

Early Efforts at Socialist Unity

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By Nathan Karp

I.

One of the questions most frequently raised by people seeking an alternative to the capitalist political parties is: “Why can’t or don’t all the parties calling themselves socialist unite?”

The question is hardly of recent vintage. It has been posed repeatedly down through the years by sincere workingmen and workingwomen both puzzled and disturbed by what seems to them to be mere squabbling among organizations and groups that really have common principles and a common goal. And the questioners generally assume that there have never been any conscientious efforts to establish unity among the organizations calling themselves socialist.

Actually, that is not the case. There have been efforts—determined and persistent efforts—to establish a principled unity among organizations calling themselves socialist. For the light it throws on the subject, we review one of the most persistent efforts here.

Prior to the turn of the century, there was, to all intents and purposes, only one significant socialist organization in the United States—the Socialist Labor Party. As one writer put it, the SLP “virtually embodied socialism” in this country between 1876 and 1900.

In 1897, Eugene V. Debs, Julius A. Wayland and others set on foot the Social Democracy of America. This in turn became the Social Democratic Party of America in 1898. In due course, the Social Democratic Party and dissident elements that had been expelled from, or had otherwise left, the SLP combined to set on foot the Socialist Party.

Thus, at the time the International Socialist Congress convened in Amsterdam on August 13, 1904, there were two parties claiming the socialist name in the United States. Dual parties of socialism existed in other countries, too. In an effort to bring unity to the socialist movement in those various countries, where multiple parties claimed the socialist mantle, the congress adopted the following resolution:

“The congress declares:

“In order to give to the working class all its force in its struggle against capitalism, it is indispensable that in each country there should

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be but one socialist party against the capitalist parties, just as there is but one proletariat.

“Therefore, all comrades and all factions and organizations which claim to be socialist have the imperative duty to do all in their power to bring about socialist unity on the basis of the principles established by the international congresses and in the interest of the international proletariat, to whom they are responsible for the disastrous consequences of the continuation of their divisions.

“To help reach this aim, the International Bureau and all parties of nationalities where unity exists place themselves at their disposal and offer their good services.”

However, “the principles established by the international congresses” related primarily to the political aspects of the socialist movement. They said nothing about the importance and/or permanency of the economic movement, a subject on which the two socialist parties in the United States were in fundamental disagreement. Moreover, the organization of the Industrial Workers of the World in July 1905 dramatically sharpened the conflict between the SLP and SP over the union question.

UNITY CONFERENCE

Accordingly, following the Amsterdam Congress, the SLP made no effort to initiate steps to implement the unity resolution. Such an effort was initiated, however, by the New Jersey state organization of the SP. Under date of September 10, 1905, the state secretary of the SP of New Jersey informed the state secretary of the SLP of New Jersey that the SP state convention had adopted a resolution to “elect delegates as a committee to meet a like number of delegates from the Socialist Labor Party to confer on the best means of uniting all the workers in one vast army for progress.” The committees were “to consist of three delegates from each of the four dominant counties” in the state.

The New Jersey SLP accepted the proposition. On December 17, 1905, the first conference was held at the SP’s headquarters in Newark, N.J. A total of six conferences were held, the final one on March 4, 1906.

At the final session, the conferees adopted a manifesto by a vote of 23 in favor and one SP delegate abstaining. The manifesto stated in part:

“It did not take the conference long to be one as to the essential reasons for the present deplorable division, consequently, it was no difficult matter to be ultimately agreed upon the essentials for the solid foundation for a united political socialist movement.

“We found that this foundation turned upon two points—first, the proper attitude for a political party of socialism to assume toward the burning question of trades unionism, and, second, the proper attitude for a political party of socialism to assume toward the ownership of its press, the voice of the movement.”

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As to the first, the manifesto declared that unless it was “backed by a classconscious,...economic organization, ready to take and hold and conduct the productive powers of the land,” the “socialist political movement” would be “but a flash in the pan.” And the manifesto added:

“The conference holds that for the socialist political movement to favor AFL craft unionism is to bluntly deny socialist principles and aims....By its own declarations and acts, the AFL shows that it accepts wage slavery as a finality;...The conference, true to these views, condemns the AFL as an obstacle to emancipation of the working class.”

