
Daniel DeLeon and the 1899 Split of the SLP

by Morris Hillquit

A section from the book *Loose Leaves from a Busy Life*. (New York: Macmillan, 1934), pp. 45-54.

A definite change in the policies and methods of the Socialist Labor Party came with the advent of Daniel DeLeon, who joined the party in 1890.

DeLeon represented a new type of leadership in the Socialist movement in America.

Born in Curaçao, in the Dutch West Indies, he came to the United States as a young man. He studied in Holland, Germany, and at Columbia Law School in New York, and later lectured at Columbia University on international law and diplomacy. He had actively supported Henry George in his mayoralty campaign and subsequently developed a growing interest in the Socialist and labor movements. For a decade he exerted a determining influence in the Socialist Labor Party. In fact he was the first and probably the only man who occupied the position of the traditional political boss in the Socialist movement in America.

Daniel DeLeon was intensely personal. Almost immediately upon his entry in the Socialist arena he divided the movement into two antagonistic camps — his devoted admirers and followers and his bitter critics and opponents. Now, almost twenty years after his death, it is still not easy to formulate a just and objective evaluation of his personality and of the part he played in the history of American Socialism.

DeLeon was unquestionably a person of great erudition, rare ability, and indomitable energy. He served the cause of Socialism, as he saw it, with single-minded devotion. He had unshakable faith in Socialism and its future, but his greater faith was in himself. He never admitted a doubt about the soundness of his interpretation of the Socialist philosophy or the infallibility of his methods and tactics. Those who agreed with him were good Socialists. All who dissented from his views were enemies of the movement. He never compromised or temporized outside or inside the Socialist movement. "He who is not with me is against me" was his motto and the invariable guide of all his political relations and practical activities.

Daniel DeLeon was a fanatic. A keen thinker and merciless logician, he was carried away beyond the realm of reality by the process of his own abstract and somewhat

Talmudistic logic.

Of small stature, mobile features, and piercing black eyes, he was a distinctly southern type. He was a trenchant writer, fluent speaker, and sharp debater. For his opponents he had neither courtesy nor mercy. His peculiar traits and methods were not due entirely to his personal temperament and character. In part at least they were the logical expression of his social philosophy. DeLeon was not a social democrat with the emphasis on the "democrat." He was strongly influenced by the Blanquist conception of the "capture of power," and placed organization ahead of education, politics above economic struggles, and leadership above the rank and file of the movement. He was the perfect American prototype of Russian Bolshevism.

Having unsuccessfully attempted to "capture" the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, he organized a rival trade union body under the name of Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance, thus provoking an open breach with the organized labor movement of the country.

His policy of antagonizing the trade unions and his regime of despotism and intolerance resulted in a strong and organized opposition to him. The final breach came in 1899, when the party split into two antagonistic factions, each claiming title to the party name and property.

The split was preceded by a long and bitter fight within the party, in which the administration faction of Daniel DeLeon was supported by the official party papers, *The People* in English, and the *Vorwärts* in German, while the opposition rallied around the daily *Volkszeitung*.

I was chosen by my comrades for the strenuous task of leading the opposition. There was never much love lost between Daniel DeLeon and me. I was repelled by his dictatorial demeanor, so utterly misplaced in a voluntary and democratic movement, and I considered his trade union policy as suicidal to the party. When the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance was organized and officially sanctioned by the party at its national convention in 1896, I could not accept it and for a time retired from active party work. But I soon realized that retirement was no solution and returned to the harness determined to make an open fight on the

spirit and practices that had come to be known among us as DeLeonism.

I was given ample opportunity to fight. In the columns of the party papers, at the meetings of the "Sections," and in numerous private conferences, the battle raged on both sides with ever-growing asperity, and I took part in all of it. Daniel DeLeon proved a formidable antagonist. He excelled any person I ever knew in unscrupulousness of attack, inventiveness of intrigue, and picturesqueness of invective. But in spite of his vigorous methods of combat, or perhaps because of them, the opposition grew constantly. While the official title to the party name was awarded by the courts to the DeLeon faction, the secessionists clearly represented the numerical majority.

In the meantime reinforcement came to American Socialism from unexpected quarters. In the Middle West an indigenous though somewhat vague Socialist movement sprang up as a sort of cross breed between certain surviving radical elements of Populism and the remnants of the American Railway Union shattered by the ill-fated Pullman strike. The movement crystallized in the organization of the "Social Democracy of America" in 1897. One year later the new party split in two. The organization remained in control of a group of romantics, who proposed to introduce Socialism by the spread of cooperative colonies, while the followers of the modern Socialist program formed the "Social Democratic Party of America."

It was to this party that the insurgent faction of the Socialist Labor Party turned for unity and cooperation.

Formal negotiations for the merger of the two organizations were opened at the national convention of the Social Democratic Party held in Indianapolis in March of 1900.

I attended the convention as a member of a committee delegated by the organization opposed to DeLeon to offer our hands and hearts to our Social Democratic comrades. Associated with me on the committee were Job Harriman, a California lawyer of rare eloquence, deep sincerity, and irresistible personal charm, and Max Hayes, a printer of Cleveland, equally prominent and popular in the Socialist and trade union movements.

* * *

The message of good will and cooperation which we of the seceding wing of the Socialist Labor Party brought to the assembled delegates of the Social Democratic Party was greeted by the latter with tumultuous applause and exuberant enthusiasm. The principle of unification was

adopted on the spot, and committees of the two organizations were appointed to work out the technical details. The convention adjourned in a spirit of exaltation and joy, which, alas, soon proved premature.

It appeared that the leaders of the Social Democratic Party, including Debs and Berger, were by no means as enthusiastic for unity as their followers. They had misgivings about the character and motives of the insurgent offshoot of the hated Socialist Labor Party. In the convention they bowed to the irresistible sentiment of the delegates, but when the finishing touches were left in their hands they changed front and decided against any form of merger. The immediate effect of the decision was to divide the Social Democratic Party into two separate factions, the "unionists" and the "anti-unionists."

Chaos reigned supreme in the ranks of the organized Socialist movement. Both the Socialist Labor Party and the Social Democratic Party were torn in two. The administration factions of the two parties maintained headquarters in New York and Chicago respectively, while the united insurgent wings of both, also operating under the name Social Democratic Party, established headquarters in Springfield, Massachusetts; and each of the parties made bitter war on the others.

The Socialists were then, as they are now, in the habit of expressing their sentiments in vigorous language, particularly in their own internal quarrels, and never did they make fuller use of the privilege than in those agitated days. I shudder to think of the reams of paper and quantities of printer's ink consumed in the pamphlets, newspaper articles, manifestos, appeals, charges, and countercharges which came in incessant torrents from all parties against all other parties and of the picturesque epithets in which they abounded. Be it confessed here that I contributed my full and honest share to this belligerent "unity" literature.

But I realize now that our seemingly childish quarrels had sense and meaning. They marked the passing of the phase of the Socialist movement which was largely based on academic propaganda and ushered in an era of active social and political struggle. It was the older and narrower movement that had matured within its loins the broader movement of modern Socialism and was reluctant to yield the field to its own rebellious child.

The logic of the situation finally prevailed over temporary unreason and personal passion. In the summer of 1901 another unity convention was held in Indianapolis with full representation of both warring wings of the Social Democratic Party and this time lasting unity was actually accomplished. The present Socialist Party was born. •