
Calm Review of the Seattle Situation

by John Downie

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Many people have heard of the dissensions among Seattle Socialists. They would like a clear view of the reasons.

The following article is both clear and calm. John Downie is well known for his deliberate and temperate way of viewing things. He is chairman of the Socialist State Executive Committee in Washington and Delegate to the Seattle Central Labor Council from the Carpenters' Union. He knows whereof he speaks.

[—E.B. "Harry" Ault]

To the Comrades of Washington:

It is with diffidence and hesitation that I bother you with the affairs of Local Seattle, but in the interests of the Socialist Party in this state I deem it my duty to give as truthful a history of Local Seattle as it is possible for one to give who has been in the fight from the beginning.

I came into the Socialist Party, then the Social Democratic Party, out of the Socialist Labor Party, and attended the first state convention of the party, held in Seattle, July 4, 1900, as a member of Local Spokane. I transferred to Local Seattle sometime during the latter part of November in the year 1900. I joined the Socialist Educational Union, then publishers of *The Socialist*, about the same time and have been active in Local Seattle from that time up to now with the exception of one summer when I was out of the state. So I come to you as one who has the facts at first hand and not as one who has come into the movement years after and

has depended upon hearsay for his statements.

In starting to give you a brief history of the movement in Seattle, I will refer to a pamphlet written by Ira Wolfe and adopted by the 9th Ward Branch of former Local Seattle.†

Ira Wolfe makes the claim, on page 2 of his pamphlet, that all the statements contained therein are "absolutely true." Let us see if they are.

On page 9 we find this statement: "Pike Street Branch was composed of those who desired to use party funds to aid in the publication of their paper (meaning *The Socialist*) and Central Branch opposed such action."

This, comrades, is an absolute falsehood. The Socialist Educational Union, publishers of *The Socialist*, never asked Local Seattle for one cent to sustain *The Socialist* and Local Seattle never contributed one cent towards *The Socialist*, and that never was an issue in Local Seattle. In one meeting of Local Seattle, Comrade [Hermon F.] Titus, on behalf of the Socialist Educational Union, was granted permission to solicit contributors from a propaganda meeting audience, which he did. It is also true that Local Seattle bought bundles of *The Socialist*, both to sell and for free distribution. They did this with other Socialist papers as well. But to say that the Socialist Educational Union or those comrades who were active in support of *The Socialist* tried to get party funds for *The Socialist* is a baseless lie.

Local Seattle always sold papers at its propaganda meetings and prior to elections the local usually bought

† - Ira Wolfe, *The Cause of the Factional Fight in the Socialist Party of Washington*. Seattle: [Ira Wolfe?], 1907; 24 pp. As of April 2010, no copies of this document have surfaced, although hope remains that a copy has been preserved in some archival collection or another not integrated into the WorldCat bibliographic listing.

an extra bundle for free distribution. Some comrades would want to purchase *The Worker* [New York], some the *Chicago Socialist*, the *Appeal to Reason*, or some other Socialist paper in preference to *The Socialist*. In fact the *Appeal* was more persistent in forcing itself on Local Seattle than any other paper in the movement. Surely Ira Wolfe could claim with equal reason that these other papers tried to get the local's funds, and thus caused Local Seattle to divide.

In referring to the comrades who were supporting *The Socialist* (pg. 8) he says, "but they forgot that the party needed funds, too, and criticized those who cared more for the needs of the party than for the needs of the paper."

This, comrades, is false. I personally have had as much to do with raising party funds as any member in Seattle and I know that the comrades who supported *The Socialist* were among the very best members in the local to put up party funds, and the records of the National Office, the State Office, and the Local will bear me out. On the other hand, the records will show that those who have been fighting *The Socialist* refused to raise funds for either National, State, or Local purposes.

When the National Office sent out their campaign coupons, Central Branch and its members not only refused to handle them, but instead had an imitation printed and sold them for the exclusive use of Central Branch, and to the detriment of the Local, State, and National Office. Surely, comrades, I could with more justice and a great deal more reason insinuate that Central Branch wanted and used the money thus raised, not for the good of Socialism, but to help it control Local Seattle, than Wolfe has for the many insinuations in his book of 22 pages. But I shall not deal in insinuations but in facts.

When the State Committee appealed to the state membership to pay off the state indebtedness, these same comrades not only refused to contribute to a fund for this purpose, but even refused to allow the Local Secretary to accept money from those comrades who wanted to see the State Office out of debt.