The conference then placed itself on record as commending the posture of the International Workers of the World in basing itself squarely on the class struggle and for “boldly and correctly” proclaiming “the socialist principle ‘that the working class and the capitalist class have nothing in common’ and that ‘the working class must come together on the political as well as on the industrial field, to take and hold that which they produce by their labor.’”

As to the second “essential point,” “the question of the proper attitude for a political party of socialism to assume toward the ownership of its press and literary agencies,” the conference unequivocally endorsed the concept of complete ownership and control of both by the party.

Subsequently, the manifesto was submitted for referendum vote by the respective members of the New Jersey state organizations of the Socialist Party and the Socialist Labor Party. The SLP membership unanimously endorsed the manifesto and its findings. A majority of the SP members rejected it.

ADDITIONAL REBUFFS

All this was reported to the next International Socialist Congress which was held in Stuttgart, August 18–25, 1907. The report was delivered by Daniel De Leon and stated in part:

“The two great principles that lie at the bottom of the struggle within the socialist and labor movement in America are these:

“One is that the political movement of socialism cannot if it would, and should not, if it could, ignore the economic; and that no healthy or successful political movement of socialism is possible in this utterly capitalist nation, unless it is founded, banked and based upon a healthy economic or union movement. This principle, in short, holds that in America a bona fide political movement of socialism can only be the reflex of an equally bona fide, that is, revolutionary economic movement.

“The other principle is that the political movement of socialism should not, if it could, and could not if it would, have anything to do with the economic movement. It preaches ‘neutrality’ towards the unions, and considers unionism a transitory manifestation.

“All the dissensions, occasionally even bloody, in the socialist and labor

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movement in America, are traceable to the clash of these two conflicting principles.”

Referring specifically to the SP’s rejection of the New Jersey Unity Conference’s manifesto, the SLP report stated:

“The matter, however, did not end there; nor could it. The work done by the New Jersey conference has since slowly percolated beyond the boundaries of New Jersey and reached large numbers of the members of the Socialist Party in other states. The result has been a variety of propositions, the most pointed of which is that which came last September from the New Orleans, La., local of the Socialist Party. The New Orleans proposition calls upon the National Executive of the Socialist Party to submit to a referendum of the national membership the question of inviting the Socialist Labor Party to elect a national committee for the purpose of conferring with a similar national committee of the Socialist Party looking to the national unity of the two parties. The New Orleans proposed resolution has received considerable support from the Socialist Party organizations in other cities, and may possibly reach in the course of the year the stage of submission to a general vote of that party.”

Nothing came of the New Orleans move. Later that year, another SP local, this one in Redlands, California, adopted a resolution ending in the following resolves:

“Therefore be it resolved, in view of the above preamble, we, Local Redlands, initiate a national referendum calling for the union of the two socialist parties of America;—unity to be based on the recognition of industrial unionism as the economic basis of the socialist political movement.

“And be it further resolved, that the official press and means of publication shall be owned and managed by the Socialist Party and that no literature be considered official unless sanctioned by the National Executive Committee.

“And be it further resolved, that no officer of any union shall be eligible as an officer or candidate of the Socialist Party.

“And be it further resolved, that if this referendum be carried and a convention called for the purpose of completing this consolidation, the delegation shall consist of wage workers holding no official position in either party.”

The resolution was published in the December 1907 issue of the *International Socialist Review*. Though owned and published by the Charles H. Kerr & Company (Cooperative), the magazine was recognized as a voice of the SP. In publishing the resolution, Kerr, himself, at some length rejected most of the premises and the overall objectives of the Redlands resolution. In part, he wrote:

“Let us especially avoid mixing the party question and the union question. The Socialist Party needs no endorsement from trade unions

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as organizations. What it does need is new members and new voters. Industrial unionism needs no resolutions adopted by the Socialist Party. What it needs is a united effort on the part of socialist trade unionists to secure the support of the industrial principle by the existing unions, not to disrupt these by organizing rival unions.”

THE STUTTGART RESOLUTION

Apparently, the Redlands resolution was never submitted to the SP membership for a referendum vote. But the unity question did come before the SP officially early in 1908 as a result of action taken by the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Labor Party.

