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# Lee and Spargo Debate Party's Report on War: Thousand Socialists at New Star Casino Hear Arguments Pro and Con

Unsigned report in the *New York Call*, v. 10, no. 141 (May 21, 1917), pp. 1-2.

A keen intellectual battle raged for 4 hours yesterday [May 20, 1917] at the New Star Casino, 107th Street and Park Avenue, when Algernon Lee and John Spargo met at a Socialist Party meeting to discuss, pro and con, the majority report on war adopted at the St. Louis Convention [April 7-14, 1917].

One thousand party members listened to the arguments presented for and against the report with concentrated attention. Probably 50 persons questioned the speakers after the formal presentations had been made, and many questions remained unasked at the end, because the hall had to be vacated.

Lee and Spargo were both members of the Committee on War and Militarism of the convention, which adopted, by 11 to 4, the majority report, which was accepted by the convention after minor changes.

## Gives History of Report.

In opening the discussion, Lee gave a brief resumé of the manner in which the majority report came into being. Charles E. Ruthenberg, of Cleveland, O.; Morris Hillquit, and Lee had been appointed a subcommittee to draft a report on the attitude of the Socialist Party toward the entrance of the United States into the war, he said. They worked, Lee declared, "Until we had a draft — not perfect and unimprovable, but one which we were satisfied to present to the committee as a whole."

Lee then began presenting his reasons for the adoption of the report. He quoted the first paragraph:

*The Socialist Party of the United States in the present grave crisis solemnly reaffirms its allegiance to the principle of internationalism and working class solidarity the world over, and proclaims its unalterable opposition to the war just declared by the government of the United States.*

"Naturally, there can be no disagreement about the maintenance of working class solidarity," he said:

The question is whether our adherence to this principle imposes upon us unalterable opposition to the entrance of the United States into the European war. We put that into the very first sentence because we considered that was the essential point before us — not what we were going to do about this or that specific question, such as free speech and press, censorship, conscription, labor legislation and organization — these things had to be dealt with — but we felt that it was necessary to put first of all other incidental questions, every one of which is of vital importance to the working class movement, unless we were clear upon this question first.

Do we approve or consent to the entrance of the United States into the war, even though we have opposed such entrance? Do we accept it as an accomplished fact, as something that has been done, and having been done, do we abandon opposition to it? Or do we, after the declaration of war, adhere to the same decision which unquestionably — I think, unquestionably — the great majority of the party held a few months ago, when we were using all our power to prevent the entrance of the United States into the war?

In affirming the party's unalterable opposition to the war, European precedents in several countries were not the determining factors.

“We considered no wars in general but this particular war,” he said, and went on to defend the statement: “We brand the declaration of war by our government as a crime against the people of the United States and against the nations of the world.”

This has been criticized (said Lee) on the ground that it is not true. It is alleged by some that the United States government was actually justified in entering the war. It is held that we have no ground for saying



that no modern war was more unjustifiable than this. Let me state why I consider these words were not extravagant or superfluous, but an actual statement of an actual fact.

In Europe the war had come as a result of a long course of policies carried on by the governments against the opposition of the Socialists. All these nations had been armed to

the teeth, and once the spark was dropped in the great powder magazine that had been collected there, it became practically inevitable that all the leading nations of Europe and several of the small ones would be involved — that they would be all repelling actual invasion, or engaged in preventing invasion of their own territory by invading the territory of their neighbors, and keeping destruction beyond their own frontiers.

Our situation has been essentially different from the beginning. We have at no time been under the necessity of entering the war — [as] judged from the point of view of those who would justify any or all of the Socialists of European nations for supporting their governments.

The United States was not threatened with invasion, subjugation, dismemberment, or domination. The United States was able to feed itself. If there was hunger in the United States, it was not because the commerce of the United States had been interfered with. If there was lack of food, it was because we were allowing our capitalist class to ship abroad for higher prices than could be got here, food that had been produced here and was sorely needed. The greater part of the evil that had been inflicted upon us by the European war had not resulted from the war in Europe itself, but had resulted directly from the interests of American capitalism in supplying the needs of one or the other party in the European war. (Applause.)

The United States up to the present time had been fortunately free of militarism. We had not yet become

irrevocably committed to the policy of economic imperialism, as compared to England, France, Germany, and Japan. That policy, to which the principle governments of the Old World were thoroughly committed was, so far as the United States was concerned, still in its infancy.

