
The Issues of Unity (April 16, 1900)

Terre Haute, Ind., April 16, 1900.

Comrades:—

A crisis is upon us. The very life of our party is threatened. Shall it emerge from the ordeal in glory or perish in ignominy? If we be men, fit and worthy to have custody of a party to which the working class are turning with a last hope, the issue is not in doubt for a single instant.

Shall the SDP and the SLP unite upon the basis agreed to and recommended by the majority of the New York conference?¹

I have read the report of the conference,² the manifesto of the Executive Board of the SDP,³ the replies thereto by Comrades Harriman, Hillquit,⁴ Hayes,⁵ and Benham,⁶ the current issues of the press of both parties, as also a vast number of personal communications relative to the unity proceedings, and after a careful survey of the entire situation and the maturest deliberation of which I am capable, I have arrived at a conclusion, and I now propose to meet the responsibilities that rest upon me in my triple capacity as member, official, and candidate, by declaring my position in clear and unequivocal terms and facing without fear all its consequences, be they what they may.

As I write I see the blanched faces, the appealing eyes of the working class, to whom alone, and my own conscience, I am finally accountable for my acts. Rather than betray them and turn their hope into despair, I would destroy myself, and if in what I now have to say I write a word not dictated by my conscience and approved by my best judgment, I hope the hand that pens it may be palsied at its task.

Dismissing all personal prejudice and all partisan predilection and viewing the matter solely from the standpoint of a socialist to whom the cause is dearer far than his own life, I take my stand against union of the parties on the basis proposed by the New York conference, and until our party has been rescued from the maelstrom which threatens to engulf it, against union on any terms. I say this with the fullest realization of what it means to break with comrades loved and true, yet sustained by the

conviction that duty demands it, that time will triumphantly vindicate the action and that the odium of today will be the honor of the future.

Lest I be misunderstood let me write it in plain words. I am opposed to union because I favor unity. In the present strained situation there can be unity without union, but there can be none with it; and as certain as it is effected, if such should be the verdict of the ballot, the Social Democratic Party will be disrupted and there will be no unity in the united party.

In arriving at my conclusions I have been guided largely by my intuitions, but I shall try to make the reasons which actuated me as clear as I can to my comrades of both parties.

It will be remember that a short time previous to the convention I wrote an article for the Herald stating that in my opinion the time for union had not yet arrived, which article provoked considerable criticism.⁷ For months I had been doing all I consistently could to harmonize the two parties and to pave the way to unification. There were many obstacles in the way. For years the official organ of the SLP had drilled it into their members that the SDP consisted of a lot of freaks, frauds, and fakirs without redeeming feature. They were fairly saturated with the virus of hate and contempt. Hundreds of them, members of the anti-DeLeon party, and I speak advisedly, still rankle with that feeling which, to even the superficial observer, is but illy concealed. It is this sort of training in the school of intolerance, fanaticism, and hate which have given the party a spirit irreconcilably in conflict with that of the Social Democratic Party, which by its high-minded toleration has appealed so successfully to the American people in behalf of socialism that its complete supremacy as the socialist party was only a question of months, while at every step of its progress its members were derided as "half-baked socialists" by the very men who now, we are assured, insist upon union. The spirit is still there, whatever may be said to the contrary, and it is this that, in my opinion, prevented the SLP representatives from even temporarily accepting our name, even though they had to change their own, even though some of them assured us it would be done, and even though our identity be totally obliterated on the eve of a national campaign. It is this spirit with which I have to deal and it is this that largely forms the basis of my opposition to union.

I shall not attempt to follow the unity proceedings through their torturous windings. I care nothing about quibbles and hair-splitting techni-

calities. There are those who are schooled in artifice, in word jugglery, in the legerdemain of smooth and cunning phrase which can be made to mean anything or nothing, and they are proud of it. I am not an adept in such practice and have no desire to be.

