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# The Disintegration of the SLP and the Establishment of the Socialist Party of America.

by Morris Hillquit

A section from his book *History of Socialism in the United States*.  
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## The Disintegration of the Socialist Labor Party.

The Socialist Labor Party was founded at a time when socialism in this country was an academic idea rather than a popular movement. The socialists were few in number, and consisted largely of men who had formed their social views and philosophy in European countries, principally in Germany. They were but little in touch with the American population, and moved almost exclusively within their own limited circle. This character of the movement reflected itself on their organization: the mode of administration and methods of procedure of the Socialist Labor Party were those of a society of students and scholars rather than of a political party of the masses.

The organization was, however, quite sufficient for a period of about 20 years. The movement had during that time made but little progress among the native population, the party grew but slowly, and whatever new members it acquired were gradually assimilated.

But...events...worked a great change in the character of the socialist movement in America. The movement grew out of the narrow bounds within which it had been confined up to that time, and the Socialist Labor Party was fast becoming inadequate for the new requirements. Its highly centralized form of organization did not suit the political institutions and traditions of this country, and its dogmatic adherence to all canons of scientific socialism and strict enforcement of party discipline were not calculated to attract the masses of newly converted socialists. A radical change had become necessary if the party desired to maintain

its hegemony in the socialist movement. But, unfortunately for the Socialist Labor Party, its leaders did not appreciate the situation. The prolonged activity within the vicious circle of their own had made them men of extremely narrow vision. They had become used to regard their party as the privilege of the chosen few, and were rather reluctant to open it to the masses. They eyed all newcomers with ill-concealed suspicion, and refused to relax the rigidity of the party requirements in any way.

Nor was their attitude toward the trade union movement of the country any more conciliatory. When the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance was first organized and sprung as a surprise on the convention of 1896, some delegates had considerable misgivings as to the innovation. Fear was expressed that the organization would only serve to antagonize existing trade unions, while accomplishing little itself, and that it would ultimately lead to an estrangement between the party and the rest of the labor movement in the country.

But these fears were allayed by the repeated assurances of the spokesmen of the Alliance that the latter did not intend to interfere with existing organizations, and would confine its activity to the task of organizing the unorganized.

As soon, however, as the convention adjourned [July 10, 1896], these promises were forgotten. The Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance accomplished hardly anything by way of organizing unorganized working men, and whatever little strength it ever attained was drawn from existing unions. The Alliance was besides not always very choice in its means and methods of organization, and it has even been charged with orga-

nizing strikebreakers during the progress of some strikes. This course naturally provoked the hostility of organized labor toward the Alliance, and the hostility was extended to the Socialist Labor Party, which was considered practically identical with it. Thus the administration of the Socialist Labor Party within a few years succeeded in placing the party in a position of antagonism to organized labor, as well as to all socialistic and semi-socialistic elements outside of the party organization.

This policy of the party officers was by no means always approved by the membership, and voices of protest were occasionally raised. But the opposition only served to accentuate the unbending attitude of the men at the head of the party. A relentless war was opened on everything within and without the party that did not strictly conform to their conception of orthodox socialist principles and tactics. The columns of the official party paper, *The People*, edited by Daniel DeLeon, and the *Vorwärts*, edited by Hugo Vogt, were filled from week to week with violent tirades against the "corrupt pure and simple labor unions" and their "ignorant and dishonest leaders," and against the Populist, Nationalist, and other reform "fakirs."

Side by side with this crusade against the "fakirs" outside of the party a process of "purification" of the party members was inaugurated. Had the party officers heretofore been strict disciplinarians, they now became intolerant fanatics. Every criticism of their policy was resented by them as an act of treachery, every dissension from their views was decried as an act of heresy, and the offenders were dealt with unmercifully. Insubordinate members were expelled by scores, and recalcitrant "sections" were suspended with little ceremony. This "burlesque reign of terror," as Lucien Sanial subsequently characterized the regime, continued for several years, and in 1899 it reached such an acute stage that the members finally rose up in arms against it.