Meeting in semiannual session in January 1908, the NEC considered the unity call of the International Socialist Congress in light of the resolution it had adopted at its 1907 session in Stuttgart. That resolution was described in the *Daily People* of November 14, 1907, by Frank Bohn, who had been one of the SLP delegates at Stuttgart, as “a milestone in the progress of the socialist movement in Europe.” The Stuttgart resolution declared:

“To enfranchise the proletariat completely from the bonds of intellectual, political and economic serfdom, *the political and the economic struggle are alike necessary....*

“The unions will not fully perform their duty in the struggle for the emancipation of the workers, unless a thorough socialist spirit inspires their policy.” (Emphasis ours.)

De Leon, who had also been a delegate to the Stuttgart Congress, and Heselwood, the IWW delegate, had jointly introduced an even stronger resolution on unions at Stuttgart. Because of the peculiarities of European parliamentary procedure under which the congress operated, the SLP-IWW resolution never came up for a vote. In the meantime, in the hope that it might, the SLP and IWW delegations had voted against the resolution on unions which the Stuttgart Congress had adopted.

Although De Leon referred to the Stuttgart resolution on unions as an “omnibus bill” with something for everybody, it is clear from the many reports in the *Daily People* by De Leon, Heselwood, Bohn and others during the latter half of 1907, that they considered the resolution a great step forward by the International Congress. For the first time, the International Congress had recognized officially that the economic organization was at least as important as the political party. As it was put in the *Daily People* of September 25, 1907, “The resolution adopted places the international movement, political and economic, on the ground which the SLP and the ST&LA occupied five years ago. That’s going some.”

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SLP CALLS FOR UNITY

Now that the International Socialist Congress had recognized the union as an “essential principle” to the socialist movement, the time was considered ripe for the SLP to propose unity with the SP. If the SP agreed to unity it would have to be on the basis of its rejection of procapitalist unionism and acceptance of unions whose policy was inspired by “a thorough socialist spirit.” If the SP refused to accept that “essential principle,” now recognized by the Socialist International Congress, it would stand exposed as a caricature of socialism.

Accordingly, on January 6, 1908, the NEC passed a unity resolution that stated in part:

“Resolved, that we, the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Labor Party, in semiannual session assembled, desiring to free the Socialist Labor Party in the eyes of the working class of America and of the international proletariat of its seeming share of responsibility for the divided, demoralized and retarded state of the movement in this country, hereby take the initiative toward remedying such conditions by electing a committee of seven members and inviting the national headquarters of the Socialist Party to elect a committee of like number to a national socialist unity conference to meet not later than the third week of the month of March of this year in order to consider whether unity of the two parties of socialism in America is possible and on what special basis; and be it further

“Resolved, that if such conference takes place and succeeds in agreeing on conditions for uniting the two parties, such decisions of the conference be immediately submitted to a general vote of the membership of both parties for approval....”

The SLP unity initiative elicited considerable enthusiasm among the rank and file of both parties. There were high hopes that the SP officialdom would respond favorably to the conference call. In mid-February, Morris Hillquit, SP National Committee member who had headed the SP delegations to the 1905 and 1907 International Socialist Congresses, publicly stated that he was “fully in favor of the contemplated unification of the two parties provided...that the comrades of the SLP are willing to consolidate with us upon the general principles and tactics established by the international socialist movement, leaving the concrete issues and details to be formulated by a joint national convention....”

Such joint national convention never took place. In fact, the proposed unity conference never took place. On March 2, 1908, the National Secretary of the SLP received official word from the SP that its National Committee had rejected the SLP’s proposal for a unity conference. And on March 3, De Leon published an editorial in the *Daily People* entitled, “Clear the Decks!” in which he summarized the unity question and outlined the course that the SLP must now follow. [See page 13.]

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What we have described here is but one effort to unite the various parties claiming to be socialist and the obstacles that resulted in its failure. There have been other efforts under other circumstances. All of them failed for substantive reasons.

As we have pointed out before, only the practical development of a mass classconscious movement within the working class itself can create the groundwork for socialist unity on the political field. As De Leon succinctly put it: “The basis of socialist political unity is classconscious unionism.”

II.