When the representatives of the SLP appeared at our convention and assured us that they wanted unity I unqualifiedly accepted their word and persuaded myself that my misgivings had been exaggerated, nor shall I now charge them with violating their pledges, although it seems clear to me in the light of subsequent proceedings that in their zeal to effect union they exceeded the scope of their authority and went counter to the wishes of their party.⁸

Comrade Harriman will doubtless recall the conversation he and I had as we walked to the convention hall to attend the closing session at which I accepted the nomination. Without any reservation whatever he assured me that the name Social Democratic Party was entirely acceptable to him and that he was confident that his party felt as he did, and that there would be no opposition upon that point. He also added that on the eve of a campaign was no time to make a change, and that whatever change might seem desirable could be made after the national election by the united party.

Now I admit that the name in itself amounts to little and should not stand in the way of union one instant, but it is what the name stands for, the spirit, the morale, the party identity, that amounts to everything and (let us not be deceived) it is this that inspired the labored arguments in opposition to the name, so that while the name itself is of no consequence it covers the central, controlling issue between the two parties and in rejecting it, the SLP representatives, inadvertently perhaps, struck the proposed union a fatal blow, and as I now view it, fortunately so for the cause of socialism.

To what extent did this conflict of party spirit actually dominate the conference?

Referring to the name, the attitude of the SLP amounted to this: "We are going to change our name, but will not have yours."⁹ In the matter of headquarters each party said in effect: "I can't have it and therefore you shan't," and made a selection ridiculously unsuitable for a national party.¹⁰

Without going further it is perfectly obvious that in all of this the SLP shrewdly yielded little or nothing, while our party surrendered prac-

tically everything, and the adoption of the majority report would simply mean the swallowing up of the Social Democratic Party and its domination by an element composed largely of men who had despised and ridiculed it and who would today scorn the suggestion of union did they not see the handwriting on the wall; and this perfectly plain and evident fact many of our own comrades who are clamoring for unconditional union seem utterly unable to see.

If unity was possible when the conference met, it was no longer possible when it closed. It is admitted that they had a complicated situation to deal with and if they did their best they could they were simply unequal to the task, and so far as failure is chargeable to the conference I have no more fault to find with the SLP representatives than with our own. From first to last there was sparring for party advantage instead of an honest, controlling desire for unification, and this in itself, conspicuous in every important feature of the negotiations, proves beyond cavil the conflict of party spirit.

Some of our own comrades will deny this, for while they are members of the SDP they have the spirit of the SLP, just as there are members of the latter who are in accord with the spirit of our party.

The National Executive Board has been severely censured for issuing its manifesto in advance of the majority report. My name is not attached to it, but I am equally responsible with my four associates for what it contains. If it is "criminal" and "malicious," as charged, I claim my full share of the odium, not from any sense of self-sacrifice, but because I endorse, if not the specific grounds, the action, and am prepared to answer for my share of it.

The purport of the report had gone out. It had struck the party with the effect of a lightning stroke and revolt threatened instantaneously. Prompt action was required in the emergency and the board took it and will stand by it until time vindicates their fealty and turns denunciation into praise. Had they not acted as they did the party would ere this be deserted by hundreds of loyal comrades, the very ones who worked and sacrificed, and put up the money, too, to make the national party what it is today.¹¹ I am not now discussing the justice of revolt. They do occur and unless the Executive Board had taken prompt action the SDP would have been disrupted, and even though part of it had united with the SLP, we would not more have a united socialist party than we had before.

I have said that the spirit of the two parties, as a whole, is totally dissimilar and it is this fact rather than the incidents to it that is responsible for the failure of the union. The SLP was trained in the bitter school of bigotry and intolerance. It must preserve an air frigidly scientific. Emotion and sentiment must be banished. hard and stern are the party methods and it must be confined strictly to the working class. Tolerance is a crime. Members must suspicion each other and rows must occur at intervals as to prevent the party from getting beyond the bounds of a mere faction. It has taken years to cultivate and intensify this spirit that has dwarfed socialism in America, and it cannot be overcome in a day nor by resolutions passed in a conference.

Diametrically opposite to this is the spirit of the SDP. It has from the beginning been tolerant and hospitable. It pursued the even tenor of its way through showers of abuse. Its dignified policy, its spirit of toleration appealed to the people, while tis comrades loved and trusted each other and worked with inexpressible zeal for its success.

