
**Correspondence between Lazarus Abelson,
Organizer, Section New York, SLP,
and Morris Hillquit
(June 22 & 29, 1899)**

(1) Abelson to Hillquit, June 22, 1899.

New York, June 22, 1899.

Dear Comrade:—

At the last meeting of the General Executive Committee [of Section New York], held on June 10 [1899], it was decided to instruct the City Executive Committee to inquire of those members who have been nominated for member of the National Executive Committee, SLP, in place of Comrade [Charles H.] Matchett, resigned, whether or not they fully support the policy of the party as heretofore carried out by the National Executive Committee, and to obtain written statements in reply to this inquiry for the information of the members before the vote is taken.

You have been nominated for this position, and if you decide to accept the nomination, you are herewith called upon to send to the undersigned your reply in writing in answer to the above question not later than June 30.

For the City Executive Committee:

L. Abelson,
Organizer.

(2) Hillquit to Abelson, June 29, 1899.

New York, June 29, 1899.

City Executive Committee, Section New York.

Dear Comrades:—

I hereby acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 22nd inst., enquiring of me as a candidate for member of the National Executive Committee, whether I “fully support the policy of the party as heretofore carried out by the National Executive Committee.”

Before I proceed with my answer to your inquiry, permit me for the sake of clearness to limit the same to its proper scope: The most fundamental points of our party policy, such as uncompromising independent political action and the like, are so thoroughly settled that there can hardly be more than one opinion on them within the party, and naturally I fully support the National Executive Committee on these points. But your present inquiry, unusual and unprecedented as it is, was, I take it, called forth by the present controversies within the party, and has reference to the points involved in those controversies only, in other words, what you really want me to state is my attitude toward the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance, my views on party discipline or the so-called “aggressive tactics” lately adopted by the majority of the present National Executive Committee, and perhaps also my stand on the question of taxation.

On all these questions I shall state to you my views fully, frankly, and without reserve.

1. I disagree emphatically with the policy adopted by the majority of the present members of the National Executive Committee in relation to the ST&LA and the trade unions generally, and in order to explain my reasons for such disagreement, I shall review briefly the gradual development of the present attitude of the NEC to that body.

In December 1895, after some of the leading members of our party had with much impetuosity and little perseverance tried to capture first the American Federation of Labor and then the Knights of Labor and had failed in both attempts, the ST&LA was organized by them as an experiment in trade unionism with a socialistic platform and socialistic leadership. In that experimental stage it was brought before our party convention of 1896. In the discussion evoked by the subject the founders

of the ST&LA sketched out the aims and proposed work of that body, laying particular stress on the fact that the greater part of the workmen in this country were as yet unorganized, and that the ST&LA had ample scope for its activity without coming in conflict with the existing labor unions, and a resolution was thereupon adopted in substance condemning the AF of L and K of L because of their corrupt leadership and welcoming the ST&LA.

The resolution did not prescribe any definite mode or plan of action, it limited itself to an expression of opinion and sentiment and was worded in rather vague and general terms, according to the favorite method of its authors, so as to leave plenty of room for construction; and to construe it the authors of the resolution, lately aided by the NEC, thereupon proceeded.

The mere expression of sympathy for the ST&LA was soon interpreted to mean an inseparable union with that body, for the better or the worse; the methods and tactics of the ST&LA were accepted as those of the party, from a mere means it imperceptibly became [a body] independent and equivalent or even at times superior to the party itself, and its deeds and occasional misdeeds were placed above the criticism of party members.

And our attitude towards the trade unions not affiliated with the ST&LA, i.e., towards almost the entire trade union movement of this country has changed correspondingly; the struggle against corrupt labor leaders, desirable and necessary as it is at the proper time and in the proper place, soon became a passion and sport, then developed into an indiscriminate war against all trade unions not bearing the brand of the ST&LA, until recently our National Secretary [Henry Kuhn] and the editor of our official English party organ [Daniel DeLeon] openly declared that they regarded all pure and simple trade unions as *capitalistic institutions*.

Here, comrades, the line must be drawn. I am personally sorely disappointed with the course taken by the ST&LA in relation to other trade unions and the lack of success in its own ranks, still I can understand the hopes and expectations of its founders and adherents, and their preference for that body over other central organizations of trade unions, but to make it a strict article of faith for each member of the party and to cry out treason at the mere attempt at criticism of the actions of that body, that is certainly something that the convention of 1896 never intended or authorized; and to place the party in a position of open and relentless hostility to all trade unions but those of the ST&LA is certainly

a very dangerous departure from the policy heretofore pursued by our party in this or any other country. With the great teachers and founders of the party I believe that trade unions, even the pure and simple ones and their activity, are manifestations of the class struggle; that the workingmen composing the trade unions are consciously or unconsciously organized on the basis of the class struggle, that for that reason they offer to our party the best field for propaganda, and that while we have the duty to combat the evil influences in their ranks, it is injurious to our cause to antagonize all unions not affiliated with the ST&LA although their doors be open to us.

