

HOW THE SLP EMERGED AS A MARXIST POLITICAL PARTY

By Robert Bills

The Socialist Labor Party “came out” as an independent political party of Marxism for the first time in 1890. As an organization, however, the SLP actually dates from 1877. During the early years, the party was dominated by an element that subscribed more to the views of Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864) than of Karl Marx (1818–1883).

Lassalle distrusted trades unionism in principle. He urged workers to form political parties instead to win control of the state, which would then be used as the foundation for socialism.

Marx opposed this view. He saw the trades unions as the training ground on which workers’ struggles would lead them to classconsciousness, and on which their political union would eventually form and be based. He did not see the political state as a “moral force” that could be converted to working-class uses, as did Lassalle, but as an implement of class rule and oppression that socialism would abolish and replace entirely with new institutions of a different character.

In spite of its Lassallean views on tactics, the pre-1890 SLP never entered a national election campaign in its own right. The 1880 national convention nominated three men as potential presidential candidates, but party members voted instead to support the Greenback Party ticket.

The SLP did manage to attract a few workers from the trades unions of the time, but most tended to be anarchists. Some of these formed armed “defense clubs” in preference to running candidates in local elections in the 1880s, and soon brought chaos and disruption into the party. In 1883, Phillip Van Patten, the party’s national corresponding secretary since 1877, abandoned his post in despair.

By 1885, the dissolution brought by the anarchists shifted the balance of power in the SLP from Chicago to New York. The seat of the executive committee was transferred to the latter, and a new secretary was elected. He was William L. Rosenberg (b. 1850), who also continued as editor of the SLP’s new official newspaper, *Der Sozialist*.

Rosenberg and a majority of the executive committee were Lassalleans of a sort. They also distrusted trades unionism in principle, and eventually urged that the SLP take “independent political action” on its own.

Before the seat of the executive committee had been transferred, however, socialists had played a critical role in bringing local trades unions together into a Central Labor Union (CLU). Unions across the country began to agitate forcefully for the eight-hour day and other measures that would benefit workers.

Trades unionism was still in its formative period. The official corruption and class-collaborationist policies that would eventually come to dominate the unions had not yet taken a firm hold. Many unionists understood the class struggle, and some of their organizations called for the abolition of the wages system and even for socialism. They welcomed the socialists, and began to listen as the SLP members urged the CLU to take independent political action in the mayoral election campaign of 1886.

1886–87 Campaigns

This led directly to the formation of a United Labor Party (ULP) and the search for a candidate. The ULP settled on Henry George, author of a book in which he claimed that poverty could be eliminated by placing a “single tax” on land.

The socialists did not accept George’s theory, and he was reluctant to accept the ULP’s nomination. By all accounts, he was politically ambitious. He would not run unless the ULP could guarantee him a large vote. The CLU and SLP went to work circulating petitions and gathering 30,000 signatures from workers pledging to vote for George.

The ULP and its candidate placed second, with 68,000 votes, far more than anyone had expected. The results had an electrifying effect, not only among workers, but also within the old parties and the ruling class.

George understood the implications as “labor demands” suddenly began to appear in the platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties in response to the 1886 elections. When, in preparation for the 1887 state elections, he succeeded in having the ULP adopt a “tax reform” platform devoid of all labor demands, the socialists objected. The fight that followed resulted in the SLP being expelled from the ULP.

Some SLP and CLU members immediately organized a “Progressive Labor Party” with a “radical platform,” which nominated its own candidates. But, the PLP did not attract a large vote.

These developments were carefully observed from two quarters that took

no direct part in the events themselves. They were closely observed by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its president, Samuel Gompers, and by the executive committee of the SLP

By 1887, the SLP had acquired a newspaper published in the English language—the *Workmen’s Advocate*. This paper had formerly acted as the official voice of the New Haven Trades Council in Connecticut, and was edited by J.F. Busche.

The membership of the SLP was overwhelmingly German, and the party had never succeeded before in establishing a permanent newspaper in English. The most important socialist paper of the time was a German daily, the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*. Unlike *Der Sozialist* and the *Workmen’s Advocate*, however, it was not party-owned. It was operated as a private business, and depended heavily on advertising for its financial support. Its advertisers included unions and “friend-of-labor” politicians, who sprang up in abundance after the 1886 campaign.

