
Why the Majority Report Should Be Defeated

by Allan L. Benson

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I have heard no stronger defense of the majority report adopted by the Emergency Convention [St. Louis: April 7-14, 1917] than that uttered by a veteran New York Socialist who intends to vote against it. "All things considered," said he, "the only wonder is that the report is not worse than it is."

He who would understand the majority report must consider it, not only in connection with the convention that adopted it, but in connection with the elements that constituted the majority in that convention. He must consider the spirit of these elements, not only as they expressed themselves in the report, but as they expressed themselves on the floor of the convention, both with regard to the report and to other matters. In no other manner is it possible to understand the majority report.

I shall therefore try to portray the convention as it appeared to me. During the last 25 years I have attended a great many national and state conventions of Republican, Democratic, and other capitalist parties, but I remember none in which the spirit of intolerance more permeated the very air than did this spirit at our St. Louis Convention. I felt this spirit the first day of the convention, and I continued to feel it to the last. Whoever was not of the majority was at least an enemy of the Socialist Party, and quite likely a traitor to the working class. Young hotheads who were wearing knee breeches when

many of the middle-aged men present became Socialists felt entirely prepared to brand such of these older men as disagreed with them with regard to tactics as "traitors."

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The majority of the convention was not composed of one group. It was composed of 4 groups, 2 of which, in all past conventions, have been opposed to each other. First there was the usual group of active ultra-radicals, composed largely of young hotheads who lost few opportunities to proclaim their unshakable devotion to Socialism and to couple with it the statement that they "had no country." These excitable young persons were under the direction, however, of leaders who shared their views, but were not so excitable. Some of their leaders had poise and shrewdness.

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The second element in the group that was fused to create a majority was composed of pro-Germans. There is no use of mincing words. The Democratic and Republican Parties each acknowledge and proclaim whatever of pro-German sentiment that may exist within their respective ranks. The Socialist Party should not be less frank. It would be idle to try to hide what everybody can see.

In all past times the German Socialists in America



have been the most conservative and stable members of our party, taking their place neither with the most advanced nor the most conservative members of the party. These German Socialists never failed, in the past, to place themselves squarely across the pathway of the extreme radicals.

At the St. Louis Convention the pro-Germans and their hereditary opponents, the ultra-radicals, fused to form the bulk of the majority! Upon learning which, a great light should fall upon the comprehension of every reader of the majority report.

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The third element that went to constitute the majority was composed of a little group that perhaps might aptly be called the “harmonizers” — those who believed that the first consideration was to prevent, at all costs, a split in the party. This element was powerfully represented on the committee that submitted the majority report. The presence of this element accounts for the fact that the report contains no un-Socialistic balderdash as to the working class of a nation having “no country.” That is an anarchistic idea that semi-anarchists in the Socialist Party have preached as Socialist doctrine and those who knew no better have accepted as such. But the harmonizers on the committee, informed Socialists that they are, and knowing how Marx, if he had been alive and at the convention, would have done an Everett True among the “no country” orators — I say the harmonizers quietly kept out of the report every semblance of a declaration that the American working class “has no country.”

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But in this game of give and take, the ultra-radicals soon had their innings. Nothing so pleases those of strong individualistic tendencies as talk of force. Is there wrong to be undone? Use force against it. Wherefore, we see in the majority report many strong words suggesting force. The war is to be opposed, not only by *public* opposition to it, such as the holding of demonstrations against it and the circulation of petitions against it, but by “all *other* means within our power.” The reader will please observe the italicized words “*public*” and “*other*.”

Either of these words mean what is their plain meaning or they mean nothing. In either case, they should not have been in the report, for reasons which I will presently show. But they had a sweet sound to the individualistic ultra-radicals, who, having been suppressed in the report as to the “no country” matter, had to be handed a sop by the harmonizers to keep them in line.

The German Socialists, we may well assume, gagged at this dose. German Socialists have in their blood none of the individualistic virus. They are socially conscious. But most of them swallowed the dose, though some of them did not. They swallowed it because they wanted some pro-German paragraphs put into the report. And straightaway they were put in. Several paragraphs Von Tirpitz would probably have signed, had he been there, with great gusto. There was a semblance of judicial poise in speaking of the “ruthlessness” of Germany’s submarine warfare, but immediately followed the declaration that the war would be prolonged by America’s participation in it.