The first to sound the note of open rebellion was the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, which engaged in a controversy with the official party organs. The immediate occasion for the dispute was the *Volkszeitung's* adverse criticism of the party's attitude toward the trade unions; but as the controversy continued, the whole range of the policy and methods of the party administration were drawn in. The discussion waxed more

heated with every issue of the papers. The members took sides with one or the other of the combatants, and the socialists of the City of New York, where the headquarters of the party were located and *The People* and *Volkszeitung* were published, were divided into two hostile camps — the "administration faction" and the "opposition faction."

Under these circumstances the month of July 1899 arrived, and with it the time for the election of new delegates to the general committee of "Section New York." This election was of more than local importance for the opposing factions. The convention of 1896 had delegated to the City of New York the power to elect and to recall the National Secretary and the members of the National Executive Committee, and the latter in turn elected the editors of the party organs. Thus the New York socialists held the key to the entire situation, and the election was to demonstrate the relative strength of the factions.

The contest was a spirited one all along the line, and its results were awaited with intense interest. The new general committee met on July 8th, and it became at once apparent that the opposition was in the majority. The committee did not proceed far in its business. The nomination of a temporary chairman precipitated a violent clash between the hostile camps, and the meeting broke up in disorder.

That very night the opposition delegates issued a call for a special meeting of the committee. The meeting was held on the 10th day of July [1899], attended by the opposition delegates only, and it proceeded with the party administration in a summary manner. The offices of the National Secretary, and of the editor of *The People* were declared vacant, and their successors were then and there elected. Henry L. Slobodin, who had taken a very active part in the overthrow of the old administration, was elected National Secretary, and guided the much troubled course of the party during the succeeding period with great skill and circumspection.

The war within the Socialist Labor Party was now on in earnest. The deposed party officers repudiated the acts of the general committee as invalid and continued in office. The party officers elected by the general committee insisted on the legality of their election, and proceeded to the discharge of their duties. Each side styled itself the Socialist Labor Party, each

side had its own national committee, its own secretary and headquarters, and each of them published a paper called *The People*.

The situation was somewhat analogous to the one created just 10 years earlier by the deposition of Rosenberg and his associates, except that in the present case the battle was more perseverant and intense.

In the beginning the administration party had decidedly the better end of the contest. The insurgents were practically confined to the city of New York, while the sections in the country knew little about the merits of the controversy, and many of them adhered to the old party officers on general principles. The latter, however, did not possess the requisite skill to follow up their advantage. Their dictatorial tone toward their own followers, and their policy of abuse toward their opponents, repelled the sections wavering in their allegiance between the two committees, and one by one these sections turned to the opposition.

This was the state of affairs when the general elections of 1899 approached. Each of the two factions had nominated a ticket, and each side claimed its ticket to represent the only regular nominations of the Socialist Labor Party. In the state of New York the contest was taken into the courts, which decided in favor of the faction headed by the old party officers.

This was a severe blow to the faction of the opposition. The faction had at that time undoubtedly the support of the large majority of the party members, some of the most prominent ones among them, and it had almost the entire party press on its side. The organization was building up steadily, and it soon regained in some quarters of the labor movement the sympathy which the party had forfeited through the perverse trade union policy of its former officers. But with all that its legal existence and identity had always been enshrouded in much doubt, and now that the courts had decided adversely on its claims to the party name, the faction was thrown into a state of indescribable confusion. To put an end to the chaos, the national committee issued a call for a special convention of all sections supporting its administration. The convention was held in the city of Rochester, and the character of the gathering and the efficiency of the work accomplished by it exceeded the most sanguine expectations of its promoters. The convention was attended by 59 delegates, and remained in session five

consecutive days [Jan. 27-Feb. 2, 1900]. All questions of principle, organization, and policy were subjected to the most searching scrutiny. The methods and tactics of the party were revised, and the party was reorganized on a basis more nearly in accord with the modern requirements of the movement.

Almost the first act of the Rochester convention was to repudiate the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance and to proclaim its sympathy with the struggles of all trade unions regardless of national affiliations.

The convention also adopted a new platform, which, with very few changes, remains the present platform of the Socialist Party, and enacted a new set of bylaws for the administration of the affairs of the party.

