
Keynote Address to the 1917 Emergency National Convention of the Socialist Party, St. Louis, MO — April 7, 1917.

by Morris Hillquit

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Comrades, I thank you most heartily for the honor you have conferred on me in choosing me as Chairman of the Sixth National Convention of the Socialist Party. At no time has the national council of our party met under as critical conditions or faced as serious a task and test as those we are facing here today.

When the chairman's gavel fell upon our last convention on May 18, 1912, our organization was flushed and conscious of youthful vigor. Our movement was buoyant with enthusiasm, and the men and women in it were joyous with struggle, conscious of conquest. Within a few years, we had increased our membership to over 125,000, represented by about 5,000 live and active locals.† We had increased our press to about 300 different organs. We had just had our first great electoral victories in various cities of the country and in legislative bodies, and we had just opened the doors of the National Congress to a representative of our party. Socialism seemed to be in the air. The Socialist movement was militant and triumphant. We saw nothing but growth and victory ahead of us.

World Factor.

And the triumphant march of the Socialist proletariat was by no means confined to the United States alone. All over the civilized world, the Socialist movement had become the most significant factor, the most propelling course in public life. In 1913 a number of the leading countries of Europe seemed definitely to

move toward Socialism at such a rate of speed that it seemed to all of us that within a few years, a very few years, Socialism would conquer and dominate those countries. The hosts of Socialist men and women in Europe alone numbered between 30 and 40 millions, and it was one great ardent body knitted together by solidarity of feeling and action, inspired by the same idea, working for the common cause, working as one great universal force regardless of national boundaries, regardless of racial distinctions. We were proud of our International, of which we formed a part. We were expecting the next joyful occasion, the great review of Socialist forces of the world which was scheduled to be held in the month of August 1914 at the proposed International Socialist Congress in Vienna.

Collapse Comes.

And then suddenly, unexpectedly, disastrously, the accumulated forces of capitalist misrule broke loose. Europe found itself in the throes of war. Everything that civilization had been laboriously building up in the course of generations collapsed, collapsed suddenly and lamentably, and our proud Socialist International, upon which two generations of men and women had been laboring incessantly at the greatest sacrifice — our International collapsed with every institution of modern civilization.

We are not here, comrades, to judge the conduct of the Socialists and workers of Europe. What elemental force stronger than principle, stronger even than class loyalty, actuated them in those dark days of

†- Hillquit's assertion of a 1912 membership of "125,000" is slightly optimistic. The average monthly paid membership according to the SPA's official statistics 1912 was 118,045.

the beginning of the war, what force it was that drove this body of workers who only 24 hours before had presented one organization, knitted together by the most intimate ties of working class solidarity — what had driven them at each other's throats, only history in the future will show.

Reaction Reaches Us.

But the fact is that for the time being at least, it tore the proud edifice of the Socialist International to pieces. For the time being our International lies wounded and bleeding at the feet of the all devouring Moloch of militarism and war. It may take years, it may take an indefinite time before we recover. But there is no doubt whatsoever but that for the time being the war and the participation of the Socialists in the war in Europe was a most vital stab in the heart of the International Socialist movement. The reaction spread over the ocean and reached us. It had taken the heart out of a great many of our comrades. It created a moral atmosphere of depression which hung over us like a dark cloud for years. And then came the even indirect effects of this war as influencing the course of our own movement. War in Europe created that spirit so fatal to all democratic and progressive movements — the spirit of militarism, founded upon an appeal to the lowest conception of the vulgar patriotism which permeated our country, which was fostered artificially, which grew from day to day to the exclusion practically of all other movements of the people.

And with that came this era of prosperity; a prosperity built upon the death and destruction of our fellow men in Europe, a prosperity to which our people unthinkingly and unfeelingly were inclined to cling.

Hypocrite Exposed.

The administration of President Wilson, hypocritical as it turns out now to be, as the Socialists knew it to be all the time, by making an appeal to the unthinking masses, an appeal in behalf of the cause of labor and progress, an appeal — the irony of it all — an appeal to the sentiment of the people in favor of peace, in favor of being kept out of the war.

†- Hillquit here turns the actual 35,000 member decline into 45,000. The average monthly paid membership of the Socialist Party of America fell from 118,045 in 1912 to 83,284 in 1916.

And with these various discouraging elements came the unfortunate growing laxity in our own organization. It was a fatal blunder, I believe, on our part to abandon those National gatherings which we should normally have had, our National Committee meeting, our convention, scheduled for last year, just at the time of all times when most necessary for the welfare of our party, for the gathering of whatever forces there were; so that after the lapse of five years we find ourselves as the Socialist movement in a period of depression.

Comrades, it will serve no good purpose to close our eyes to the fact that our party and our movement have gone backward since 1912. We have lost members. Our membership has been reduced to about 80,000 from 125,000.† We have lost several organs of publicity. We have lost votes in the last election. And worst of all, we have lost some of our spirit, some of our buoyant, enthusiastic, militant spirit which is so essential, so very vital for the success of any movement like ours. (*Applause.*)

War is Upon Us.

And now, on top of it all comes the war. Our country, which seemed so very safe from the European insanity, 3,000 miles removed from the seat of conflict, our country has been violently, needlessly, criminally drawn into this European conflict. (*Great applause.*) War is upon us with all its horrors. It may be that there is time. The vast majority of the unthinking crowds consider our declaration of war a mere manifestation, a mere game. But the time may come, the time probably will come, when war will become as grim, as hideous a reality for the American people as it has become for the peoples of Europe. (*Applause.*) Millions of our boys will be sent to the trenches to murder millions of other boys in foreign countries, and they will be for the most part boys of the working class on both sides. War means more than a state of mind. War means horribly mangled bodies of hundreds of thousands of innocent boys. It means the groans, the agonies of the battlefield. It means desolation, privation, suffering at home, and all of it, yes, most of it will fall upon the working class.

