
Socialists Play Berlin's Game: Take Pacifist Stand in America — Refused to Do Same Thing at Meeting in Germany

by A.M. Simons

Published in the *Milwaukee Journal*, April 29, 1917.
Reprinted in *The Congressional Record*, v. 55, (May 11, 1917), pg. 2091.

There is a story of the last two international Socialist congresses often whispered among Socialists, but hitherto unpublished. The capture of the recent special Socialist Convention at St. Louis [April 7-14, 1917] by pro-German nationalists now not only adds a final and convincing chapter to that story, but makes its publication in this



country imperatively necessary.

This story may be hotly denied by pro-German Socialists here. But every delegate in Stuttgart or Copenhagen in 1907 and 1910 knows it to be true.

The great issue of the Stuttgart Congress was militarism. Leading the anti-militarist forces was the brilliant, erratic Herve, whose single aim was to secure a resolution pledging the Socialists of the world to a general strike in case of war. Against him was pitted the entire German-Austrian bloc, led by August Bebel and supported by pro-German delegates from the United States.

For nearly a week the struggle went on in committee. Then suddenly the word was passed that a compromise had been reached and a resolution adopted by unanimous vote.

The German Promise.

That unanimity rested upon the pledge of honor by the German Social Democracy that if a formal resolution was not adopted they would lead in any general strike or other concerted move against war.

Because that pledge was made directly to me by prominent representatives of the German Social Democracy, my experience is important.

The Socialists of other countries had been assured that the Imperial German government had guaranteed freedom of discussion to the gathering. If any such assurance had been given, it was most outrageously violated when Harry Quelch, an English delegate, was given 24 hours to pass the frontiers because he had reflected upon the Hague Peace Congress, which included some of the Kaiser's personal friends.

On the evening of the day following his speech I was with Quelch when a secret service man handed him the formal order of expulsion. With the remark that the document would make an interesting souvenir, he passed on into a room where an entertainment for the delegates was in progress.

Threatened with Police.

I sat down beside Ledebour and Paul Singer,

both members of the Reichstag and asked what would be done about the Quelch incident. Singer vehemently vetoed any protest, lest the police dissolve the congress.

Surprised at such supineness, I raised the question of the militarism responsible for it and the resolution then before the congress. Very loudly and emphatically Singer declared that the adoption of resolution endorsing the general strike or other violent action against the war would outlaw the great German Social Democracy. I then asked how, if such a position were maintained, there could ever be any international action against war.

Singer's voice sank, he gave a furtive glance around such as I had learned introduced any radical statement in a public place in Germany, and said slowly and impressively: "The German Social Democracy will never be found lacking in international solidarity. It never has been We will act without resolutions."

Ledebour Repeats Pledge.

Recognizing the tremendous significance of this statement, I turned to Ledebour for confirmation. Singer had spoken in German. Ledebour changed to English and said: "I can pledge you that we will not be found lacking. We were not lacking when help was needed for the general strikes in Belgium and Denmark. We will not need a resolution to bind us.

Of course, after nearly 10 years I cannot swear to exact words. But they made a deep impression at the time. I have repeated them many times. I know that the above is as nearly verbatim as it is possible to recall a spoken conversation without notes. Singer has since died. Ledebour has fought the war up to the present moment and has done his best to keep his pledge.

But the complete confirmation came next morning. I found that many similar statements had been made to other delegates by Germans,

and that the entire congress was preparing to act upon the strength of those statements.

"Every Step Possible."

If further confirmation is needed, it exists in indisputable form in the resolution adopted and in the speeches made at the time. The resolution calls upon the working class "to take every step possible to avoid the occurrence of war." Every delegate understood this to include the general strike and revolt, and that this phrase was used to record the pledge of the German Social Democrats without using the exact words that would doom the politicians.

Complete proof is found in the stenographic report of the final speeches on its adoption. The resolution was reported by Vandervelde, who moved the cloture. Herve demanded the floor. The Germans feared to have him speak, because they knew he would so word his knowledge of methods to avoid German police censorship, insisted upon having his instructions that debate must be confined to the question of putting the cloture, translated into French. Herve laughingly informed Singer in German, that he, Herve, understood German. "No," insisted Singer, "these instructions must be translated."

Herve for General Strike.

This was done. Herve then, in spite of continuous "calls to order," succeeded in saying that he had obtained everything he wished, that he would return to Paris perfectly satisfied, and finally, that he "would vote for the resolution with both hands in the air," which he did. Herve came to the congress to secure just one thing — the adoption of a resolution pledging the Socialists of the various nations to revolt or general strike in case of war. He returned thinking he had succeeded.

No sooner had the war broken out and the German Socialists failed to keep their pledge than

their American defenders seized upon the omission of the words "general strike" in the resolution to deny that the Social Democrats of Germany were pledged to any violent opposition to war. Some who so wrote knew these facts. Others perhaps wrote in ignorance.

By 1910 and the Copenhagen Congress the feeling that it was dangerous to trust an indefinite pledge had grown. Kier Hardie then joined with Eduard Vaillant of France to make the pledge formal. Again the German politicians pleaded that such action would outlaw them. But Ledebour, with some other Germans Socialists, had already begun to suspect these politicians of double dealing and supported the Hardie-Vaillant resolution. But the political machine of Germany, assisted, as at Stuttgart, by their German allies in the American delegation, was able to secure a reference to a committee to report at the next congress. On the date set for that congress German Socialists in arms were in Belgium by virtue of the votes of other German Socialists in the Reichstag.

I do not raise the question of the efficacy or desirability of the general strike and domestic revolt against war. I only call attention at this time to the fact that the very pro-German delegates from the United States who opposed such methods at Stuttgart and Copenhagen endorsed them at St. Louis to be used against the government of the United States. German imperialism desired the defeat of such a resolution at the international congresses. German imperialism desired its adoption by the Socialist Party of the United States.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.