But by far the most momentous act of the Rochester convention was the adoption of the following resolution, paving the way for the unification of the party with the Social Democratic Party:

The Socialist Labor Party of the United States, in national convention assembled, sends fraternal greetings to the Social Democratic Party of the United States.

*Whereas*, The course of development of the socialist movement in the United States during the last few years has obliterated all difference of principle and views between the Socialist Labor Party and the Social Democratic Party, and both parties are now practically identical in their platform, tactics, and methods;

*Whereas*, Harmonious and concerted action of all socialist elements of the United States is expedient for a successful campaign against the combined forces of capitalism;

*Resolved*, That it is the sense of this convention that the interests of socialism will be best subserved by a speedy union of the Socialist Labor Party and the Social Democratic Party into one strong, harmonious, and united socialist party;

*Resolved*, That we call upon the earnest and intelligent socialists of this country in the ranks of both parties to discard all petty ambitions and personal prejudices in the face of this great purpose, and to conduct the negotiations for unity of both parties, not in the sense of two hostile camps, each negotiating for peace with a view of securing the greatest advantages to itself, but in the sense of equal parties, hitherto working separately for a common cause, and now sincerely seeking to provide a proper basis for honorable and lasting union for the benefit of that cause;

*Resolved*, That for the purpose of effecting union between the two parties on the basis outlined, this convention appoint a committee of nine to act as a permanent committee on Socialist Union, until the question is definitely disposed of;

*Resolved*, That the said committee be authorized to delegate a representative or representatives to the next national convention of the Social Democratic Party in order to convey this resolution to said party and to invite the said party to appoint a similar committee; and

*Resolved*, That any treaty of union evolved by the joint committee on union, including the question of party name, platform, and constitution, be submitted to a general vote of both parties.

The resolution was adopted by a vote of 55 to 1, and the committee of 9 provided for by it was forthwith elected.

Before adjournment the convention took up the nomination of candidates for the ensuing Presidential campaign. Job Harriman, of California, a brilliant speaker and untiring worker who had become widely known in party circles through his agitation on the Pacific coast, was nominated for the office of President of the United States, and Max Hayes, of Ohio, equally popular in the socialist and trade union movement, was nominated for the office of Vice President.

But in view of the pending negotiations for unity with the Social Democratic Party, the nominations were not considered final, and the committee on unity was authorized to make any changes in the ticket that might be required by the exigencies of the situation.

### **The Socialist Party.**

The narrow policy of the Socialist Labor Party... had the double effect of disgusting many old-time workers in the movement, who withdrew from the party in large numbers, and of making the organization unpopular to the majority of newly converted socialists.

Thus around the middle of the '90s of the last century a new socialist movement gradually sprang up outside of the ranks of the Socialist Labor Party. It was scattered all over the country and assumed the most variegated forms. It was grouped around such enterprises as the weekly papers of J.A. Wayland, *The Coming Nation*, and subsequently *The Appeal to Reason*, both of which reached a circulation unparalleled by any socialist publication in this country; it expressed itself in the foundation of socialist colonies, such as the Ruskin Cooperative Colony of Tennessee, and in the formation of a number of independent socialist and semi-socialist clubs and societies.

The movement, however, lacked clearness and cohesion, and stood sorely in need of an energetic and popular leader to collect the scattered elements and to

weld them together into one organization. The man to accomplish that task finally appeared in the person of Eugene V. Debs.

Debs had always been a man of radical views on social questions, and his experience in the great Chicago [railway] strike had only served to intensify this radicalism. He utilized his enforced leisure in the Woodstock jail for the study of social problems and the theories of modern socialism, with the result that he left the jail with decided leanings toward socialism.

In the campaign of 1896 he still supported the candidacy of Mr. Bryan, but in January 1897, he publicly announced his conversion to socialism.

The American Railway Union had by this time practically ceased to exist, with the exception of a small group of men who remained true to Debs. This remainder of the once powerful organization was reorganized on political lines and decided to unite with the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth, a socialist organization of a utopian coloring, which had then recently been called into existence by *The Coming Nation*.

A joint convention of the two organizations was held in the city of Chicago on June 18, 1897, with the result that a new party, the **Social Democracy of America**, was created.