That is plain pro-Germanism. There are as many reasons for believing that America’s participation will shorten the war as there are for believing that it will lengthen it. I do not believe it is within the power of any man or any group of men to know what the result will be. But every German will tell you that America’s participation will lengthen the war, as every Englishman, Frenchman, Belgian, and Russian will tell you that it will shorten it. The answer that one gives to this question is pretty nearly a test of where his sympathies lie.

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The fourth element in the majority was composed of delegates who had never before attended a national convention and were apparently impressed by the vigor and frequency with which the ultra-radicals shouted some of the stock phrases of Socialism. The fourth element had no influence in the convention except to furnish votes.

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We now have the convention before us as I saw it and are prepared to consider the report. The report

began with a long exposition of Socialist philosophy, particularly with regard to war and the responsibility of the capitalist class therefor. It was and is all true, but it is not new. It had all been said thousands of times before, as it will be said thousands of times more. It was, indeed, a strange beginning for an "Emergency Convention." It tended to confirm the oft-repeated criticism of the capitalist press as to the tendency of Socialists to riot in theories while ignoring facts. Here was a convention hurriedly called to determine what the attitude of the party should be toward and during the war with Germany. Two hundred men and women had been summoned from communities representing every part of the United States. Yet, when they began to draft what they hoped would be the party's message to the American people, they devoted the first half of their report to matter that could have been found in any encyclopedia. If these men and women had chanced to be in San Francisco at the time of the earthquake, and, while buildings were falling and burning and hundreds of human beings were dying, had been appointed on an emergency committee to tell the city how to deal with the situation, is it possible that they would have first urged the populace to rush to the public libraries and read all they could find with regard to the causes of earthquakes and fires?

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I realize that this criticism is not serious except as it reveals a state of mind. I believe it does reveal a state of mind. Composed as the committee was, it had no word of sympathy to say to the American people in the hour of their affliction. In this very committee, a discussion of perhaps an hour had proceeded as to whether the expression "our country," as it appeared in the tentative report, should be permitted to stand or should be changed to "this country," and the ultra-radicals prevailed and changed "our" to "this."

The first half of the report was therefore devoted to a cold statement of philosophical attitude, heavily freighted with the stock words that a certain type of "r-r-revolutionists" hold dear, then switching momentarily to pro-Germanism, proceeded to utterances that Socialist lawyers who were delegates to the convention informed me were treasonable and that I believe were and are treasonable.

I refer readers first to a paragraph of the report to which reference has already been made, which reads as follows:

Continuous, active, and *public* opposition to the war, through *demonstrations, mass petitions*, and all *other* means in our power.

I call particular attention to the words that I have set in italics. Nobody charged with responsibility has a right, in these times, to use the English language in any except its accepted meaning. Nobody charged with great responsibility, as we all are in these times, has a right to use the English languages carelessly. I charge that when first the War Committee and then the majority of the convention advocated not only public and lawful opposition to war, but sought to pledge the party to "all *other* means within our power," they took ground so close to the line of treason that in the event of loss of life in outbreaks against the war the signers of the report would be in great danger of suffering the death penalty for treason. President Wilson, in his warning against the commission of the crime of treason, cited the following act as among the acts that the United States courts had declared to be treasonable:

The use or attempted use of any force or violence against the government of the United States, or its military or naval forces.

I warn both the party and each member of the party against the ratification of a report which, in the event of a single unfortunate death, might and probably would be so construed by the courts that the signers of the report would be put to death and the Socialist Party hopelessly disgraced for a generation.

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But, unfortunately, the paragraph quoted is not the only dangerous paragraph, nor the most dangerous paragraph in the report. I call attention to the following lines from Section 2, as they appear in the report under the heading "Our course of action":

Unyielding opposition to all proposed legislation for military or industrial conscription. Should such conscription be force upon the people, we pledge ourselves to continuous efforts for the repeal of such laws and the support of *all mass movements* in opposition to conscription. * * *

Here are some serious words. Out of “all mass movements,” I can get no other meaning than “all mass movements.” “All” means “all” or it means nothing, and a riot in resistance to the draft would, I fear, in case of fatalities, be construed to mean a “mass movement.”

