
Indicting the Left Wing:

A Speech to the National Executive Committee, SPA,

circa May 27, 1919.

by James Oneal

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The following is a fragmentary report of a speech by James Oneal before the National Executive Committee when the charges against seven language federations were being considered by that body. The address is not complete, as only a few notes were taken by an office stenographer. Members of the committee thought it interesting enough to have the notes transcribed for publication.

It may be interesting to some of the members of the foreign language federations to review the history of the Left Wing movement in this country. The DeLeonite group in the SLP was the original Left Wing. It was the only one until the split. The SLP group was guided by a large number of men who wrote and who spoke as comrades are speaking and writing today who are affiliated with the Left Wing. They indulged in revolutionary phraseology at every opportunity, and among the most prominent of the people in those days who indulged in those things, who talked about this overthrow of church and state were David Goldstein and Martha Moore Avery. They became the most reactionary and contemptible betrayers. Goldstein traveled around the country, wearing a silk hat, swinging a cane, and defending capitalist reaction. These were the first of the ultra-revolutionists.

In 1904 another Left Wing developed in the Chicago convention. The leaders were a lady palmist of Oregon and Wade Parks of Kansas. Their program was just the reverse of the Left Wing program today. They held that economic organization of the workers was so much folly. That it was a crutch and the sooner we kicked it from underneath the workers, the sooner we would have the social revolution. They were super-revolutionists like the Left Wing of today.

They disappeared and we have not heard from

them to this day.

Another Left Wing developed at another convention led by Harry Spears and Theodore Meyer. Their theory was similar to the theory of the palmist and Parks. They were more Bolshevik than Bolsheviki, more revolutionary than the revolutionist. Both of those worthies also disappeared. Some time later Spears appeared in one of the Dakotas as editor of a Republican paper, subsisting on contracts of the state Republican machine. He accumulated a few thousand dollars and later turned up in Ohio as editor of a chain of Socialist papers published in Ohio and adjoining states.

He again took the leadership of the super-revolutionists and was active in formulating the policies of the Ohio movement. He again disappeared a few years ago. His next appearance in public was as a paid speaker of the liquor interests. So ended the career of another super-Bolshevik.

In 1912 we had another group — Walling, Russell, Stokes, Bohn, Gustavus Myers. Two years before the war broke out Walling wrote in one of his books that in the event of war in this country, his true revolutionists would refuse to obey any arbitrary acts of the government. They would opposed such usurpation with physical resistance if necessary. Walling today is the most contemptible betrayer of the working class. He has done every dirty service possible for imperialism and capitalist reaction and has written articles for the *New York Times* favoring the overthrow of the Russian Soviets by Allied bayonets.

Bohn is the joint author of a super-revolutionary book. He was the original Bolshevik in this country. In that book he said that any action by the working class for the purpose of a revolution is legitimate. Today Bohn is a trusted agent of the United States

Government. Today he is also writing articles for the *New York Times* against the Bolsheviks and in favor of Allied intervention in Russia.

What of Gustavus Myers? In the convention of 1912, Myers charge me with being a supporter of bourgeois property because of a certain vote I cast in the convention. He became very heated about it. He, too, is gone, gone with the other super-Bolshevists. He is now allied with Samuel Gompers and his reactionary policies and is a trusted man of the Civic Federation.

Charles Edward Russell was the guide and philosopher of this Left Wing in the 1912 convention. In an article in the *International Socialist Review* he wrote frankly that this thing of political action and electing representatives to lawmaking bodies is so much folly. He was afterwards compelled to modify his statements when cornered by Comrade Hillquit, who took him to task in one of our Party papers. Now this Godfather of the 1912 Left Wing has gone the way of the others.

Then there is Stokes and others, but I do not want to tire you with a complete list. We have repeated examples from the history of the movement of these Left Wingers attacking the movement from the inside. They then turn a complete somersault and land in the camp of extreme capitalist reaction.

There is some psychological law to explain this, though I am not certain it is clear to me. But there are the facts. Those men find it perfectly easy to jump from one extreme to the other.

Here I am going to make a prediction: A certain percentage of those who pretend to be more Bolshevik than the Bolsheviks, more revolutionary than the revolutionists, are going to jump to the other extreme and land in the camp of our worst enemies. Mark that prediction.

One explanation of the present Left Wing is the Russian Revolution. In such a gigantic world upheaval through which we are passing, the Socialist movement is bound to be affected. The deserters and betrayers of the movement represent the same emotional response to the war that the pretended super-Bolsheviks do. Both are possessed with an emotional ecstasy which they cannot shake off; but contradictory as their actions may seem, they have their origin in the same common cause.