What followed was that the overwhelming mass of the people of the United States hated and dreaded the idea of militarism; in so far as they were thinking at all about policies of economic imperialism, the great mass of the American people disapproved it. Consequently, they held the European war to be a crime against humanity. (Applause.)

They were agreed that the United States should remain at peace. And as a result, the whole situation was this: That until the United States embarked upon a system of militarism, which may soon match that of Germany, the American people had an opportunity — a historic opportunity, such as had never been presented to any people. While Europe was being bled white, economically and vitally, it would have been the opportunity of the United States to lead the people of Europe and of the world out of the bloodstained paths that they had been following in the past, into the paths of peace. (Applause.)

That is what even those people who support the minority report have been saying from the beginning of the war down to the last few weeks — and in all earnestness, I believe — and what the greater part of us say today.

“Had the United States not developed a policy of economic imperialism, with a great army and navy to back it up,” Lee said to loud applause, “it would have been in a position to do what the Council of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies in Petrograd have now done — to take the leadership of the world for peace, to lead the world toward a lasting peace — a peace without indemnities or allies which strangle small nations; a peace consistent with the freedom and development of all the nationalities, with practicable means of international arbitration; a peace leading to simultaneous, progressive, and ultimately complete disarmament.”

It would have been the duty of the United States to take the lead in imposing such a peace upon the capitalists governments of the nations, by rousing the will of the peoples of the world.

The United States missed that opportunity. It did not miss it by mistake, or ignorance. It missed it because it suited the interests of those classes which do now just what they did before the war, and what

we said they did before the war — dominate the government — because it suited them not to have an immediate, lasting peace, because it suited their interests to permit the war in Europe to go on until those nations should be sufficiently weakened. Then they would enter the war, when, through their diplomats, they could dictate the terms of peace, backed up by a great army and navy, and an unexhausted country. (Applause.)

Because I am thoroughly convinced that this is a correct statement of what the United States would have done had it been guided by the desires of the Socialist Party, because I am convinced that this is a correct statement of the desires of those who really rule this country, I am convinced that this statement is not superfluous, not exaggerated, but say that “no war in modern times has been more unjustifiable.”

Lee proceeded to discuss the report’s declaration that “militarism can never be abolished by militarism.” He said:

We took what I believe is the unimpeachable position that while you may destroy the military forces of a country, you could not destroy its militarism, that in fact, if you still allowed that country to exist, you simply intensified the militarism of that country, and provided for the recreation of a still more intense and stubborn militarism than that which existed before.

There has not been one single instance from the days of Frederick the Great where a nation so beaten has thereby been set free from its militarism of a case where by such a defeat, that country has been internally democratized. The one case that seems to approach it is that of Russia. And the one reason that in Russia now on 3 occasions an unsuccessful war has brought a revolutionary movement, and this time to the point of overthrow of the government — the reason was that the revolutionary movement was unalterably opposed to the war policy of the government. (Applause.)

Of the charges made against the majority report that it was treasonable, Lee said:

I have still just enough confidence in the integrity of the courts of the United States to believe that treason means now what is meant when the constitution was written — “levying war upon the United States, or giving aid and comfort to its enemies.” And, according to the whole trend of opinion and interpretation of that definition, opposition to the war policy of the government during time of war is not treason. I may be wrong about it. That’s for the courts to decide.

Lee referred to several prominent European Socialists who were jailed on charges of treason for opposing their governments. “I hope there will be no occasion for any of us to go to prison,” he said. “But if opposition to the government in time of war should be construed as treason, that would be unfortunate for us, but the responsibility for it rests upon the courts and not upon us.”

Turning to the program of action, contained in the majority report, which began by pledging the party to “continuous, active, and public opposition to the war, through demonstrations, mass petitions, and all other means within our power,” Lee pointed out that the allegations that this meant “mass action,” and that mass action meant violence and crime were unfounded.

“I want to deny absolutely that in Socialist phraseology in this country, or in any other, so far as I know, the phrase ‘mass movement’ or ‘mass action’ have been euphonized for violence and crime,” he said.