Now, I have no fear that any of the signers of the majority report have or had or will have the slightest intention of leading a riot against the draft if conscription should become a fact. But I do know the meaning of the words they have used, and I believe I know how the courts would construe them if some misguided persons, mistaking this report for the sentiment of America, should fire upon soldiers seeking to conscript them. The misguided rioters would probably be shot down with machine guns. Their trouble would be ended. But their advisers in the Socialist Party would be punished for treason. And the Socialist Party, for a generation, would be compelled to bear the brand of a traitor party; during which time, any measure, to be politically damned, would require no more than the endorsement of the Socialist Party.

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To point out these dangers is not to assume an attitude of general submission or to deny the right of revolution. There is plenty of authority for the right of a people to overturn their government by force. Washington and his associates used force to overthrow English rule in the American colonies. But, to the best of my knowledge and belief, there are certain plain rules that should govern the exercises of the right to use force against the government.

The first of these rules is that the right insisted upon should be worth acquiring, even at the cost of war, that all lawful and peaceful attempts to obtain this right had failed, with no reasonable prospect that such attempts would, within a reasonable time, be successful, and that so large a part of the population was therefore in a frame of mind to use force as to give force reasonable prospects of success.

Let it be granted that the right of a people to determine democratically whether they will go to war is a right of the first importance. Have the American people exhausted all peaceful means to achieve this right, and is there no reasonable prospect that peace-

ful means would ever give it to them? *The American people have never tried lawful means to accomplish this desire!* Having never tried this means, they certainly have not exhausted it. They have never forced any political party to democratize the war-making power. When the Socialist Party, last year, urged the people to take control, both of their foreign policies and of their war-making power, they turned a deaf ear to us. Parenthetically, I may remark that some of the most ardent “r-r-revolutionists” in our party who now want to use “all” means against conscription, including “mass movements,” were most uninterested when the war referendum plan was proposed, as they were also most censorious of me last year, when I made the draft law and militarism generally the keynote of my part of the campaign. They said I should have talked “straight Socialism” — right out of the encyclopedias, I suppose.

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I say that the men and women who favor the majority report are as little justified as are other Americans to advocate force against conscription. They have never been interested in lawful methods of accomplishing their purpose. A little more vision would have revealed to them last fall much of what now confronts us. They had no vision then. They have none now. They apparently believe that the American people only await their word to “rise” against the government. If the American people rise, it will be to strike down some of those who are talking about the use of force against the United States government. He who believes America is in a revolutionary mood does not know his America. Compulsory military service, if it should come, will not be welcomed, but after some muttering it will be accepted, as it was in England.

If there were intelligent leadership in this country, compulsory military service might not come at all. If the Socialist Party has vision and understanding, it will reject the majority report and adopt the alternative report, signed by, I think, 60 dissenting delegates at the convention, of whom I was one, which demands that the American people shall be given an opportunity to vote on conscription, as the Australians did, and decide the matter themselves.

If the American people should sufficiently peti-

tion Congress for the right to vote on conscription, Congress would not dare to try to enforce conscription. If the news were to reach Washington that the people, demanding the right to vote on conscription, were filling all the halls in the land, from the largest to the smallest, there would be no conscription act of Congress — depend on that. Congress often appears to be deaf, but it is not. It responds when it sees that the people are in earnest.

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Lawful and peaceful means to prevent conscription not having been tried by the American people — much less exhausted — I am opposed in principle to the use of force against conscription for the same reason that I am opposed to conscription itself — because both conscription by act of Congress and forcible opposition to it are each a denial of democratic principles as applied to government. I do not believe that a little group in Washington should have the power to conscript the men of America. But under the constitution Americans have a right to petition Congress to democratize the power to conscript by giving the people an opportunity to vote upon it and settle it for themselves. I stand by the democratic principle which compels me to cry out against both the wrong (legally right though it is) of a few men voting to conscript a nation, which is but the exercise of legalized force, as I also cry out against the wrong of using force against conscription, if it shall come, when we have made no attempt to forestall it by legal and peaceful means. And I further assert that any and every man and woman who, under mature reflection, now stands for the use of force against the government to prevent conscription thereby denies one of the great fundamentals both of democracy and of Socialism. Force, in this instance and at this time, is not Socialistic but anarchistic; it is not in harmony with orderly, democratic procedure, but is individualism gone made.