The aims and views of the party were originally somewhat raw and indefinite. Its declaration of principles was substantially socialistic, but its main feature of activity was the promotion of a rather adventurous plan of colonization. The new scheme launched by the party was to colonize in some Western state, to capture the state government, and introduce a socialist regime within the limits of the state. A colonization committee, consisting of Col. R.J. Hinton, of Washington, DC; W.P. Borland, of Michigan; and C.F. Willard, of Massachusetts, was appointed. Funds for the purchase of territory were raised, and in May 1898 the committee announced that it had completed arrangements by which the party would acquire about 560 acres of land in the Cripple Creek region in Colorado for the sum of \$200,000, of which a cash payment of only \$5,000 was required.

The colonization schemes of the Social Democracy had opened the doors of the party to all varieties of social reformers, and even a number of prominent anarchists joined the organization in the hope of ex-

plotting it for the propaganda of their theories.

But side by side with this movement the clear socialist element within the party grew in numbers and strength. Many former members and several entire sections of the Socialist Labor Party joined the new organization, and these, together with some prominent leaders within the Social Democracy, headed by Victor L. Berger, of Milwaukee, Wis., inaugurated a movement to substitute ordinary socialist propaganda for the colonization scheme of the party.

Under these circumstances the first national convention of the Social Democracy was held in Chicago on June 7, 1898. The convention was attended by 709 delegates, representing 94 branches of the party, and it became at once evident that a pitched battle was to be expected over the question of politics as against colonization.

The debate was opened on the report of the platform committee. Two reports were submitted, a majority report favoring the abandonment of the colonization scheme and the adoption of the usual methods of socialist propaganda, and a minority report advocating colonization as the most prominent feature of the activity of the party. The debate lasted until 2:30 o'clock in the morning, when a vote was taken, showing 53 in favor of the minority report and 37 in favor of the majority report. As soon as the vote was taken, the defeated minority withdrew from the convention hall in a body, in accordance with a prearranged plan, and the field was left clear to the colonization faction. The latter adopted its platform, elected its officers, and adjourned. The organization subsequently established two insignificant communistic colonies in the state of Washington, and quietly dropped out of existence.

In the meanwhile, the 37 bolting delegates met and called into life a new party under the name of **Social Democratic Party of America**. Freed from the presence of the troublesome colonization advocates, the new party proceeded to eliminate all utopian elements from its platform. It organized on the lines of a socialist political party and elected a National Executive Board, consisting of Eugene V. Debs, Victor L. Berger, Jesse Cox, Seymour Stedman, and Frederic Heath.

The following two years witnessed a rapid growth of the young party. The party nominated state or local tickets in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York,

Connecticut, Maryland, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, and California. In the fall elections of 1899 it elected the first socialist representatives in the Massachusetts state legislature — James F. Carey and Lewis M. Scates, and in December of the same year the Social Democrats of Haverhill, Mass., elected John C. Chase to the office of mayor of that city, while C.H. Coulter was elected mayor of Brockton, Mass., also on a Social Democratic ticket. The party also succeeded in electing to office a number of aldermen, councilmen, and school commissioners in several towns of Massachusetts and Wisconsin. When the first national convention of the party assembled in Indianapolis on the 6th day of March, 1900, it claimed an enrolled membership of about 5,000.

The system of representation devised by the party was a rather novel one for political conventions. Each member had the right to append his signature to the credential of the delegate or proxy of his own choice, and each delegate had as many votes in the convention as the number of signatures attached to his credential.

The number of delegates who attended the convention was 67, and the total number of individual signatures attached to their credentials was 2,136.

The all-absorbing topic at the convention was the question of amalgamation with the Rochester wing of the Socialist Labor Party. On the second day of the session a committee of the latter, consisting of Max Hayes, of Ohio; Job Harriman, of California; and Morris Hillquit, of New York, formally opened the negotiations. Their earnest plea for the unification of the socialist forces and their glowing description of the advantages which the movement as a whole would derive from the union were interrupted by round after round of applause. The great majority of the delegates had come to the convention with their minds firmly made up on the subject. They needed no arguments or persuasion; they were enthusiastically for union, and urged immediate measures for the accomplishment of the object.