Spargo said:

I am going to waive many minor objections that I have against the majority report. I shall not stress the fact that it is couched in such ambiguous language that it is capable of the interpretation placed upon it by Comrade Lee, and open to interpretation as different from that as black is different from white. I shall address myself only to the major and outstanding objections to the report. I shall bring against that report an indictment upon 4 distinct counts, namely:



1. That it is unsound in theory generally, and especially in its treatment of the economic causes of the war.

2. That it is inaccurate and misleading in important statements of fact and record.

3. That it is a betrayal of fundamental Socialist principles.

4. That it contains a program of action well calculated to strengthen all the greatest and most dangerous enemies of the international Socialist movement, to hinder the progress of our movement throughout the world, and to disrupt and to destroy the Socialist Party in this country.

You will agree, comrades, that that is a terribly

solemn indictment to bring against the report.

Under the first head, that the report is unsound in its economic theories, I am going to read passages from paragraph 5 of the report:

*The mad orgy of death and destruction which is now convulsing unfortunate Europe was caused by the conflict of capitalist interests in the European countries.*

*In each of these countries the workers were oppressed and exploited. They produced enormous wealth, but the bulk of it was withheld from them by the owners of the industries. The workers were thus deprived of the means to repurchase the wealth which they themselves had created.*

*The capitalist class of each country was forced to look for foreign markets to dispose of the accumulated "surplus" wealth. The huge profits made by the capitalists could not longer be profitably reinvested in their own countries, hence they were driven to look for foreign fields of investment. The geographical boundaries of each modern capitalist country thus became too narrow for the industrial and commercial operations of its capitalist class.*

This is unsound. In the first place it makes no distinction between the war as it affects Russia and Serbia and Bulgaria and Turkey, and the war as it affects and concerns Germany, France, England, and the United States. And yet surely there is between these two great groups of nations, East and West, a gap, not only in historical conditions, but a vast difference in economic conditions, too.

No economic generalization applying to the one group will apply to the other group. And the war broke out, may I remind you, in the East; primarily it was when Austria made upon Serbia demands of unparalleled brutality and arrogance, and Russia said to Austria: "If you push this issue too far we shall be forced to meet the issue and defend Serbia."

It is quite too absurd for argument to say that in Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Turkey there were such surplus products that they could not dispose of them without recourse to war. It is absurd to the limit of human absurdity, one would think, to say that the capitalists of Serbia and Turkey and Russia could not find means for their investment of their huge profits. That may or may not be true of the capitalists of England, France, and America, but it is not true of that great group of nations. And this crude, sweeping, childish generalization is plainly indicative of an inability upon the framers' part to analyze the facts as they are.

The assumption underlying the whole paragraph is that somehow the frequency of profitable investments depends upon imperialistic government,

upon political control of the country in which these investments are made, by governments representing the countries in which the investing capitalists reside. That is a view of the war and of the economic causes leading to it which may well come from some group of semi-bourgeois, liberal upstarts of yesterday. But no man who had learned the rudiments of Marxian analysis can accept it as true.

Do you for one moment believe that the German capitalists prior to the war believed that their investments in countries which Germany did not govern were less secure, or less profitable, than they would have been if Germany governed these countries? Do you not realize that the German capitalist with perfect safety and every facility for obtaining profit, invested his surplus profit here in the United States, in England and France, and that there was no temptation to the capitalist to say to the German government: "We must conquer this nation, in order to make safe our investment"?

Referring to oft-repeated statements made by the Socialists previous to the war (and concurred in by himself) that the capitalist has no country, Spargo declared: "All that the capitalist does require is that there be some form of stable government in the country where his investments are made."

Spargo said the causes of the European war were rooted in Germany, and were threefold:

An absolute monarchical government, with big dynastic ambitions to be served, together with the professional aspiration of her military caste, plus the interest of a small and important, but not dominant, section of the capitalist class, the iron and steel interests.

That is the union of forces that made the war — not the capitalist class, but a conjunction of political forces which could not have existed under any other social and economic conditions (he said).

If we say that the war is the logical outcome of the capitalist system, then we must find some explanation that will answer the average man who asks, "If that be true, how comes it that before the war the great capitalist leaders of all the countries were working to build up international arbitration for the settlement of disputes?" This you cannot dispute. International capitalism was already working upon a world trustification which would have insured freedom from war.