There is more than a mere coincidence in the

fact that the Left Wing tendency is largely manifested in the foreign comrades, and in particular in those various nationalities that go to make up what was known as the Russian Empire. Enthused with the Russian Revolution as we all are, these comrades lose their judgment. They attempt to transplant the Russian Revolution to this country, its tactics, policies, and principles, regardless of the historical and economic conditions of the United States. They forget that the nations constitute certain geographical sections of the earth's surface and that no two are alike. They do not inquire whether Russian experience applies here; they take it for granted without investigation. Now, it may apply, but I contend they have not even attempted to prove that it does.

I hope that the comrades will be patient with me in this long speech, but the matter is so important that I am going to risk imposing on you.

I want your Left Wing to remember this: Comrade Lenin himself, in a letter to the Hungarian Communists, warned them against the mistake of attempting to copy the experience of the Russian Soviets in all their details. He warned them that the historical conditions in Hungary, and even Germany, vary so much from Russia that the Hungarian comrades would grossly err in relying upon the experience of Russia. He went on to tell them that Hungary and Germany had something of parliamentary traditions which Russia had not and that this is only one of the many factors which the Hungarian comrades would have to consider.

Lenin here is the realist, not a utopian of the super-Bolshevik Left Wing. Suppose, for example, that Belgium had not been invaded and as a result of the war raging about her the Socialist cooperatives had become organs of power in the hands of revolutionary workers. These cooperatives would have become to the Belgian social revolution what the Soviets have become to the Russian Revolution.

What effect would this have on our emotional "revolutionists" of the Left Wing? Judging from their conduct they would transplant the Belgian experience to this country and insist that the Party concentrate on cooperatives as the organs of power to achieve the social revolution. No judgment, no analysis, no reasoning, no comparison of historical conditions, could satisfy the self-styled Left Wingers. They would im-

mediately attempt to foster the cooperatives, to transplant them to this country, and assault the Party if it insisted on taking Lenin's advice to the Hungarians.

The Party, all its organs and speakers, have defended the Russian Revolution. This committee has arranged for meetings of the Soviet government of Russia. But the Party does not slavishly follow the experience of our Russian comrades without examining the historical conditions of this country and the present situation, here and now.

There are a number of factors entering into the composition of the Russian Soviets and every one of them is absent in this country! They are composed of revolutionary soldiers, workmen, and peasants. Russian went through an exhausting war that demoralized her economic life, ruined her transportation system, starved her population, and made large masses of the soldiers rebellious and revolutionary. The rotten and corrupt bureaucracy fell like a house of cards and a national coalition between the revolutionary soldiers, workmen, and peasants was formed in the organizations of councils, or Soviets. These exercised a limited power during the first revolution and in the second revolution they took over the power of the nation.

Now are any of these factors present in this country? Talk to the returning soldiers and try to find any revolutionary sentiment. I mingled among them on my return from England. Most of them are filled with the idea that they "won the war." The only grievance they have is against the treatment some received at the hands of officers. There is no revolutionary soldiery to make up Left Wing Soviets in this country.

What about a rebellious and hungry peasantry? Aside from some of the southwestern states like Oklahoma and Texas, there is nothing in the rural regions of this country to correspond with the economic life of the Russian peasants. There is discontent in the southwest, but no acute hunger, and certainly no widespread revolutionary sentiment. It must also be remembered that the rural life of this country is not nearly so uniform as in the old Russia. In states like Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana, you find the wealthy exploiting farmer who has two and three automobiles. He spends his time at the county seat and exploits wage labor. Then there are the New England and the far west farming regions which vary from each other and from the others. A poor peasant class, driven to revolution by

hunger and war, does not exist.

As for the organized workers, they were delivered to imperialism by the AF of L leaders. AF of L officialdom is the most reactionary in the world and only a fool will contend that we have any hopes of a strong industrial union for some years to come.

Besides all this is the fact that we have not suffered as the masses of Europe have from the war. We had only a few minor food restrictions and a patriotic psychology that has survived the war. Our economic system has not been impaired and the nation has emerged from the war a strong imperialist power.

Every factor of the Russian Revolution is absent in this country. Yet our "Left Wingers" are so intoxicated with the war and the revolution that they imagine they can import all the factors here. It is dangerous and suicidal for Socialists to ignore these facts.

It is true that new conditions require a change in policies, but the change does not consist in transporting the Russian Revolution here. I am sure I am speaking for the majority of the committee in stating that we intend to suggest changes so far as our limited powers permit. But you of the "Left Wing" cannot wait. You adopt your manifesto and you tell us to swallow it or you will smash the Party. Your manifesto did not originate within the regular Party channels established by the Party constitutions. You tell us that we shall not even discuss, amend, strike out, or add to it. In my 22 years experience within the Socialist Party I have never heard of such a proposition before. You would ape the revolution by establishing your "Left Wing" as a dictatorship within the Party itself.

