
SDF Calls Convention at Pittsburgh, May 29: Delegates of Six Eastern States and Two Language Federations Plan the Launching of a Nationwide Organization [events of Feb. 7, 1937]

by James Oneal

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Although unsigned, *The New Leader's* editor was James Oneal, the probable reporter.

Meeting in the Labor Lyceum in Philadelphia last Sunday [Feb. 7, 1937], the Eastern States Conference of Social Democratic organizations adopted a call for a national convention to be held in Pittsburgh, May 29, 30 and 31, and set up a committee of 5 to make arrangements for the convention, with Emil Limbach of Pittsburgh as director.

Mayor J. Henry Stump of Reading was made chairman of the committee and Mayor Jasper McLevy of Bridgeport, treasurer. This committee will also raise funds to finance the national convention, have power to add one to its number from each state, and serve as a committee on credentials.

The conference was held on the initiative of the Pennsylvania Socialist Party, which withdrew from the Thomas organization of that name [Socialist Party of America] last summer. To it came the State Executive Committee of that state, and representatives from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, the Finnish and Jewish [Yiddish-language] federations, the District of Columbia, and the New Leader Publishing Association.

Large Delegations.

The delegations were fuller than expected and the hall was filled with delegates and visitors. It was recalled that it was in this same hall a year ago last January that the NEC of the old party suspended the New York State organization which was later followed by secessions of the two important federations and several big state organizations.

The committee to draft the call for the national convention consisted of Martin F. Plunkett of Connecticut, Leo Meltzer of Massachusetts, Darlington Hoopes of Pennsylvania, Sol Rifkin of the Jewish Socialist Verbund, Algernon Lee, William Karlin, and James Oneal of New York.

The committee on organization consisted of Sarah Limbach, Harry Berger, and George Rhodes of Pennsylvania; Carl Rhodin of Connecticut; Sam Neistadt of Maryland; Edwing Thompson of New Jersey; and Julius Gerber of New York.

This committee brought in recommendations for the time and place to hold the national convention and for a committee of 5 on arrangements, finance, and credentials, which were adopted with few changes.

Before the conference had proceeded very far, Meltzer moved that a telegram of greeting be sent to James H. Maurer who lies ill at his home in Reading and this was adopted by a unanimous vote.

Sarah Limbach Presides.

In opening the conference, Sarah Limbach, State Secretary of Pennsylvania, declared that the delegates were called to unite the Social Democratic forces throughout the country and to draft a call for a national convention so that all who are sent as delegates would know precisely for what it was to be held. She was also made permanent chairman of the conference and Sonia Tietelman was made secretary.

Algernon Lee was asked to open the discussion. He responded by saying that there had been many splits in the history of the American movement, but the movement had never died. We are in a transition period of the nation, the trade union movement and our movement, said Lee, and our job has been and is now to base our movement on the thought, feeling, and interests of the working class.

James Oneal reported for the Social Democratic Federation. He had had not time to consult records for a detailed report but declared that a rough estimate would place the membership, including federations and states that had not affiliated, at somewhere between 6,000 and 8,000. He doubted whether the Thomas organization had more than 3,000 as it had no reliable or effective state organization outside of New York.

An Important Discussion.

There was only one lengthy discussion in the conference and this involved the question of political policy in states where a Labor Party may be set up by the trade unions as in New York state. It was discussed in the committee that drafted the convention call and then by the conference.

Hoopes of Pennsylvania moved an addition to the call reading that the conference "favors a working class party that will not endorse Republican or Democratic candidates," and making acceptance of this one of the condition for admittance to the Pittsburgh convention. Oneal offered a substitute which appears as Section 6 of the call.

Of course, there was no one in the conference who did not sincerely "favor a working class party that will not endorse Republican or Democratic candidates," and had that been the real issue the Hoopes amendment would have been adopted unanimously. The interpretation put upon the amendment by the mover and its supporters, however, gave it another meaning. It raise the issue: Suppose that there is in any state a genuine beginning of a Labor Party, which has not, however, developed to the point of barring all endorsements of old party candidates. May Social Democrats participate in such a party, using their influence to promote further development, or must they stand outside and oppose the rise of a labor party until it has developed to full and complete independence?

The adoption of the Hoopes text, its opponents pointed out, would bar New York from the Pittsburgh convention unless the New York organization first withdrew from the American Labor Party.

Those who participated in the discussion were Jane Tait, Darlington Hoopes, Algernon Lee, Martin F. Plunkett, William Karlin, Reobert Lieberman, James Oneal, Raymond Hofses, Julius Gerber, Calrence H. Taylor, Leo Meltzer, and Carl Rhodin.

Problem in the Statea.

A few delegates appeared to believe that New York favored a policy of endorsing Republicans or Democrats if unions endorsed them and others pointed out that such endorsements could only be an issue for democratic Socialists in states where the trade unions organized a Labor Party. Should such a Labor Party make some such endorsements, Social Democrats would then be faced with the question of cooperation with the Labor Party or opposing the Labor Party because all its nominations were not from its own ranks.

Hofses, Hoopes, Tait, and Taylor were opposed to Social Democrats cooperating with a Labor Party that made such endorsements. Oneal declared that no one objected to the Hoopes amendment as it is what we would have a Labor Party ultimately become and that Section 6 of the call showed this, but to adopt it as worded would be to prevent cooperation with a Labor Party unless its break with old political policies was complete at the beginning.

Convention to Act.

Plunkett and Rhodin stated that Connecticut would hesitate about joining a federation if it adopted any rigid rules for the states.

While adopting Section 6, it is understood that it does not fix any policy but that this will be discussed thoroughly at the May convention and that body will determine the general course to be taken to meet the problems that will face Social Democrats in states where the trade unions organize their own party.

The date of the national convention was changed from March to May to give the committee on arrangements and finance plenty of time to contact all organizations likely to send delegates and enable them to arrange to send them.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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