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Briefly, this is my case against the majority report. As a sidelight upon its ultra-radical advocates, who to me seem to be the worst pronounced reactionaries that have controlled a party convention for many

a day, I should like to mention two illuminating facts. These ultra-radicals who are so wrought up about war and conscription also took it upon themselves to write a new platform for the party. If you will look at it carefully, you will note that they have dropped from it the demand that the power to determine foreign policies be taken from the President and placed within control of the people, as they have also dropped from it the demand that, barring the actual invasion of our soil, no war should be begun without an affirmative vote from the people on the direct question. The war-referendum demand, which is now omitted from the platform, would, if it had been the law, have prevented the government from going to war with Germany in the present instance, since Germany has not invaded this country. If the war had been prevented, there could have been no conscription, and therefore no occasion for the advocacy of “force” to resist conscription.

The convention also proposed an amendment to the constitution which, if it be adopted, will send the party another leap along the road of reactionaryism by going back to the old convention system of nominating candidates for President and Vice President. This system is so out of harmony with all democratic principles that there is already a loud demand in the old parties for its abandonment. President Wilson, after his first nomination, said he hoped there would never be another convention held for the nomination of national candidates — that the people, by direct vote, should nominate their own candidates for President and Vice President. But the “ultra-radicals” of the Socialist Party, who advocate democracy everywhere else, would now abandon the democratic principle as applied to the nomination of Socialist Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates.

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I should like to add that while I accept the present war as a lamentable fact, I believe our policy should be to get from it for the working class every advantage that can be obtained and to hold these advantages, rather than to waste our energies in futile exhibitions.

We should strive, for instance, to create a public opinion that will prevent England from jamming Germany to the limit, both in fighting and in peace terms. I think I have some information with regard to Euro-

pean affairs that is both true and new. France will not insist upon harsh terms. The new Russian democracy has already renounced the claims of the old autocracy. Only England stands out for harsh terms. *When Germany is ready to quit, England should be made to quit.* England should not be permitted to drive a peace that would leave Germany so miserable that another war, sooner or later, would be inevitable. That Germany will be ready to quit long before the end of the year [1917], there is little, if any, doubt.

When that time comes, the German people, both in the name of a humanity that has already suffered too much and in the interest of the future, should be treated generously. Grant treated Lee generously. It is both the right and the politic thing to do and we, as Socialists, instead of impotently jangling about the vexed questions of the war, should get behind and push the idea of a just peace for Germany whenever she signifies her desire to quit. Give her back her colonies. Let Alsace and Lorraine decide with which nation they want to be. Otherwise, let German territory alone. Waive all indemnities, except for the restoration of Belgium, France, and Serbia. Impose no punitive financial penalties. Leave even the question of the Hohenzollerns to the German people. We should consider their sensibilities. If they show a disposition to stop fighting, let the Germans have a chance to settle with the Hohenzollerns. Let us trust something to German sense. They have had a severe lesson. They

must have learned something.

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Here is a problem for which all of us should be able to work with a will. It is high time we were at it. The end of the war is near. Do not doubt it. Just before Von Bernstorff left Washington, in February [1917], a man asked him how long he believed it would take the submarines to starve England. Von Bernstorff replied that unless they did it in 3 months, it would be too late. The 3 months during which Von Bernstorff figured that Germany could hold out will end about May 1. Now, in the latter half of April, Germany is showing unmistakable signs of extreme hunger. The end can not be far delayed. There will be no time of r an American conscript army to land in Germany, though it seems likely that steps will be taken to raise such an army. But the end is coming, and it is near. Let us try to do our part toward bringing peace. Let us raise all the food we can this summer and let us cheerfully live on plain fare next winter, in order that we may export all we can to France, Germany, England, and all the other nations in which there is and will long continue to be so much hunger and so much suffering.

Our party has a great opportunity. My fervent hope is that it will measure up to it.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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