In Part I, we reviewed one of the major efforts to unite the Socialist Labor Party and the Socialist Party—the two parties claiming the socialist designation during the early 1900s. That effort came to an end in March 1908 when the National Committee of the Socialist Party rejected a unity resolution proposed by the Socialist Labor Party.

The SLP reported the failure of its unity effort to the Eighth International Socialist Congress that met in Copenhagen in late August and early September 1910, in part, as follows:

“After the Stuttgart Congress [August 1907] the Socialist Labor Party believed that a change for the better had come over the Socialist Party. The Socialist Labor Party acted upon this belief. The belief was founded upon the posture of the Socialist Party at the Stuttgart Congress [where the SP had supported the congress’ trade union resolution and had pledged to abide by the congress’ resolution on immigration]Consequently, at the first session of the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Labor Party after the Stuttgart Congress, held in January 1908, the Socialist Labor Party proposed unity to the Socialist Party upon no condition other than the principles of the International Congress—minority representation, liberal immigration and the recognition of the essential function of unionism in the performance of the revolutionary act. *The Socialist Party rejected the offer.*” (Emphasis in the original.)

While that ended the unity effort it did not put the unity question to rest. In the months that followed, the unity question continued to agitate the rank and file of both parties. It was a frequent topic of debate and discussion among members, at local meetings, in the socialist press and elsewhere. But there was no immediate effort to initiate another unity move.

EFFORT TO UNSEAT DE LEON

In the meantime, despite the obvious desire of many of its rank and file for a unified socialist movement, the national body of the Socialist Party,

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led by Morris Hillquit, launched an effort to replace Daniel De Leon on the Socialist Congress' International Bureau. The United States was allotted two seats on the International Socialist Bureau. De Leon held one as the representative of the Socialist Labor Party; Hillquit held the other as representative of the Socialist Party. Unseating De Leon would, of course, amount to declaring that in the view of the congress, the Socialist Labor Party was not a bona fide socialist party, hence not entitled to a seat on the International Socialist Bureau. Both seats would then go to the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party's intended replacement for De Leon was Victor L. Berger.

The Hillquit-led effort to unseat De Leon had no success during the months preceding the Eighth International Socialist Congress. Berger had brazenly tried to claim De Leon's seat in London in November 1909, but his claim had been rejected by the bureau. The seat-grab effort, however, was to come up again.

The congress was scheduled to convene in Copenhagen on August 28, 1910. The SLP delegation consisted of Olive M. Johnson of Fruitvale, Calif., who became editor of the *Weekly People* in 1918; Mrs. A. Reinstein of Buffalo, N.Y.; Mrs. A.B. Touroff of New York City, who was also the official representative of the Socialist Women of New York; Jaime Angulo of Baltimore, Md., author of the party's publication, *The Trial of Ferrer*; Solon De Leon; and Daniel De Leon, editor of the *Daily* and *Weekly People*.

Two days prior to the opening of the congress, the International Socialist Bureau met in the same city. There the Socialist Party's effort to unseat De Leon came to a head. The SP contended that the SLP was dead, that De Leon alone remained, that he was a serious impediment to the SP and was hurting the socialist movement in America, etc. In contrast to the alleged demise of the SLP, Hillquit claimed that not only was the SP growing, it already had 53,375 members, and was the only socialist organization to be reckoned with in the United States.

SP CLAIMS REFUTED

De Leon had little difficulty refuting the SP claims on all counts. With specific regard to the number of members in the SP, De Leon cited discrepancies between Hillquit's membership claims and figures given in official SP reports. De Leon also cited a report by Berger in which he had distorted what had taken place when he had claimed De Leon's bureau seat in November 1909. De Leon compared the Berger document with the official report of the November incident issued by the bureau itself. It demonstrated how unreliable the claims and how baseless the charges of the SP were. As De Leon afterward noted: "This settled the question of the seat on the bureau." De Leon retained his seat.

During the bureau's meeting, Berger had tried to participate in the

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debate. The bureau chairperson, however, had denied him the floor emphasizing that only De Leon and Hillquit were members.

Hillquit, in responding to De Leon's refutation of the SP's position, apparently realized that they could not get De Leon's seat. Hillquit, therefore, concentrated on the SP's demand that its delegation to the congress be given 13 of the 14 votes allotted to the combined U.S. delegations on the floor of the congress. The original division of those votes had been three to the Socialist Labor Party and 11 to the Socialist Party.