I said that the majority report was misleading and inaccurate in some of its statements upon some important matters of fact and record. I read from the report:

*The acute competition between the capitalist powers of the earth, their jealousies and distrusts of one another, and the fear of the rising power of the working class forced each of them to arm to the teeth.*

I stop on that sentence and ask you, does this phrase, "the capitalist powers of the earth," not include the United States of America, Great Britain, and Ireland? If so, it seems to me very easy to reply that the facts of the record disprove the statement that these powers were armed to the teeth. Comrade Lee has himself said that we here in the United States were free from militarism. Which is true, Comrade Lee or the majority report? As usual (*turning to Lee*), Comrade Lee is truthful and accurate.

England was not armed to the teeth. Against the statement of the majority report, I place the statement made in the Reichstag May 5 [1917] by Germany's Minister of War, Von Stamm. He said that previously unarmed nations were now arming themselves to the teeth.

Spargo continued reading from the report:

*And this led to the mad rivalry of armament, which, years before the outbreak of the present war had turned the leading countries of Europe into armed camps, with standing armies of many millions, drilled and equipped for war in times of "peace."*

"And that statement from the majority report," he exclaimed, "is in direct contradiction to the hopeless unpreparedness of Great Britain and Russia."

"In all modern history there has been no war more unjustifiable than the war in which we are about to engage," Spargo read from the report.

If I were a believer in the policy and program recommended by the majority report (he said), if I were ever so bitter an opponent of the present United States administration, I would not think it was compatible with my self-respect to give my assent to a statement that is so palpably at variance with the facts. (Applause.)

Even those among us who most earnestly believe the policy of the government to be wrong must, I think, be willing, if we can divest ourselves of prejudice and passion, to admit that, judged by the understandings that nations have determined their conduct by, there has never — or at least there has rarely — been a nation in history with power to defend itself which stood so patiently a series of violations of its rights without using that power.

Bring this proposition to the average American and he will think of the Franco-Prussian War, and of

the Boer War, and the Spanish-American War, and the Russo-Japanese War, and ask himself if it is true that this war is the most unjustifiable of all of these.

And he will answer: "No, of course it is not true. This war may be wrong, but at least this war has more justification than any of the others. (Applause and cries of "No, no!")"

Comrades, I know you will shout no. But I ask you to think, not of your opinion of these statements, but of what the average American mind will think of them. (Applause and laughter.)

I know the American mind. And if I am to go out over the country and oppose war, I must oppose it with a sounder statement than I find in this majority report.

I said I find this report a betrayal of fundamental Socialist principles. We have been told that in the forefront of the report is a declaration of our position on internationalism. I, too, am an internationalist. I believe that the future of Socialism depends upon its being in fact an international movement. And in this war we have seen developed in our midst a conception of internationalism, we have had offered us an interpretation of internationalism that is contrary to all the usages of our movement from its inception until now.

Internationalism has come to mean, for many comrades, anti-nationalism, or rather an attitude for which no proper word has yet been coined which may be termed the negation of nationalism. I sat in that committee, and I heard members of that committee say that they did not believe that the workers had any country. And it is a fact that we spent an hour and 20 minutes discussing whether we should use the words "our country" in the report or not — and then we were not satisfied and had to return to it.

Comrades, what have we meant when we have said that we were internationalists? Internationalism, is a fabric woven of the strands of national freedom, and no destruction of national sovereignty and freedom is anything but subversive of internationalism.

In our party, because of this conception of internationalism, we have always taken the side of the small and oppressed nations' fight for freedom. When any people flung to breeze their banner of defiance of national oppressors, our movement has



said: "Your cause is our cause."

That has been our attitude toward Poland, Bohemia, and other small Slavic nationalities; toward the Finns, toward Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the other Balkan people; toward Ireland and India. Now all of a sudden we are called upon to throw that all aside and say that it really does not make any difference at all whether these subject peoples are freed or not.

Julius Gerber, Executive Secretary of Local New York, presided.

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### ***Spargo Condemns "Backstair" Tactics.***

Questioned as to his attitude on the action of Winfield R. Gaylord and A.M. Simons in suggesting to a United States Senator the "discreet use of authority" in stopping the circulation of the Socialist Party's report on war, John Spargo said yesterday at a party meeting in the New Star Casino:

"I am utterly and absolutely and unequivocally opposed to the kind of campaign of abuse of some individuals in our party. I do not find it possible to defend in any manner or form the bringing of party matters up the back stairs of our administration, through Senator or Congressman. That action seems to me to be absolutely indefensible."

***Edited by Tim Davenport.***

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