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# A Christmas Party.

by Max Eastman

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While the international high-priests of capitalism are deciding how to kill us in the next war — whether to stand off and blow us into the air with big guns, or get up in the air and drop bombs on us, whether to drown us with submerged battle-ships, or stay on top of the water and merely submerge us, or whether just to wait until we have gone to sleep and pull us away quietly by the townful with our nightcaps on — while they are deciding these momentous questions of tactics, it seems fitting that we should meet also, and try to arrange some general scheme for staying alive as long as possible at least in principle. And I take it the convention of the Workers Party was such a meeting.

The Workers Party was born on Christmas day, 1921, and no date could be more appropriate. It is not that Jesus Christ was born on that day, although the chances are at least 1 to 364 that he was. And it is not that Christmas is the one day set aside by our highly specialized culture for the business of charity and the love of the neighbor — or at least for the mailing of an engraved neighborly formula to all the addresses contained in a card catalog. The reason why it was appropriate for the Workers Party to be born on Christmas day, 1921, is that on that day, once in every seven years, the workers get two days of liberty in succession. They get that much opportunity to think.

The program of the new Party shows that some of them have been doing a little thinking, a little hard, quiet, practical thinking. There has never been a program of an American party that

seemed so little occupied upon the one hand with political opportunism, and upon the other with romantic dogmatism, as the program of the Workers Party.

The convention was scheduled for 10 o'clock Saturday morning, December 24th, and following the Russian fashion — it assembled five hours later. It assembled at the Labor Temple on East 84th Street, in a hall decorated with a very non-committal selection of colored bunting — red, pink, yellow, green, red-white-and-blue — all converging with a wonderful suggestion of internationalism upon a Japanese lantern. These decorations were old and faded; the windows were dirty enough to give about as much light as church windows; and the voice of J. Louis Engdahl, who called the convention to order, was very ministerial. A feeling that he ought to be reading the Bible, or distributing prizes to the boys and girls who had learned the largest number of verses by heart, rather dimmed my revolutionary ardor for the moment. It was revived, however, by James P. Cannon, who made the “keynote speech” — an eloquent and thoughtful pledge to the workers of America to give them a fighting party, a unified party, a party free from personal malice and the spirit of divisionism, a party that will be “democratically centralized,” and “solve its problems in the true spirit of Marxian science.”

“The guarantee that the party will not be reformist,” he said, “will be in the personality of the delegates, not in the phraseology of the platform” — a challenge to the diehards of rhetorical extremism, which could only be improved by add-

ing that there *is* no guarantee that a party will not become reformist. Human beings are changeful, and the associations composed of them still more so. We are not staking out the boundaries of a promised land. We are guiding a flux in which we ourselves are flowing. We can make clear definitions of the dynamic elements involved, and clear volitions as to the goal and present course of our action, but we cannot by any device whatever forestall new combinations and alignments, new problems of definition and volition in the future. There is no rest or ultimate finality anywhere. If the diehards could realize this fact in general, they might find it easier to give up their hope of finding rest and finality — of finding the Absolute — in a rhetorical formula.

Those who feared that the revolution was becoming too parliamentary in its methods were reassured in a timely way by the ejection of Harry Waton, who had asked to be recognized as a delegate from the Marx-Engels Institute, of which he is, I understand, the faculty and trustees. His credentials were rejected by the committee, and he rose to a point of information on the floor of the convention. It seems to have been understood that he had some remarks to make which the del-

egates considered perniciously irrelevant, and that if he started making them he might possibly have to leave through the window instead of the door. It was by way of assuring him the more dignified exit that the chairman refused to recognize him, and the delegates sustained the chair. It was not exactly an application of the steamroller. It was more like the Mississippi River. The business of the convention simply flowed over him, and he



*Boardman Robinson*

**Hail, the Workers' Party!**

stood there yelling, "I demand recognition," "I will be heard," "If you all go to hell I will be heard," until he was drowned. There were some cries of "Steamroller!" and "What are you afraid of?" from the gallery, some boos and catcalls, energetically smothered, and followed by sounds in the hallway resembling the picture of a nude descending a staircase. But during all this uproar the convention flowed silently along, electing as chairman Caleb Harrison, who proceeded to read the program of procedure, opening with the statement that "Robert's Rules of Order shall prevail."

"Robert Fitzsimmons," I suggested to one of the delegates, but he was a little injured at the implication. He was the one who explained to me that if Harry Waton had got the floor, he would also have got the ceiling and probably a portion of the furniture.