Hillquit delivered what De Leon described as "the regulation anti-SLP speech": the SLP was dead, only De Leon remained, etc., etc. As De Leon subsequently reported in the *Daily People* (September 14, 1910): "Hillquit was answered by Rosa Luxemburg with a neat incisive speech. She said: 'The leading feature of Hillquit's speech is an inextricable contradiction to me. I do not understand how, if the SP is as large as it claims and the SLP consists of De Leon only, one single man could so tremendously hurt 53,375 others.'"

SP WINS A DEMAND

Despite the unprincipled character of the SP's conduct, vis-a-vis De Leon and the SLP, the SP's demand for 13 of the 14 votes was upheld by a vote of 13 to 10. Some members of the bureau attributed the SLP's defeat on this point to two factors. One was the absence of several bureau members whose votes might have altered the outcome. The other was the hatred that certain East European members of the bureau held for Rosa Luxemburg and who, therefore, were said to vote against any proposition that Luxemburg supported and for any proposition that she opposed.

When De Leon was told this, he replied that he would rather have one vote with Rosa Luxemburg's speech, than the three votes without it.

Once the full congress got under way, the unity question again was on the agenda. In his report to the *Daily People* (September 14, 1910), De Leon summarized the matter as follows:

"A unity resolution, reiterating in more emphatic language the Unity Resolution of Amsterdam, was introduced by the French delegation and lay before the congress, and was received with general applause, the SP delegation joining. I took the platform. I announced myself as a delegate from a country where the parties were split; I declared myself in loyal accord, without mental reservation, with the proposed resolution; and I added: 'A similar resolution was adopted six years ago at Amsterdam, it was adopted unanimously, the SP delegation voting for and applauding it. Nevertheless, when, in obedience with the said decree of the congress, the SLP, although the smaller party, set pride aside, and in January of last year [actually in January 1908] tendered unity to the SP upon no conditions other than the principles of the International Congress, the

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tender was rejected. For these reasons I here call upon the SP delegation to take the platform, and let this congress know whether that party's applause for, and support of, the resolution before us are merely platonic demonstrations covering mental reservations. For my party I here state that, by January, we shall have a committee, elected by the party, ready to confer with a similar committee from the SP to carry out this resolution. I call upon the SP to let this congress know what it is to expect from the SP.' Hillquit came upon the platform and answered. It would have been 'money in his pocket' if he had not. His answer was that there was unity now in the United States; that the SLP was dead; that our report to the congress was 'mudslinging'; and that they would receive me with open arms provided I abandoned my 'harmful "IWW whims against the unions," which are not wanted by the American proletariat.' I did not care to dignify such an answer with a reply. The hypocrisy and duplicity of the answer was commented upon by many delegates with Comrade Olive M. Johnson and myself as we were leaving the congress hall and were crossing the courtyard."

ANOTHER UNITY EFFORT

The 1910 International Socialist Congress, in adopting the French delegation's unity resolution, did not alter the fundamental principles for socialist unity that had been established at its Amsterdam and Stuttgart congresses.* And the unity question continued to be on the agenda of many individuals and groups during the years that followed.

As late as February 14, 1914, the State Convention of the Socialist Party of Minnesota issued a call for the state organizations of the SP and the SLP to hold a unity conference. The Minnesota SLP responded affirmatively, and on April 26 a conference attended by five representatives from each party met in St. Paul. After a daylong discussion, the conference unanimously adopted resolutions:

1. On unionism, affirming "the necessity of an industrial organization of the workers, the abolition of craft unionism, and the need of united industrial and political action."

2. On reforms, stating that the introduction of "reform questions and issues into the program of a political party of socialism...creates ...false conceptions regarding the socialist movement and hinders the work of educating the working class for the overthrow of capitalism."

The conference then unanimously adopted a resolution declaring: "The Socialist Labor Party and the Socialist Party shall unite forming

*The 1910 congress did, however, leave the door open for a kind of federation between political organizations whose differences on serious questions made organic unity impossible or impractical. Under the federation concept, such parties could cooperate as a "united party" for the express purpose of nominating a single set of candidates running on a joint platform.