I cheerfully admit that in some places the spirit of the parties has so modified as to make union entirely feasible. But this is not true of the parties at large. Take Chicago, for example. We are told the SLP have 600 comrades there. Not [six?] of them all told have ever been at our headquarters, even since the unity negotiations have been in progress. At heart they have no use for our comrades and hold them in contempt, and it should also be said that our comrades have no use for them. This is the fact, and there is no use trying to conceal it.¹² Taken as a whole, they will not work together, and all the resolutions that can be passed will not unite them in their present spirit toward each other. To put them into one party at this time means simply disruption and disaster. Better far to keep them in separate parties until the logic of events has ripened them for union.

In discussing the spirit of the SLP I am struck by the exhibition of it in Comrade Benham's letter, which I wish every one of our comrades to read with care, especially the paragraphs in which he charges our Executive Board, in innuendo so direct that specific averment could add nothing to its force, with being in the pay of capitalism. I confess to being greatly surprised in the source in which that spirit had found expression. Comrade Benham's letter must furnish its own comment so far as I am concerned. After reading what he has to say, and the manner in which he

says it, I am satisfied that he and I are not ready to belong to the same socialist party.

It seems hardly possible that this is the same comrade who in the convention made the touching plea to me to accept the nomination for President, inviting me to his California home to have my health and vigor restored by the balmy breezes of the tropics; and yet, was it not that same evening at the "peace conference" that he took the ground that if I were given the nomination he would insist upon our party giving up its name? Just why my nomination should be at the expense of my party's name I will leave others to explain.

It has been charged that Victor Berger knew that I would accept the nomination before he went into the "peace conference."¹³ This is not true. Up to the time the convention adjourned I had steadfastly refused the nomination. I left the hall with my brother alone, and after a long struggle with myself concluded to accept the nomination. I did not now a conference was held and did not see Berger until after it adjourned. He could not have known that I would accept the nomination for I had not at that time communicated the fact to anyone.

For the reasons herein imperfectly stated I am opposed to union at this time, and I shall vote against it and also against the report of the majority and use my best efforts to defeat both. I propose to stand by the Social Democratic Party until conditions favor a united party; and my judgment is that this consummation will not be deferred long after the national election. In the meantime I stand ready to work in harmony with the SLP, and so far as I am concerned, we shall go into the national campaign with a united front.

I shall not resign the nomination at this time unless the party desires it. I did not want the nomination at the convention, but I shall not desert when the party needs me. Nor can I be neutral, as some of my best loved comrades insist, without feeling myself guilty of cowardice. The effect upon myself personally is of no consequence, and I am not concerned upon that point. It has been intimated that the reason I did not want the nomination this year was because I wished to nurse my chances till the party becomes strong enough to elect. All I have to say is that the Presidency and all other offices are alike to me and I do not think there is a man living who has a stronger aversion than I to public office; and that I am a candidate at all is simply because of an overwhelming sense of party duty.

And now I respectfully propose the following line of action:

First, let us decide against union at this time and reject the majority report.

Second, elect a National Executive Board of nine members by referendum vote. Upon this board women should be represented by their own sex.

Third, elect a National Secretary and Treasurer and editor of the official organ.

Fourth, elect a national campaign committee.

This program can be carried out in short order and then we will be ready to cooperate with the SLP in moving on the enemy with a united front. If they are willing to unite on candidates, that can be readily arranged, and if not we will go into the campaign with our own.¹⁴ We will lose no time in attacking the common enemy. Whenever it is possible let the two parties unite on candidates and otherwise cooperate, and where this cannot be done there need at least be no friction. Separately organized, the parties can move forward on parallel lines and accomplish the substantial objects of unity; while these must certainly be defeated by an enforced union of elements that are fundamentally dissimilar and inharmonious.

Such cooperation as is herein indicated would be in the nature of a preparatory stage for final union and would inevitably lead to such a result.