2. On the question of party discipline I disagree with the present NEC as emphatically.

I am well aware of the fact that no political party can prosper without proper discipline in its ranks. But what is the limit of this proper discipline as applied to the Socialist Labor Party? Let us see: Ours is a body not bound together to the all-powerful will of a supreme commander, as an army of soldiers, or by the power of unreasoning dogma or prejudice, as a church, or by the expectation of pecuniary gain through political spoils, as any of the old parties; no, ours is a party of men, freely associated for the common cause; what binds us together is a common principle, a common conviction, and nothing else. Now our party already numbers its membership by the thousands — in the future we expect to draw under its banner all intelligent, reasoning workingmen of this country, the millions of heterogeneous elements, of all nationalities and tongues, of different habits and education, of different notions and ideas; can we, I ask you, ever expect to see all those elements agreed on absolutely all questions of policy, tactics, or any theoretical question (for instance: the question of taxation) that may arise? Surely not, and will we for that reason have constant strifes and disruptions within our ranks? Surely, no reasoning socialist will expect that.

Our party is essentially a party of criticism, comrades. It owes its birth and existence to the criticism of the existing system, institutions, and beliefs, and it owes its growth and progress greatly to the constant revision of its own tactics and even principles.

Founded on the sound basis of science and historic necessity our party does not shun, but courts the searching light of criticism, it learns from its errors, it profits by its experience, it keeps always pace with the times; therein, in this constant criticism, in this free discussion and exchange of opinions, privately, at meetings and in our press, lies the

strength and great vitality of our party; therein lies its future. The criticism of party matters within proper bounds and in a decent manner are the best signs of life within our ranks, and ought to be encouraged by all means, to curtail it means to injure or cripple the party instead of developing it.

But the majority of the present members of the NEC and the editors of our official party organs do not seem to understand this fundamental truth; they do not seem to understand our party's great mission, they make no distinction between a religious sect or a Benevolent Order and a great International Party of Rebellion. What they require of the members of the party is not mere recognition of the fundamental principles of scientific socialism as expressed by our party platform, no alone compliance with the express decisions of the party, but an absolutely uniform mode of thinking on all matters anyone who dares to have an opinion of his own on any ever so subordinate question of tactics, is to them an enemy of the party, or traitor to it.

From this narrow conception of party discipline and party tactics flows quite naturally the attitude of intolerance and the spirit of fanaticism lately displayed by the NEC in its decisions and edicts and the similar tone adopted by the editors of our official party organs in their controversies with comrades.

The sweeping condemnation of the *Volkszeitung* and the harsh denunciations of numerous good comrades for expressing their opinions on party tactics and abstract questions of political economy, and the weekly savage onslaughts of our party editors on those comrades, although their devotion to the cause is above suspicion, are sufficient illustrations of that sad state of affairs.

And let us look at the results of that policy in the place where it is felt most strongly, the place where the members of the NEC and the editors of our party organs come most in contact with other comrades, the seat of the committee, the center of our party press, the headquarters of the ST&LA — the city of New York. What fruits has that policy ripened? Within the section we are busily engaged in suspending branches and individual members and a good half of the membership is up in open revolt against the methods of the present Party Administration... [W]e have made enemies of organizations who have been our friends for years, and our vote has remained at a standstill for the last four years. True, we have made good progress in the country, but it is at least peculiar that we gain most where the inaugurators of the present policy are felt least.

3. As to the question of taxation, which has for some unaccountable reason been elevated by the NEC into a question of party principles and tactics, I will but say that I fully agree with the stand taken by the *Volkszeitung* on it, as I regard that stand fully in accord with the principles of scientific socialism and the opinions of the best socialistic authorities on that question.

These, comrades, are my views on the mooted questions of party policy, this is, I may say, my platform in the present election for member of the NEC, the nomination for which position I hereby accept, and I shall count every vote for me in this election as a vote of assent to the views above stated.

In conclusion I may add that I regard it as a matter of course that you will cause this declaration to be published in our party organs before my nomination is placed before the voters, as the same is certainly intended to use your expression “for the information of the members.”

Fraternally yours,

Morris Hillquit.