We, the Socialist Party of the United States, are today the only considerable organized force which has still retained a clear vision, an unclouded mind, in this general din of confusion, passion, and unreason; and it falls to us to continue our opposition to this criminal war, even now after it has been declared. (*Applause, cries of "Good".*)

People Oppose War.

The favorite phrase nowadays is "Stand by Our President." We Socialists, so long as we remain Socialists, will never subscribe to so meaningless, so undemocratic a phrase by which the people of the United States surrender their sold birthright. (*Great applause.*) In his speech before Congress, smooth and well turned as usual, President Wilson calls attention to the fact that in the autocracies of Europe this war, the most vital to all the peoples of Europe, was declared by the powers that govern, without consulting the people of the respective countries. And that comes from the mouth of the man who never consulted the American people as such, for the American people — I say boldly — even today the vast majority are opposed to war. (*Great applause.*) If ever a great people has allowed itself to be stampeded into death and destruction, it is this great democratic people of the United States. And we Socialists have a task before us. We have the task, first and foremost, to continue preaching reason and humanity to the people of this country, continuing our opposition to war. And more than that, war having been declared, it becomes our duty and the duty of all progressive, thinking men and women of this country to begin at once laying the foundation of a speedy peace, and one that will make future wars impossible forever and ever. (*Applause.*)

Nor is that all. War means more than conflicts on the battlefield. War means reaction at home. War creates a mob spirit of unreason. War creates conditions under which all the powers of reaction, all the predatory powers of the country, can satisfy their desires, and accomplish their attacks upon popular liberty, upon popular rights with absolute impunity. Not a voice in this country will be raised against these attacks upon popular liberty that are sure to come; not a strong voice unless it be the voice of the Socialist Party of the United States. (*Applause.*)

Fight War Profits.

Nor does this exhaust our task. This war will consume not merely the lives and the blood of the people, but also the wealth of the people, millions and billions of dollars. And as usual, the working class which will furnish the fodder for cannons will also be called upon to furnish the sinews of war.

It devolves upon us to proclaim to the working class of this country, to the whole people of this country, that those powers and interests who have made the war, that those powers and interests who can best stand that war, who expect to profit by it, shall be made to bear the tremendous cost of this war. (*Applause.*) No individual profit shall be made. No individual advantage shall be gained by the predatory classes of our country, out of the misfortune, out of the calamities, out of the lives of their fellow men; that we, the Socialist Party, can awaken the people of this country to a realization of the enormity of the situation.

Comrades, there are dire days ahead of us. There are critical days ahead of us. Do not be despondent; do not be discouraged, for after all, the Socialist movement never had smooth sailing; for after all, when you men and women gave yourselves to the Socialist movement you must have known that it was a great, a hard, a difficult struggle which you undertook, a struggle which has its ups and downs, its victories as well as its defeats, its defeats as well as its victories.

There remains but one thing for us, the faith in the ultimate victory, the inevitable victory of our cause through all hardships and all difficulties. (*Applause.*)

Foe Near Collapse.

Already we begin to see the signs of the arrival of our movement; the unmistakable signs of the collapse of our inveterate foe, the capitalist system — the great social revolution in Russia was an indication of it. (*Applause.*) Our shortsighted press and our shortsighted statesmen may console themselves with the theory that this was a resolution created by the liberal minded bourgeoisie. We know better. We know that the revolution in Russia was forced on the streets of Petrograd by the working men in uniform and out of uniform, in protest against the horrors of war in Russia. (*Applause.*)

And what has happened in Russia is bound to happen, and bound to happen within a short time, in Germany and Austria as well. (*Applause.*) Already from all indications, the throne of the Hohenzollerns is tottering. That of the Hapsburgs may follow. This war will be ended not by diplomacy, not around the table by representatives of the powers, monarchies and governments of Europe. This war will be ended by the rebellious working class of Europe. (*Applause.*) And when the hour comes, comrades, when the proletariat of the world finds itself, when it renews its struggles for liberty, its struggles for social justice, let us see to it that the new movement finds us in a condition where we can proudly take our place in the ranks of the rejuvenated International to continue our struggles for the emancipation of the working class of the world. (*Applause.*)

Time of Great Test.

Comrades, just in these critical times it becomes more than ever our duty to preserve, to strengthen, to build up our organization. It is times like these that test the value of movements and of men. It is easy to go with the Socialist movement when it has almost

become fashionable to be a socialist. It is harder to stick to the movement, to give it the best that is in you, at a time when the movement has experienced setbacks, at a time when an artificially infuriated and incited mob has set upon the Socialist movement, at a time when the entire press of the country is up in arms against it. (*Applause.*) It is at a time like this, comrades, when each true soldier in the Socialist revolution, man and woman, must be at his or her post and stick to it. (*Applause.*) It is for the purpose, comrades, of gathering our forces, of solidifying our forces; it is for the purpose of organizing a strong, militant, powerful front against all the predatory powers-that-be, that we have gathered here today. (*Applause.*)

This convention, comrades, will make or unmake the Socialist movement in the United States. (*Applause.*) Let us hope, then, that our deliberations will be conducted with faith, wisdom, and courage. Let us remember that a small band of 200 of us are charged with a tremendous trust, not merely in behalf of our immediate constituents, but in behalf of the entire working class of this country, in behalf, perhaps, of the International working class, the Socialist movement of the world. I thank you, comrades. (*Applause.*)

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.

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