
Conference for Progressive Political Action: A Report to the Membership of the Socialist Party.

by Otto Branstetter, et al.

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The Conference for Progressive Political Action, called by the 16 standard railway organizations, met in Chicago on February 20th and 21st, 1922.

A number of Socialist Party members had been invited as individuals, and accepted the invitation in accordance with the resolution adopted by the National Executive Committee at its Cleveland meeting on November 25th, 1921. These comrades included Morris Hillquit, James Oneal, Otto Branstetter, Bertha Hale White, Victor Berger, and Daniel W. Hoan. A number of other Socialist Party members were present as representatives of various labor organizations.

This conference, as originally proposed, was to have been of those elements in the Farmer-Labor movement who are in favor of independent political action, and who would attend for the purpose of attempting to work out some basis for uniting their forces in joint action. In issuing invitations for the Conference, however, the railway organizations abandoned this idea and invited officials and members of all so-called progressive organizations, regardless of whether or not they were committed to the principle of independent political action. As a result, the Conference was composed of heterogeneous elements, with nothing in common except their criticism and resentment against existing conditions. These elements ranged all the way from certain railway organizations, whose conception of political action was that of endorsing friends of Labor on the Democratic ticket, to the Socialist Party delegates who desired independent political action with a revolutionary program.

It was immediately discovered that it would be impossible to agree on any program or even a declaration of principles which would be acceptable to all the delegates present. An "Address to the American People" was adopted, mildly stating the criticisms of existing

conditions and a plan of action which allows each organization to do exactly that it would have done had the Conference not been called. This no doubt is what they will do. The railway organizations will endorse the friends of Labor on the old party tickets, the Non-Partisan League and the Farmer organizations will attempt to name their candidates in the old party primaries, and the Socialist and Farmer-Labor Parties will continue their activities and conduct their campaign as though the Conference had not been held. Here and there, locally, there may be some cooperation between the Socialist and the Farmer-Labor Parties and such other groups as will combine for independent political action on a working class program. This will necessarily be confined to a few localities, and will not materially affect the general situation.

On the whole, the conference was a disappointment, so far as immediate results are concerned. The importance of the Conference lies in the fact that representatives of both conservative and radical unions, Farmer organizations and Non-Partisan League, Farmer-Labor Party and the Socialist Party met together for two days, discussed conditions and remedies and adjourned without antagonism or resentment, with an increased respect and toleration for each other and each other's views, and a determination to get together in later conferences in a effort to establish closer understandings and ultimately, if possible, secure united action on a common program.

The Socialist Party members filed the following statement at the conclusion of the Conference:

Statement of the Socialist Party Group.

In fairness to the Conference and to ourselves, and in order to avert any possible misunderstanding

about our attitude on the declaration and plan of action adopted by this conference, we desire to make the following statement.

The Socialist Party at its last national convention, held at Detroit June 25, 1921, adopted the following resolution:

“Be it Resolved, That the incoming National Executive Committee be instructed to make a careful survey of all radical and labor organizations in the country with a view to ascertaining their strength, disposition, and readiness to cooperate with the Socialist movement upon a platform not inconsistent with that of the party, and on a plan which will preserve the integrity and autonomy of the Socialist Party.

“Resolved, That the National Executive Committee report its findings with recommendations to the next annual convention of the Socialist Party.”

This is the only credential and authority which we have from our party to participate in the deliberations and work of this conference. We accepted the invitation to attend the conference as individuals and in the hope that it would result in the creation of an organization such as outlined in the above resolution. We found that the majority of the conferees were not ready to organize for independent working class political action.

We appreciate the difficulties under which each group in this conference has labored and the consistent efforts which all have made to reach a common basis of agreement. We believe that the mere fact that we have [been] able to meet is of itself evidence of progress and a forecast of the unity and solidarity of rural and industrial workers, which all seek to realize, and we think particularly that the decision of this conference to continue its work, to increase its numbers,

and to meet again for further consideration of the vital problems before us in the light of the experience to be gathered in the meantime is of a great promise for the future of the producing classes in the United States.

We propose to submit the action of this conference to the next convention of our party with recommendations to endorse the same to the extent to which it is consistent with the fundamental principles of our organization. We are frank to state that we do not believe in and do not intend to urge Socialist participation in efforts to capture old party primaries or in support of candidates of the Republican and Democratic Parties.

We believe on the other hand that our party will be ready to cooperate to the fullest extent with the other groups represented in this conference in all cases in which groups unite for the independent nomination and election of officials pledged to the expressed purpose of this conference, i.e., “to the interest of the producing class and to the principles of genuine democracy in agriculture, industry and government,” and we sincerely hope that the subsequent conferences will prepare the ground for ever closer union and cooperation between all the constituent elements.

It is on this understanding and with this hope that we are ready to continue working with the conference pending definite instructions from our next convention.

Otto Branstetter
 Morris Hillquit
 Dan Hoan
 James O Neal
 Bertha Hale White

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