In those days, local SLP organizations (sections) were based on the language spoken by their membership. New York had three sections—German, “American” and Jewish. The German section was the largest by far, and it was strongly influenced by the *Volkszeitung* and its editor, Alexander Jonas. The “Coups” of 1889

Early in 1888, Rosenberg and Busche began to agitate for “independent political action” by the SLP, with or without CLU support. By summer they had prevailed and the sections nominated Jonas for mayor. But the SLP ticket received only 2,000 votes.

A dispute quickly broke out within the SLP Rosenberg and Busche discounted the small vote and continued to agitate for independent political action. But they were tactless, and allowed their contempt of the unions to color their articles and editorials. This led to trouble for socialists within the CLU, where the influence of the major parties was starting to be felt. The *Volkszeitung* also felt the pressure in terms of lost revenue.

The conflict within the SLP was waged during the first half of 1889. In September, the German section voted to remove Rosenberg, Busche and a majority of the executive committee. They physically occupied the editorial offices of *Der Sozialist* and the *Workmen’s Advocate*, locking the officers out. This “coup,” as it was later called, was sanctioned by the SLP’s Eighth Na-

tional Convention in October 1889. A new executive committee, with Benjamin J. Gretsch as secretary, was installed, and Lucien Sanial was made editor of the *Workmen's Advocate*. The convention also adopted a new national platform, which would be the model for subsequent SLP platforms for decades to come.

The split of 1889 wasn't over "independent action," but over who should take it—the SLP or the unions. A similar dispute soon broke out inside the CLU, where the Democrats, frightened by the ULP campaign, sought to defuse the "spirit of 1886." The rupture came in June 1890, when a number of unions withdrew from the CLU and established the Central Labor Federation (CLF). The newly reorganized SLP was instrumental in that decision, and simultaneously issued a call inviting all labor organizations to a conference to decide on entering the 1890 state elections.

In the meantime, a new movement had arisen around another book—*Looking Backward*, by Edward Bellamy. Bellamy envisioned a new society organized on a cooperative basis without class conflict or poverty. The movement attracted many liberals and academics, some of whom had left the George movement in disgust. A number of these sympathized with the socialists and workers. As the 1890 state election campaign approached, the Nationalist Clubs (inspired by Bellamy) in New York divided into two groups. Those who feared and rejected socialism formed a "Commonwealth Party." Those who sympathized with the socialists withdrew and invited unions and other labor organizations to attend a conference for the purpose of nominating a labor ticket for the 1890 elections.

The date for the conference was deliberately set to coincide with the SLP conference. The SLP conference, supported by the CLF, decided to nominate a ticket and proceeded to adopt a platform. This platform was virtually identical to that adopted by the SLP's 1889 convention.

The SLP Arrives

These conferences were held separately but simultaneously over several weeks' time. In the meantime, socialist and Nationalist speakers worked together staging campaign meetings throughout New York City.

The final session of the SLP conference was held on Thursday, Sept. 25, at Clarendon Hall. It began at 8:30 p.m., with Alexander Jonas acting as chairman. As the meeting got underway, another group entered the hall. As the *Workmen's Advocate* of Oct. 4, 1890, reported:

Credentials were received from the United Machine Wood Workers' Union No. 1, Progressive Laborers No. 1, Pants Makers' Union No. 1, Assembly Districts 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24, and three delegates each from the four Nationalist organizations. The latter 12 appeared in a body headed by Daniel De Leon and Charles Sotheran; and they were vociferously cheered as they entered the hall. The Credential Committee reported favorably on all, and the delegates were seated.

Prof. D. De Leon then spoke on behalf of the Nationalists. He said that the call of the Nationalists for a convention some weeks ago, had been actuated by a desire to reach labor organizations which presumably could not have been reached otherwise. The problems of certain people had amounted to nothing. Two or three 'pocket organizations' of the K. of L. [the Knights of Labor] had responded; the others were bogus labor organizations. The Nationalists, therefore, had to disavow the Commonwealth Party and join the party of organized labor. (Continued applause.)

The convention proceeded to nominate candidates, and a vigorous campaign in which the SLP received over 13,000 votes followed. New struggles and conflicts lay ahead, but for now the SLP was united and had finally and irrevocably "come out" as an independent political party based on a sound Marxist platform. And it entered the new period having acquired a new member—Daniel De Leon—whose name would soon become synonymous with the socialist movement in America.

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Please report errors to

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