There are many other misstatements scattered through the book, such as, that Local Seattle started the publication of *The Socialist* (page 7), which is not true, and on page 3 he states that *The Socialist* would not publish anything that the faction opposing it of-

fered. Whatever may be said for or against *The Socialist*, though it has not published everything that it was offered, it has published the best that was offered on either side of any Party question. And if the Central Branch faction did not get their side published in *The Socialist*, it was because they did not offer it for publication.

In reviewing the past I will only touch on those incidents that have a bearing on the factional fight that has troubled Local Seattle so long.

Up to about the third year [1903] Local Seattle was fairly harmonious, though certain personal animosities crept in. It stood for a united policy. In the Party's trouble with Local Whatcom [Bellingham] the Local membership was almost, if not quite, unanimous in condemning the action of Whatcom and their middle class platform. In the trouble with Local Spokane, the membership was fairly unanimous in disciplining Local Spokane for their action in allowing non-members to participate in their municipal convention.

Now, right here a difference in policy began to creep in. As to whether it was mainly due to jealousy on the part of some, of the power of *The Socialist*, or a creeping in of a change in fundamental principle, or both, is a matter of conjecture. But whichever it was, Local Seattle up to that time presented a united front to the old political parties. I honestly believe that if we had been allowed to continue, the Socialist Party would be at this time one of the most important factors in the municipal life of this city. In fact, the old party politicians of that time expected it.

About a year after the Spokane matter was settled [i.e. in 1904], there came into Local Seattle a man who started to control the Local in the interest of the *Appeal to Reason*. For some time Local Seattle did not handle the *Appeal*, as a majority of the membership considered that the *Appeal* was loose in its Party policy and erratic in its presentation of Socialism, and therefore not a good propaganda medium, and dropped it.

This man got himself made Local Organizer and flooded Seattle with the *Appeal* and other matter boosting the *Appeal*, which the Local afterwards had to pay for. I know this because I was treasurer when the Local paid him.

Now, the personal animosities above referred to had somewhat developed by this time. Certain comrades were making it a point to talk to the comrades

as they came into the movement and tell them what a terrible man Titus was. He was a politician, he would sell out the Party, he was a dictator, and all that sort of stuff was circulated. And the comrades that supported *The Socialist* were dupes, serfs, vassals, and any other name you may think of.

The writer had it dinned into him for over two years and most any member of Local Seattle can testify to the truth of these statements.

You can imagine, comrades, what a demoralizing effect such tactics must have on an organization, and they had their effect on Local Seattle. Of course, a good many comrades did not swallow all this stuff, but used their own judgment instead, but some of them did; and those that did, could be used by any old thing so long as it was against Titus and *The Socialist*.

This was the condition of Local Seattle when Mr. Hutchison struck town. Of course, to displace *The Socialist* by the *Appeal*, it was necessary to fight *The Socialist* and Comrade Titus as its editor. To fight this paper it was necessary to organize all the elements that were in opposition to it. Let us see how it was done.

It was not till Central Branch, which at that time comprised nearly all the members of Local Seattle, was split in two by trumped up charges against Comrades Curtis and Titus, charges that if the comrades preferring them had been in their right mind, would never have been considered for a moment. It will not be necessary to go into details as to what the charges were. Suffice it to say that if they had had the least value, they would have been carried beyond Central Branch. But they did what was wanted. They separated the elements and placed them in well defined opposition to one other, and since that day, the energies of Local Seattle have been wasted to a great extent by the Opportunists trying to force loose Party tactics and methods on the organization.

The Pike Street Branch was a result of that fight, which lasted through three hard fought business meetings of Central Branch.

The next big fight that took up the attention of Local Seattle was this: Central Branch preferred charges against Pike Street Branch and Comrade Titus. Comrade Titus, on the complaint of some Comrades that could not get official ballots for a Local referendum that was before Local Seattle [to abolish branches], had some cards printed expressing the wish of the comrades signing them in regard to the question before the Local.

Prior to this it was the practice of comrades who did not happen to have an official ballot on a referendum to write a note signifying their wish in regard to the question before the Local, sign it, and send it in and it was counted with the rest of the ballots. The writer of this voted on at least two referendums in this way and on once occasion wrote ballots for two other comrades and their legality was never questioned. But those cards expressed a wish contrary to the wishes of those in control of Central Branch and in that lay the crime.

Those charges took up the attention of Local Seattle for some time. Two or three meetings of the State Committee were given to them and they were finally settled by a state referendum, exonerating Pike Street Branch and Comrade Titus.

There are many more things I would like to say but space forbids. In justice to the 9th Ward Branch members of former Local Seattle, who endorsed Ira Wolfe's pamphlet, I may say that they are not old members and had to depend upon hearsay for those statements they claim to be facts. Ira Wolfe himself came into the Local after the incidents above referred to had take place.

Your Comrade,

John Downie.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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