Now one of the main functions of the language federations is to maintain a medium of communication between the federations and the Party as a whole. In the last year or so, a situation has developed where the language federations practically attempt to dictate to the Party its general policies and its general principles, in addition to the propaganda they were supposed to carry on in their language federations. I might call your attention to some instances: Section 2 of Article 2 reads:

"No Party member shall be a candidate for public office without the consent of the city, county, or state organizations, according to the nature of the office."

The "Left Wing" comrades did not agree with

that. Already in New York, so far as you are concerned, you have amended this constitution to read:

“No member shall be a candidate without the consent of those who are affiliated with the ‘Left Wing’ and who carries a ‘Left Wing’ card.”

In practice you have amended the National Constitution of the Socialist Party on your own initiative. You have distinctly violated the constitution. You repudiated this clause, a clause that was adopted after a full discussion at the convention, endorsed by referendum vote, and then when we, as the Executive Committee — entrusted with the administration of the Party — when we propose to take action to prevent this violation, you say that we are doing wrong and that we are indulging in tactics that will ultimately destroy the Socialist Party! We say that you have violated the Party constitution and the Executive Committee has to take cognizance of the thing you have done.

I want to call your attention to some other propositions in the constitution. Coming back to the matter of discussing this “left Wing” program of yours, the National Constitution, regarding National Conventions, reads:

Article 9, Section 8:

“All national platforms, amendments of platforms, and resolutions adopted by any National Convention shall be submitted seriatim to a referendum vote of the membership. One-fourth of the regularly elected delegates shall be entitled to have alternative paragraphs to be submitted at the same time. Such alternative paragraphs, signed by one-fourth of such delegates, shall be filed with the Executive Secretary not later than one day after the adjournment of the convention.”

You say, “there is not alternative. We will thrust this manifesto down your throat.” So far as the spirit of the constitution is concerned, you violate it. You will have no alternative even to the striking out of a single word.

Again you have violated the Party constitution. What sort of an answer do we get from the joint document signed by seven language federations? Article 2, Section 5(a) says distinctly:

“Branches of Language Federations shall be an integral part of the county and state organizations, and must in all cases work in harmony with the constitu-

tion and platform of the state and country organizations of the Socialist Party.”

These federations not only violate this constitution and the local constitution of New York, but they also say that the Executive Committee should discipline, not the “Left Wing” for having violated the constitution, but Local New York, because it did not permit *<word missing>* of the constitution!

Again, the Party is willing and anxious to work for general amnesty for Debs, O’Hare, Haywood, and all the political and class war prisoners in this country. You are not in favor of amnesty. *The Revolutionary Age* tells us all about it here. They don’t want any of these comrades released. They say, “Our comrades are languishing in prisons; amnesty cannot reach them and we don’t want amnesty for them. We want them to be released by the industrial might of the proletariat — by class-conscious action.” If we can enlist the support of any other agencies outside of the Party, to secure general amnesty, it is a crime not to do so. And if there be any “counterrevolutionists,” they are those who refuse to do these things.

The Italian Party, a party which has stood for the International, is today demanding complete amnesty for all political prisoners. I want amnesty, and I want to get it just as soon as I possibly can. I want Debs, O’Hare, and the rest out of prison so they can reach their class with the message of Socialism.

Then there is your distortion of the Party’s attitude towards political action. One would think that we have only been interested in political campaigns. This is a deliberate distortion. It is a fact that the larger part of our time and our funds have been devoted to economic struggles of the working class, and we have given these gladly. We have contributed large funds, we have gathered food, clothing, shoes, and other necessities for our class on strike. We have actively participated in every notable struggle of the working class in the past twenty years and would have concentrated on the recent Lawrence strike but for the blows rained on us by you inside and capitalist reaction from without.

In Colorado, in Michigan, in West Virginia, everywhere we have been busy in the everyday class struggle. We gave of our resources and gave them regardless of whether the strikers were members of the AF of L, the IWW, or were independent of both. This

is a matter of history, yet you ignore it and baldly assert that we have been interested in political campaigns alone. You are dishonest in the assertion for the record is against you.

Our charges against you and the others are numerous, but this is the main one: That you are too impatient and that you refuse to wait to give us an opportunity to act upon various questions of a tactical nature and with reference to principle. You then proceed to violate our principles and platforms and attempt to destroy our institutions. Long before this committee met, I think most of us agreed that at this session of the committee, considering events of the world, as far as our powers permit, and they are somewhat limited, but so far as we had any power at all, that we should send out a series of statements upon the international situation — upon the Soviet Revolution — that we should send out a series of statements with the view of having the membership discuss these questions and come to the National Convention ready to take some sort of action in accord with the changed conditions brought about by the upheaval of the world. You would not wait. You have to take action in your little group and we have to swallow it. It is not constitutional and it is not fair. It is characteristic of minority groups who are desperate. It is characteristic of the worst type of politics in the capitalist parties of the United States.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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