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the Socialist Party of the United States; each branch or local of each party to retain the same standing in the new organization that it held in the former one. Upon the passing of this motion the national executives of the two parties shall call a joint national convention for the purpose of submitting to a referendum proper constitutional laws adaptable to a united socialist party.”

The resolution was promptly rejected by the SP's State Executive Board. However, the SP delegates to the unity conference took vigorous objection to the board's action and subsequently the matter was submitted to the state referendum. The Minnesota unity resolution was endorsed by the SP members by a vote of 616 to 110. But it never got to the SP's national membership because while the matter was pending, the SP bylaws had been amended so that a state could not initiate a national referendum. Consequently, the only thing the state body could do was submit the unity resolution to the SP's national office requesting that that office do what was necessary to initiate a national referendum.

Nothing ever came of this resolution. Nor did anything come of another unity resolution adopted on May 16, 1914, by the Ohio SP's Local Niles.

Quite likely, the unity question in one form or another would have arisen again at the next International Socialist Congress scheduled to convene in Vienna on August 8 or 9. When World War I broke out at the end of July, Austria was one of the first nations involved in hostilities. The scheduled opening was then postponed to August 23, and the new location was Paris. It soon became clear that the new arrangement was also impossible and the congress was postponed indefinitely and with it the unity question.

Clear the Decks!

By Daniel De Leon

On the second instant the National Secretary of the Socialist Labor Party received official notification from the Chicago national headquarters of the Socialist Party that the SLP invitation for a unity conference had been rejected by an overwhelming vote of the members of the National Committee of the SP.

The SLP invitation to a conference stipulated no conditions, except adherence to the principles of the International Congress. Affecting the swagger of a Goliath toward a David, business interests of the most groveling, guild and craft union interests of the most reactionary, “intellectual” schemes of the most treasonable to the proletariat, trembled behind the mask of socialism, worn by a large majority of the SP National Committeemen;—trembled at the bare thought of confronting an SLP delegation of conferees;—aye, trembled at the, to them, even more dreadful thought of having to submit their conference deliberations to that rank and file, around whom they seek to build a Chinese Wall, and whom they seek to pluck as their special dupes. The SLP invitation contained the express provision that the findings of the proposed unity conference were to be submitted to a referendum of both memberships. Had the SLP invitation contained no such provision, the invitation might have been accepted by the National Committee of the SP; with that provision, the invitation was unacceptable.

In a matter so important that the International Congress found it necessary to urge—the unification of the socialist forces—and obedient to which the SLP acted, the large majority of the SP National Committeemen slighted the International Congress and insulted its own membership by disfranchising them.

Thus, once more, the truth of the principle has been demonstrated—the loudest shouters of “democracy” are the worst contemners of the people; the loudest inveighers against “bossism” are the schemers after “bosssdom.” Accordingly, with the Bergers and the Simonses leading the van, and the New Yorker Volkszeitung Corporation furnishing the music, a decisive majority of the SP National Committee refused even to confer.

The action of the National Committee of the SP clarifies the situation immensely. It does more. It is the strongest justification imaginable of

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the indomitable persistence shown by the SLP not to allow itself to be swept off its feet by the hurrah chaff of votes, gathered any old way. It is the latest and most convincing proof that the SP is all that the SLP has charged it with, and that the continued existence of the fighting SLP is a continued necessity to the bona fide socialist movement of America.

If, when there might have been a theoretical doubt that the SP is not a member of the socialist family, but a hideous changeling smuggled into the cradle at the hearth of the socialist family, the SLP stood firm to its colors, and upheld these against all assaults, open and covert, now that a decisive majority of the SP National Committee have been compelled to come out for what they are, there can no longer be any doubt as to the duty of the SLP towards the American working class. Not rejoicing at the discovery of the correctness of its old estimate concerning the SP, but regretfully, yet with jaws all the more firmly set and with countenance all the serener, the fighting SLP will pursue, unterrified, its undeterred career—freed now in the eyes of all thinking men of all blame for the continued spectacle of a “divided socialist movement.”

There is a double foe to fight: the capitalist despot, and his political caricature.

Clear the decks!

Daily People, March 3, 1908