The enthusiastic desire for union without reserve or qualification was, however, confined to the mass of the delegates only. The party leaders were more cautious in the matter. The name of Socialist Labor Party had an unpleasant ring for them; they were somewhat apprehensive of the motives and sincerity of the new

allies, and they proposed to surround the negotiations for unity with all possible safeguards. They consented to the appointment of a committee of 9 to meet with the similar committee of the Socialist Labor Party and to evolve a plan of union as called for by the Rochester resolution; but they recommended that the results of the deliberations of the joint committee be submitted to a referendum vote of each party separately, so that



*John C. Chase (1900)*

if either of the parties should not approve of the plan as a whole it might reject it and thus frustrate the proposed union. They also insisted upon the name Social Democratic Party for the new organization.

These recommendations were the subject of a prolonged and heated debate, at the conclusion of which they were rejected by a vote of 1,366 [proxies] against 770. A committee of 9 was thereupon elected with full power to arrange the terms of union with the like committee of the Rochester faction. To seal the treaty of peace, a Presidential ticket was nominated, with Eugene V. Debs, of the Social Democratic Party, for President of the United States, and Job Harriman, of the Socialist Labor Party, for his running mate, with

the understanding that the nominations would supersede those made at Rochester.

The joint conference committee of the two parties met on the 25th day of March, 1900, in the city of New York, and the practical work of merging the two organizations now began in earnest.

The Social Democratic Party was represented by John C. Chase, James F. Carey, Margaret Haile, Frederic Heath, G.A. Hoehn, Seymour Stedman, William Butscher, and W.P. Lonergan. Victor L. Berger, who was also a member of the committee, did not attend.

The Socialist Labor Party faction was represented by May Hayes, Job Harriman, Morris Hillquit, F.J. Sieverman, J. Mahlon Barnes, G.B. Benham, C.E. Fenner, W.E. White, and N.I. Stone.

The conference lasted two full days, and the questions of party name, constitution, candidates, and platform were discussed with much earnestness. The last two points were disposed of with practically no debate. The Indianapolis nominations were ratified, and the Rochester platform was readopted as the declaration of principles of the new party, while the "demands" formulated by the Social Democratic Party were appended to the document.

But the questions of party name and headquarters gave rise to prolonged and, at times, heated controversies. The representatives of the Social Democratic Party insisted upon the retention of their party name for sentimental reasons and on the ground of expediency, while the others urged the name of United Socialist Party as more expressive of the character of the new organization. A compromise was finally effected by the decision to submit both names to the vote of the combined membership of both parties.

The party headquarters were located in Springfield, Mass., and a provisional National Committee of 10 was created to be selected from the membership of the two parties in equal numbers. The work of the committee was on the whole harmonious, and when the joint meeting adjourned, the union of the two parties was practically accomplished save for the formality of submitting the results of the deliberations to a general vote of the members for ratification. But the unexpected was to happen again. Hardly a week had passed since the members of the joint committee had closed their labors to the satisfaction of all con-

cerned when the National Executive Board of the Social Democratic Party issued a manifesto, charging the Socialist Labor Party representatives with breach of faith, and calling upon the members of their party to repudiate the treaty of union.

The document provoked a storm of protests within the ranks of both parties, and gave rise to a prolonged and acrimonious feud between the adherents of the National Executive Board and the supporters of union. When the vote on the manifesto was finally canvassed, the officers of the Social Democratic Party declared that union had been rejected by the members of their party by a vote of 1,213 against 939, and that the party would hence continue its separate existence.

But this declaration by no means disposed of the controversy. The adherents of union within the ranks of the Social Democratic Party, the majority of its committee on unity among them, denied the legality of the procedure adopted by the board, and refused to recognize its authority to represent the party any longer. They went on voting on the treaty recommended by the joint committee on union, and the treaty having been ratified by the Rochester faction of the Socialist Labor Party and the pro-union faction of the Social Democratic Party, they proceeded to carry its provisions into effect.