And now a closing word to our comrades. How far you may agree or disagree with me I do not know. I have given you as accurately as I could a transcript of my head and heart. I have written without malice toward anyone and with the cause of socialism the guiding influence in reaching my decisions. You are to decide this important question and I have no wish to control your action. Having faith in your judgment and your loyalty I have no fear of the verdict you will render.

I hope that each of you will carefully read all the testimony presented by both sides before you cast your vote. Read the *NY People*, the *Cleveland Citizen*, and other SLP papers as well as the *Social Democratic Herald* and then vote as your conscience may dictate, and the party we love and which has been such a shining success will emerge from the fire unscathed, and tempered by the heat and passion of conflict will be better than ever fitted to enter upon the glorious future that awaits it.

Yours fraternally,

Eugene V. Debs.

Published in *Social Democratic Herald*, vol. 2, no. 33, whole no. 94 (April 21, 1900), pg. 1.

¹ The first conference of the Joint Unity Committee of 18 met in New York City from March 25-27, 1900. One committee member of the SDP, Victor Berger, did not attend. The eight SDP delegates split 5-3 in favor of a majority report outlining the program, constitution, and terms of unity between the SDP and the dissident SLP organization which split from the party after failing to depose Daniel DeLeon and the party leadership in 1899. The three SDP unity committee members voting in the minority — Frederic Heath, Seymour Stedman, and Margaret Haile — then successfully sabotaged a vote on the majority report with a barrage including a front page “Manifesto” of the National Executive Board, written April 2 and published in the *Social Democratic Herald* of April 7, accusing the SLP of double-dealing and negotiation in bad faith, as well as this piece by Debs attacking the agreement as an individual. Unity between the two organizations would be delayed until August 1901.

² “The Union Conference,” *Social Democratic Herald*, April 7, 1900, pg. 2. Minutes and a lengthy negative commentary on the proceeding by Margaret Haile, secretary of the SDP delegation to the March 25-27 conference.

³ “Manifesto,” *Social Democratic Herald*, April 7, 1900, pg. 1. This document was signed by NEB members Jesse Cox, Victor Berger, Frederic Heath, and Seymour Stedman, but not by Debs, who, largely for matters of form, awaited release of the majority report before offering his negative opinion. The majority report was itself published in the *Social Democratic Herald*, April 14, 1900, pp. 1, 4.

⁴ Job Harriman and Morris Hillquit replied with a joint letter in *Social Democratic Herald*, April 21, 1900, pg. 4.

⁵ The letter of Max S. Hayes, dated April 7, was published in *Social Democratic Herald*, April 14, 1900, pg. 3.

⁶ A long letter by San Francisco SLP activist G.B. Benham was published in *Social Democratic Herald*, April 21, 1900, pp. 1, 4.

⁷ “On Unity,” Jan. 14, 1900, published in *Social Democratic Herald*, Jan. 20, 1900, pg. 3. Republished in this volume.

⁸ The Social Democratic Party convention of March 6-9, 1900, was attended by Morris Hillquit, Job Harriman, Max S. Hayes, and G.B. Benham on behalf of the SLP dissident faction.

⁹ The SLP dissidents favored the name “United Socialist Party of America.”

¹⁰ The SDP was based in Chicago and the SLP dissidents in New York City; the latter favored Springfield, Massachusetts as the new national headquarters of the united party.

¹¹ According to the official report of Theodore Debs published in the *Social Democratic Herald*, issue of March 24, 1900, as of the first of that month the Social Democratic Party had liabilities \$751.44 in excess of assets, with three creditors accounting for this amount: Eugene Dietzgen for \$225, with Editor A.S. Edwards and National Secretary Theodore Debs representing the balance, presumably in the form of unpaid wages. The party’s total

disbursements from its formation in June 1898 to March 1 totaled \$8,245.74, a majority of which related to costs of publication of the organization's weekly newspaper.

¹² The organ of the SLP dissidents in Chicago was *The Workers' Call*, edited by Algie M. Simons, a weekly launched in March 1899.

¹³ The source of this alleged charge is unclear.

¹⁴ This is a plain call for "political fusion."