
A Convention to Restate, Not Apologize.

by Eugene V. Debs

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It has been a rule of mine these many years to ignore false charges and misleading statements concerning me in capitalistic publications. But now and then an exception arises which requires attention, and such an exception appears in the report now being circulated, with editorial comment, by the capitalistic press that I come to realize the error of my position in regard to the war, and that I have changed front and am now a pro-war advocate and appealing for the support of the administration in the prosecution of the war to the bitter end. The report is an unqualified falsehood. It is out of whole cloth, and for not other purpose than to create dissention in Socialist ranks, and create division, and, if possible, disruption in the Socialist Party.

A leading capitalist newspaper editorializes upon the false and vicious report as follows:

Debs has been whipped into line by public sentiment, and at this late hour is humbly clambering aboard the bandwagon.

This lying, profiteering organ need lay no such flattering unction to its festering heart. I have never asked any favor of the gang it represents, and am not doing so now. I have never yielded to threats or to intimidation in any form, and I am not cowardly enough to seek refuge, as so many do, in the popular side of a public question.

Years ago I declared there was only one war in

which I would enlist, and that was the war of the workers of the world against the exploiters of the world. I declared, moreover, that the working class had no interest in the wars declared and waged by the ruling classes of the various countries upon one another for conquest and spoils. That is my position today. I have not changed in the slightest, and any report to the contrary is absolutely untrue and is hereby branded accordingly.

I have urged a special convention to restate the attitude of the party toward the war in the light of the present situation. The St. Louis platform a year ago was all right at the time of its adoption. Certain parts of it might have been worded differently, but as a whole it declared the true attitude of the party in fearless terms, and I give it my wholehearted approval. There is nothing in that platform to apologize for or to retract. It fitted the time and the occasion, but much has happened since then, and a restatement, more complete and comprehensive, is now necessary, in my opinion, especially as we are just entering upon a national campaign and our position should be made so clear that there could be no doubt in regard to it, either on the part of our enemies or our friends.

In the St. Louis platform there are certain propositions stated which are now impossible. We cannot carry them out, and we should nor remain in the attitude of proposing to do the impossible.† For this reason, if no other, the St. Louis platform should be su-

†- One is slightly befuddled as to what aspect of the St. Louis platform struck Debs as so “impossible” (a code word for utopian radical extremism) in the current period. The St. Louis platform decried American entry into the European war as “a crime against the people of the United States and against the nations of the world” and emphatically rejected the proposal “that in time of war the workers should suspend their struggle for better conditions.” Instead, the St. Louis platform called for “an even more vigorous prosecution of the class struggle.” The St. Louis platform’s set of concrete proposals for action were quite tame, however: “1. Continuous, active, and public opposition to the war, through demonstrations, mass petitions, and all other means within our power. 2. Unyielding opposition

perseded by one that fairly and fearlessly meets the present situation.

It is said that a convention may result in a split of the party. That is easily possible, but does not argue against a convention. Confusion and chaos within the party are more to be feared than a split, and everything possible is being done and will be done by the enemy to bring such a condition if we do not squarely meet the issue.

The reason I favor a convention is that I want the attitude of the party stated as nearly as may be by the rank and file, and not by the leaders, and a convention comes nearest doing this.† It has been urged that we have not the money to cover the cost of a convention. Let each local pay its own delegate; and the sooner the convention is held, the better.‡ Let the rank and file be heard, and we shall make no mistake.

Now is the time for us to remember that we are Socialists and stand our ground. We shall, no doubt, be put to a severe test, but if we are true to the principles of International Socialism we have nothing to fear and we shall come out victorious in the end.

I have condemned the German majority Socialists, and I am not going to imitate their perfidy, much as the capitalist press may abuse me for not doing so.

The party leaders and many other comrades have been indicted and are now in prison or out on bail pending trial for being true to our cause. They are charged with being pro-German, disloyalists, and traitors, and if they are guilty, so am I. But they are not guilty, and their alleged disloyalty is to the real traitors of this nation, and will be written to their everlasting honor.

to all proposed legislation for military or industrial conscription. Should such conscription be forced upon the people, we pledge ourselves to continuous efforts for the repeal of such laws and to the support of all mass movements in opposition to conscription. We pledge ourselves to oppose with all our strength any attempt to raise money for payment of war expense by taxing the necessities of life or issuing bonds which will put the burden on future generations. We demand that the capitalist class, which is responsible for the war, pay its cost. Let those who kindled the fire, furnish the fuel. 3. Vigorous resistance to all reactionary measures, such as censorship of the press and mails, restriction of the rights of free speech, assemblage, and organization, or compulsory arbitration and limitation of the right to strike. 4. Consistent propaganda against military training and teaching in the public schools. 5. Extension of the campaign of education among the workers to organize them into strong, class-conscious, and closely unified political and industrial organizations, to enable them by concerted and harmonious mass action to shorten this war and to establish lasting peace. 6. Widespread educational propaganda to enlighten the masses as to the true relation between capitalism and war, and to rouse and organize them for action, not only against present war evils, but for the prevention of future wars and for the destruction of the causes of war. 7. To protect the masses of the American people from the pressing danger of starvation which the war in Europe has brought upon them, and which the entry of the United States has already accentuated, we demand:- (a) The restriction of food exports so long as the present shortage continues, the fixing of maximum prices and whatever measures may be necessary to prevent the food speculators from holding back the supplies now in their hands; (b) The socialization and democratic management of the great industries concerned with the production, transportation, storage, and the marketing of food and other necessities of life; (c) The socialization and democratic management of all land and other natural resources now held out of use for monopolistic or speculative profit.”

†- Debs never attended Socialist Party conventions and was no expert on them. His argument that conventions somehow necessarily reflected the will of the rank and file while other forms of party assemblages, such as meetings of the National Committee, did not seems to fly in the face of the evidence. Conventions also were historically dominated by State Secretaries and party “names,” rather than by Jimmie Higginses. Debs’ implication that a 200 member convention elected by the various states would differ in some fundamental way from a gathering of 45 or so State Secretaries and 15 members of the NEC is debatable, particularly given that the controversial decisions of either would inevitably be submitted to the full membership for final decision by referendum.

‡- Debs here conveniently sidesteps the constitution of the Socialist Party of America, which explicitly states: “Article IX (Conventions)—Sec. 5: Railroad fare, including tourist sleeper carfare, of delegates to and from the conventions of the party and the per diem allowance of \$2.50 to cover expenses shall be paid from the national treasury, by setting aside a portion of the national dues sufficient to cover the same, to be estimated at the beginning of each year.” Further, it was not “locals” which elected delegates to a national convention, but rather state organizations — each of which had their own constitutional provisions for delegate selection after the National Office apportioned representation to each state on the basis of paid membership. Setting up a convention was not a speedy process unless one was willing to summarily abandon party legality, as was done in the run up to the dubious 1919 Emergency National Convention. Any controversial decision resulting from such an illegal convention would certainly prompt a split, or at the very least a lack of legitimacy and enforceability of that decision.

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