
Proposal Ambiguous and Incomplete.

A Letter to the Editor of *The New York Call*, March 29, 1919.

by Algernon Lee

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Editor of *The Call*:

I have read with interest the letter entitled "A Basis for Discussion," signed by 13 party members, and published in *The Call* of March 23. Their intention, to bring about an intelligent discussion of party questions in place of reckless mudslinging, parliamentary obstructionism, and factional organization within the party ranks, is certainly a good one. I cannot say, however, that their proposed basis is satisfactory.

In the first place — it is a creed, not a statement of problems, but a list of ready-made conclusions.

In the second place, some of the main articles in this creed are either incomplete or ambiguous.

The 13 propose that all "social reform planks" should be eliminated from our party program. This proposal is both ambiguous and incomplete. Do they mean all the planks or only certain ones; and, if not all, which ones? We have planks declaring for woman suffrage, for the initiative and referendum, for freedom of speech and press, for legal recognition of the wage-workers' right to organize, strike, picket, and boycott, for social insurance, for improvement of the public health service and of public education, for municipal trading in the necessities of life, for nationalization of great industries, for abolition of child labor, for legal limitations of the workday, and various others. Does the phrase "social reform

planks" apply to all of these?

And when all or part of these have been eliminated, what then? Suppose, for instance, that the social insurance plank is struck out. What is then to be the attitude of our party, and of its editors, speakers, and elected representatives on the concrete issue of social insurance? Must we all oppose the measure which we formerly advocated? Or must we all simply "keep our mouths shut" and steadfastly ignore the question? Or, while the party stands neutral, are its members free to take what stand they like?

Again, we are told that our propaganda must be directed exclusively to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of industrial democracy. The whole meaning of this paragraph must lie in the word "exclusively." But what is that meaning? Just what is it that is to be excluded from our propaganda? Is this merely a repetition of the first article in vaguer terms? If not, what is it?

Yet again, the 13 tell us that the party should "assist in the process of organization on the economic field" by carrying on a "propaganda for revolutionary unionism." The trouble with this formula is that it might be accepted in perfect good faith by persons who hold widely different views as to the proper relation between the party and the unions. Why gloss over the actual differences of opinion on this question?

A "basis for discussion" ought to define questions, state them definitely and concretely, so that

every one may know exactly what each proposition means, and so that the reasons pro and con may be weighed.

But, in the third place — and this is yet more important — the letter of the 13 completely ignores certain fundamental and inescapable questions which, though seldom clearly formulated, are implicitly involved in the whole ferment of ideas now going on in the party. Let me suggest some of these questions:

Have we reasons to expect a revolutionary crisis in this country in the proximate future, aside from the possibility of such a crisis being voluntarily precipitated by one element or another? In such a crisis, if it should be precipitated (no matter by whom), would the majority of the people probably be actively with us or against us? Or would the majority remain neutral and inert, ready to accept the outcome of the combat between a

revolutionary minority and a reactionary minority? In this latter case, taking into account only the supposed active minorities, which of them would probably win in a decisive struggle at this time? On the basis of our answers to these questions, have we reason to seek or welcome a hastening of the crisis?

These are fundamental questions. Upon the answers we give to them must rest our decision on detailed problems of methods and tactics. They are inescapable questions. Ticklish as discussion of them may be, either we must answer them or we must continue to drift without compass or rudder. And our answers to such questions as these must be the expression not of our arbitrary will, but of our studious judgment of objective fact.

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