. Its numerous resolutions tended generally in the direction of counter-revolutionary Trotskyism, and their application must still further isolate the Socialist Party from the masses. Although the convention enveloped its policies in a maze of revolutionary phrases, this cannot alter their sectarian opportunist character.

On the vital question of defeating reaction and fascism in the United States, the convention showed no understanding of the present-day tasks of a revolutionary working class party. Instead of concentrating against the Wall Street bankers and their Republican and Democratic agents as the main enemy and then calling for a great democratic front in the coming elections to defeat them, the convention, with a flourish of revolutionary phrasemaking, singled out Roosevelt and the New Deal as the principal force to be defeated, and then set out to do this by splitting the progressive ranks through the development of a premature, sectarian labor party. Such a political line can have but two results: first to play into the hands of the reactionaries, and, second, to destroy the prestige of the Socialist Party as a mass leader.

On the question of peace, the convention also adopted a policy which has nothing in common with the interests of the masses. While repudiating isolationism in words, it spoke for isolationism in fact, which means surrender to the fascist war-makers. In taking this stand, the Socialist Party placed itself in contradiction to the line, not only of the Communist International, but also of the Socialist Second International and the Socialist-controlled International Federation of Trade Unions, all of which advocate a policy of collective security by the democratic nations to restrain the fascist aggressors. The Socialist Party, by this action, also runs counter to the developing mass collective security movement in this country. Although for the moment the Socialist Party may seem to gain some support by playing for those masses who still believe in isolationism, it will eventually pay the penalty by diminished mass contacts and influence.

On Spain the destructive character of the new "Left" sectarian line of the Socialist Party was glaringly manifest. The convention resolution delivered its main attack, not against Franco (Hitler and Mussolini were not even mentioned), but against the Communist International! It poured out great praise upon the discredited Largo Caballero, and shed crocodile tears over the Trotskyites and other counter-revolutionaries now justly in the jails of Loyalist Spain. It carefully refrained from endorsing the Negrin government, so opposed is the Socialist Party to the People's Front. The flight of the Socialist Party from its earlier policy of open opportunism to its present one of sectarian opportun-

ism is well exemplified by the facts that six years ago the Socialist Party supported the Hindenburg government in Germany, which was then, with the help of the Social-Democratic leaders, preparing the way for Hitler, while now the Socialist Party, in its new ultra-Leftism, refuses to endorse the Spanish People's Front government notwithstanding its heroic fight against fascism.

On the U.S.S.R., the convention also failed signally. In substance, the Soviet Union was considered not as the land of socialism, but as just another imperialist power. Its great achievements in building socialism were ignored, its peace policy was repudiated and slandered, its trials of the Trotskyite-Bukharinite traitors were denounced as "frame-ups," its proletarian dictatorship was lumped together with the fascist dictatorships, a la Hearst. All of which signifies that the Socialist Party does not recognize the revolution when it sees it, and that it has no inkling of the problems of the actual building of socialism. The great revolutionary lessons of the Soviet Union are quite lost upon it. Although the Socialist Party seems quite unaware of the fact, one of the basic reasons for its failure to grow is this hostile attitude towards the Soviet Union. So long as it persists in this, the Socialist Party can never hope to win the allegiance of the most militant and progressive sections of the working class without whom the Socialist Party cannot be built.

The convention delivered many attacks against the Communist Party. The Communist Party policy, which is fast building our Party into a mass Party, was condemned as crassest op-

portunism. The Communist Party was slanderously accused of thuggery, suppression of Party and trade union democracy, warmongering, expulsions of Socialists from Communist-led trade unions, cooperation with the police against Socialists, and a host of other imaginary crimes, much along the Pegler, Stolberg Red-baiting line. The convention provided no basis for the Socialist Party united front work with the Communists, but it raised no objection to Socialists cooperating with the notorious fascist Hamilton Fish in the "Keep America Out of War" Committee.

The convention was torn with factionalism. The two principal factions were the Clarity group, led by the renegade Zam, and the Militant group, headed by Thomas. The main bone of contention between them was the extent to which the Socialist Party should go in the direction of Trotskyism. The Clarity group, which is fast degenerating into Trotskyism, secured the upper hand in the convention and in the newly-elected National Executive Committee. This assures that the Socialist Party in the coming period will plunge still deeper into the morass of sectarian opportunism that is ruining it.

The convention was destitute of enthusiasm. It has been followed by confusion and pessimism in the dwindling Socialist Party ranks. The Thomas group is especially demoralized and is evidencing definitely liquidatory tendencies. It may eventually quit the Socialist Party and, in the main section, New York, merge its identity into the American Labor Party.

The Kenosha Convention re-emphasized the fact that the Socialist Party, due to its uncured opportunism, does not know how to fight for socialism. It has only one-fifth as many members as it had when it was launched 38 years ago. During the mass upheaval of the past several years, a period of great mass political awakening and sharpened class struggle, of swift trade union growth, and of rapid expansion of the Communist Party, the Socialist Party continues to dwindle and decline. This is because of its wrong policies, a fact which such empty political leaders as Norman Thomas and Herbert Zam cannot understand. Unless the Socialist Party drastically changes its present political line it will degenerate altogether into a harmful sect, a barrier in the path of working class progress.