Whether it was in the hope of disarming the anti-union elements or for any other reason, the name Social Democratic Party was adopted on the general vote, not only by the pro-union members of the party, but also by the overwhelming majority of the Socialist Labor Party members, and the new party consequently assumed that name. The climax of confusion in the socialist movement in this country was thus reached. The Socialist Labor Party as well as the Social Democratic Party were torn in twain. The former maintained its headquarters in New York; the latter had one in Chicago and one in Springfield, each of these parties and factions had a separate set of national officers, and each was making war on the other. And, as if to emphasize the absurdity of the situation, the Presidential elections drew near with the various socialist nomina-

tions in a state of indescribable chaos. The administration faction of the Socialist Labor Party had nominated a ticket of its own — Joseph F. Malloney, of Massachusetts, for President, and Val Rimmel, of Pennsylvania, for Vice President.

The Rochester faction of the party had originally nominated Harriman and Hayes for its candidates, but, as related above, these nominations were abandoned for those of Debs and Harriman. The latter ticket, however, was nominated on the assumption that complete union between the Rochester faction and the Social Democratic Party was an assured fact. But now, when the negotiations for union had failed, the anti-union or Chicago faction found itself with Job Harriman, a member of a rival organization, on its own Presidential ticket, while the pro-union or Springfield faction was in the same position with regard to its candidate for President, Eugene V. Debs. The warring factions of the Social Democratic Party conducted an energetic and enthusiastic campaign, and the vote polled for their joint ticket at this, their first national campaign, was 97,730, more than the Socialist Labor Party had ever succeeded in uniting on its candidates in its palmiest days.

The harmonious work of both factions of the Social Democratic Party for a joint ticket during the brief campaign had accomplished more toward effecting real union between them than all the prolonged negotiations of the past. The members had learned to know each other more closely, and their vague feeling of mutual distrust was dispelled. After the campaign there was no more reason or excuse for continuing the separate existence of the two factions, and the Chicago board issued a call for a joint convention of all socialist organizations for the purpose of creating one united party. The Springfield faction, several independent local and state organizations, and, in fact, all socialists organizations except the New York faction of the Socialist Labor Party, responded to the call. When the convention assembled in Indianapolis, on the 29th day of July, 1901, it was found that the organizations participating in it represented an enrolled membership of no less than 10,000.† The system of represen-

†- This figure is a substantial exaggeration of the true strength of the combined organization, which was more sanguinely estimated by the *Social Democratic Herald* at "about 4,000" in an historical article that was published on page 4 of the May 25, 1912 issue. There seems to be an Iron Law of Political Mergers in which intoxicated participants claim that  $2+2=5$ , while simultaneously these very mergers cause a spate of membership dropouts resulting in actual math more closely resembling the equation  $2+2=3$ .

tation was the same that prevailed at the preceding Indianapolis convention. One hundred and twenty-four delegates held 6,683 credentials from individual members. Of these, the Springfield faction was represented by 68 delegates, holding 4,798 credentials; the Chicago faction by 48 delegates, with 1,396 credentials; while three independent state organizations, with a total membership of 352, were represented by 8 delegates.

Mindful of the disappointing results of the labors of the former joint committee on union, the convention decided not to take any chances again, but to complete all arrangements for the final amalgamation of the organization represented, then and there.

With this end in view, a new platform and constitution were adopted. The headquarters were removed from the seats of former troubles to St. Louis, and Leon Greenbaum, who had not figured very prominently in the former controversies and was acceptable to all parties concerned, was elected National Secretary.

The convention was the largest and most repre-

sentative national gathering of socialists ever held in this country. Among the delegates there were men who had been active in all phases of the socialist movement, and alongside of them men of prominence who had recently come into the movement. The socialist organizations of Puerto Rico were represented by a delegate of their own, while the presence of three negroes, by no means the least intelligent and earnest of the delegates, attested the fact that socialism had commenced to take root also among the colored race.

The composition of the convention also served to demonstrate how much the character of the socialist movement had changed during the last few years: Out of the 124 delegates, no more than 25, or about 20 percent, were foreign born; all the others were native Americans. Socialism had ceased to be an exotic plant in this country.

The convention had assembled as a gathering of several independent and somewhat antagonistic bodies; it adjourned as a solid and harmonious party.

The name assumed by the party thus created was the **Socialist Party**.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

*Photo of John C. Chase from Social Democracy Red Book (January 1900).*

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