There were 146 regular delegates at the convention of the Workers Party, 94 from the American Labor Alliance, 13 from the Workers' Council, and 39 from miscellaneous labor bodies. And there were 14 fraternal delegates, having a voice but no vote. These included George Hardy, representing the pro-unity group within the IWW, and Dennis Batt and Harry Wicks, representing the Proletarian Party of Detroit and points west. These two delegates hung like a small thunder cloud over the convention, threatening to join it if it was good, and give it a terrible and Marxian scolding if it was naughty. They did, as a matter of fact, explode at the final session, and denounce the program and the leaders, and the whole disposition of the assemblage, for not more explicitly declaring for a dictatorship of the proletariat, and for not describing the same in sufficiently Russian language. They said in effect that without the magic word, soviet, there was nothing to distinguish the Workers Party from a party of yellow socialists.

It was here that the convention showed itself so much more mature and confident than any previous assemblage of its kind in this country.

Two years ago such a theoretical thunderstorm would have struck fire and split the convention in forty places. Large blocks of earnest young Bolsheviks of the "hyperthyroid" type would have withdrawn to closet themselves for forty hours' debate in caucus, while the American working class waited breathlessly to learn who were to be its leaders in the revolution. Today almost everyone seemed to realize that the American working class will not pay any attention to a debating society, and that the leaders will be those who occupy themselves with organization, propaganda, and action in the current struggle. In consequence Batt's attack was not received with deadly seriousness by the leaders of the majority. A little very skillful and friendly humor was introduced into the argument, and the terrible thunderstorm sort of rolled away in a gale of laughter.

"The trouble with the comrades from Detroit," said Jim Cannon with his most genial smile, "is that they violate Rule 7 of the Book of Common Sense: 'Don't take yourself too damn seriously.'" He congratulated them a little upon the success of their speeches as an Eastern advertising campaign for the Proletarian Party, and in reply to their assertion that they alone had not altered their position in the past three years, he reminded them that in that virtue they could not compare with the Socialist Labor Party, which has stood still for forty years and will probably stand still forever.

"We are starting out," he said, "to build a real movement of the fighting workers. We invite everybody to join us for an open struggle against capitalism. Those who don't want to fight have our benediction as they retire to the library."

A like sentiment was expressed by Bittelman and Lovestone. In short the convention was unanimous in a good-natured opinion that if Batt and Wicks wanted to have a little party of their own, they were welcome to it, and if they wanted to come in and help mold the policies of the revolutionary party of the American working class, they

were welcome to do that also. They will come in, if they are disinterested and possessed of real political sagacity, for the issues upon which they criticized the party program are neither fundamental principles nor points of divergence in immediate practical action.

It should be explained to those not in touch with the ramifications of the American movement that the Workers Party combines all the leftward elements that have split off from the Socialist Party since 1919, a group in the IWW which is not committed to the anti-political dogma, and the principal workers in the American Federation of Labor who are devoted to the policy of “boring from within.” It comprises practically all the genuinely revolutionary elements in the United States, except the anti-political dogmatists, the romantics of the “Infantile Left,” and Eugene Debs.

Whether Debs will have the clearness of mental vision to place himself where in his heart he belongs, with the genuine revolutionists, is a question of great importance to the American movement, and still more perhaps to Debs himself. He will no doubt have an opportunity to become the emotional leader of a movement towards a “labor party” — a movement which will occupy the center of the stage in the years immediately coming. The program adopted by the Workers Party states that the attempt of the Socialist leaders “to unite the so-called progressive labor elements and the Farmer-Labor Party into some sort of moderate Socialist organization has been a total failure.” And that may for the moment be true. But such a union will occur nevertheless.

Such a “moderate Socialist” organization — whether so named or not — will be born, and will flourish, and probably pass through its political victory and disillusionment, before a Marxian party comes actually to the center of the arena

in America. Debs may lend his voice and passion to the illusion, and so hasten the process of disillusionment. He will not be without value in that function. But a greater destiny is open to him. He can add his magnificent personality and prestige to the little group that is distinguished by its present understanding of the whole process. It will be, for some time to come if it stands to its principles, a little group — apparently insignificant in America’s political life. But it has a good chance to become the true and ultimate standard-bearer of revolutionary change.

We can hardly expect Debs to realize immediately, after the years of confinement, that a complete, new, thorough, patient, flexible, and dispassionate technique of agitation and organization has been worked out in the last three years, and that the perfect practicality of it must inevitably prevail. Through the mere pressure of their daily problems, the revolutionists will be driven to its standard. The exponents of intellectual dogma, of romantic emotionalism, of political compromise, will alike fall into a secondary and ineffectual place. The groups that comprehend the spirit of experimental science, and know how to use their brains as practical instruments, will constitute the authentic socialist movement of this generation. Debs belongs to that movement. His eloquence and humanity — his genius for feeling — are not the only gifts he brings to it. He has also a simple realistic common-sense, a kind of Americanism — if I may do that honor to a much dishonored word — at least a disposition to *be* where he is, that would be a most wholesome ingredient in these new beginnings in America. They are not new beginnings, but they are beginnings on a basis of new and wider experience, of the work to which Debs has devoted his life.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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