

**Expulsion of Half-Educated Socialists a Trap:
Letter to the *California Social Democrat*
(July 25, 1915)**

Terre Haute, Ind., July 25, 1915.

Dear Comrade Williams:

I am just back and having to leave again. I have been thinking seriously of your predicament and have read everything regarding it that has come to my hands, and although I am far behind with my work, I feel as if I am duty bound to make answer to the inquiry in your letter of some days ago.¹

First of all, I am not to be understood as attempting to meddle in the affairs of California. I never meddle in local complications unless asked to or unless I can do some good. In this instance I am simply giving you my views in compliance with your request.

In the next place what is here written is simply my individual opinion and I am just as apt to be wrong as anyone else.

After having gone over the whole matter I want to say that your own statement, "To the Comrades of California," has almost word for word my unqualified endorsement. The few exceptions that I might take to it are scarcely worth considering. Upon the main issue itself you could have expressed my views and it could hardly have been done more clearly nor in a calmer and more temperate spirit.

As the matter now stands it is a very complicated one, but it need not lead to disastrous results unless the comrades of California prove themselves incapable of dealing with it intelligently, which I am not ready to believe.

What is needed, first of all, is clear thinking, calm deliberation, and a comradely spirit in composing differences over non-essentials, without which there can be no united action.

The Bull Moosers are doubtless laughing in their sleeves at your discomfiture. They have hit the bullseye and if the comrades now get excited and abuse one another to the disruption and destruction of the party, instead of uniting to repel the attack, the aim of this "reform measure" will have been fully accomplished. For the Socialists to fight one another now over this matter is to play directly into the hands of the Bull Moosers and the latter have very shrewdly calculated upon this very

thing. Will the Socialists of California walk into the trap so craftily set for them by the enemy? I shall hope and believe not.

Now then, in the present unforeseen and unexpected situation in California, section 3 of article 10 of the national constitution becomes inoperative.² About that there can be no question. To attempt its general enforcement in California under the present circumstances will be simply to disrupt, if not to destroy the party. The few who might remain when all the expelling and bitterness and vituperation and factional warfare were ended would not amount to enough to be called a party, but would be reduced to the size and limits and harmlessness of a sect.

At the same time it will not do for any loyal party member to repudiate the national constitution. To do that would not only be wrong but would have harmful and mischievous results.

Now section 3 of the national constitution reads in a way that it may be construed, I think, to take into consideration the conditions peculiar to California and which may in time spread to other states and certainly will if the experiment works and the Socialist Party is wiped out on the Pacific coast.

I am not and never have been strong in the expelling business. I am opposed to it except in extreme cases and as a last resort. I hate and abhor the inquisitorial spirit, the spirit that wants to expel and brand and put on the rack and figuratively burn at the stake. This spirit is wretchedly out of place in the socialist movement. I prefer to correct the faults of comrades, as my own need correction, rather than search with a detective's infernal instinct for a chance to prefer charges and sear their foreheads with the brand of disloyalty.

Now I believe no well seasoned Socialist in California or elsewhere will under any circumstances vote a capitalist ticket. Upon that rock I think you should take your stand. But there are thousands who are not sufficiently educated and grounded to understand the reason why of this and to throw out and brand them with treason would be to my mind for the party to commit deliberate suicide, and the party that would be so foolish as to attempt this in the face of the existing facts would merit destruction for it would not in plain truth have the sense nor be fit to exist. What these half-educated members need is not expulsion to drive them forever from our ranks but education to bring them to a true understanding of the Socialist position. Upon this point your statement is particularly strong and in my opinion absolutely invaluable.

To sum up I venture to suggest that your State Executive Committee is in position to take the initial steps looking to the solution of this vexa-

tious and complicated problem. I think this board should issue a statement (not a resolution or a referendum), clear, calm, concise, and to the point, explaining the party law and the situation: stating that no loyal Socialist can or will under any circumstances vote a capitalist ticket, and earnestly appealing to them to refrain from so doing and thereby walking into a trap set by the enemy, while at the same time recommending that on account of the utter impossibility of enforcing Section 3 no general attempt to do so be made until the party has had more time to grapple with the problem, adapt itself to the change, and find a way out of the difficulty without disrupting the party.

In other words, I would urge the party membership to line up; be loyal and refrain from voting the capitalist ticket while at the same time I would say that we propose education instead of expulsion in dealing with those who are still new to party discipline and do not yet understand why it is absolutely necessary to draw so sharp a line between the Socialist Party and all capitalist parties whatsoever.

This should be followed up by a petition or memorial to the National Executive Committee and through the NEC to the National Committee. The reasons should be clearly shown why Section 3 should be modified in the case of California and possibly other states hereafter, where said section is absolutely impossible of enforcement. In due course of time, I believe, such modification could be effected and in the meantime the comrades of California could be carrying on through their papers, their speakers, by leaflets, tracts, or otherwise a thorough educational campaign, covering the point in particular, cautioning the newer members against taking this bait of the Bull Moosers, showing them clearly in the socialist spirit, why they and the party can only lose in the end by voting the capitalist ticket even though not a single Socialist candidate is in the field, and thus escaping the danger that now threatens to divide them and array them against each other in bitter hostility to their mutual undoing and to the destruction of the party.

It is better to reason than to abuse and better to educate than to expel. if there is not other alternative it is better to violate the constitution than to destroy the party. No one is more insistent upon preserving the party integrity than myself, but we must use common sense in that as in all other things and there are times when to stickle blindly and fanatically for a point is to lose the entire case.

I have had to write under stress, but I trust you will understand me. I feel keenly with and for the California comrades in this crisis. They are being tested as never before. Will they be equal to the ordeal and emerge

from it united, triumphant, stronger than before with all my heart I hope so. You are at liberty to use this letter as you may think proper.

With affectionate greetings and warmest wishes to yourself and comrades, I remain

Yours fraternally,

Eugene V. Debs.

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¹ The original letter has not been preserved.

² Article 10, Section 3 of the current constitution of August 1914 read: "...No state or local organization shall under any circumstances fuse, combine or compromise with any other political party or organization, or refrain from making nominations, in order to favor the candidate of such other organizations... No member of the Socialist Party shall, under any circumstances, vote in primary or regular elections for any candidate other than Socialists nominated, endorsed, or recommended as candidates of the Socialist Party. To do otherwise will constitute party treason, and result in expulsion from the party."