

THE DEBS CAUCUS

A Party Within a Party

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The Socialist Party, U.S.A., was formally organized at a unity convention held in Indianapolis in 1901. The two merging groups consisted, on the one hand, of the Social Democratic Party of Eugene Victor Debs, and on the other hand, of one of the two Socialist Labor Parties then in existence. The Social Democratic Party had been organized in 1898 mainly from among radical Populists after the breakup of their party; a breakup which owed much to the nomination of Bryan by the Democrats in 1896, which in turn was caused in part by the fallout from the Pullman strike which Debs had led. The SDP was mainly native American and for years the Socialist Party was to get its highest vote in farming states, Oklahoma, in particular. The SLP had split over DeLeon's dual unionism, and the anti-DeLeon faction, led by Meyer London and Morris Hilquit, was made up of people active organizing the needle trades in urban centers; it was mainly foreign-born people and strongly Marxist.

As this initial unity implied, from the beginning the SP-USA was the ecumenical organization for American radicals. It was always extremely open its membership. It included Marxists of various types, Christian socialists, Jewish socialist groups, foreign language sections, single-taxers and funny-money people—virtually every variety of radicalism America had. On the divisive issue of reform versus revolution, the SP-USA from the beginning adopted a compromise formula, producing platforms which called for revolutionary change but which also spelled out "immediate" demands of a reformist nature. A perennially unresolved issue was whether revolutionary change could come without violence; there were always pacifists and evolutionists within the SP-USA, and others who opposed such views. The SP-USA historically stressed cooperatives as much as unions, and included within it the concept of revolution by education and by "building the new society within the shell of the old."

The SP-USA aimed to become, in its own right, a major party. Before World War I it elected two Congressmen, over 70 mayors, and innumerable state legislators and city councilmen. It was still electing people occasionally as late as the 1950's. Its membership topped 100,000 several times, and its vote was about a million on the presidential line in 1912 and 1920 (for Debs) and in 1932 (for Norman Thomas).

As with any ideologically grab-bag organization, it was forever in internal dissension, with grouplets leaving. An early major fight was over the Industrial Workers of the World, which Debs and Daniel DeLeon of the Socialist Labor Party had helped create. In World War I the SP-USA was one of the very few Social Democratic parties that hung on to their traditional opposition to war, and many leaders besides Debs were imprisoned.

The Bolshevik split, (when people left to form the Communist Party, USA), therefore, based as it was viscerally on antiwar socialism, attracted very few English-speaking SPers, though it was successful among the foreign-language federations whose members oriented more to politics in the old country than in America. In 1924 the SP-USA joined the AFL in supporting the "Bob" LaFollette (Progressive Party) candidacy, and by the 1928 election Norman Thomas had emerged as major national leader.

As a vote-getting party, the SP-USA was effectively destroyed by the New Deal. For instance, the mass union vote in New York was led out of the SP-USA to support Roosevelt in 1936, by David Dubinsky of the ILGWU and other union leaders, who formed the Social Democratic Federation. With them went the Jewish Socialist Verband (publishers of the Jewish Daily Forward) and such prosperous SP-USA institutions as the publication, The New Leader; the Rand School; radio station WEVD (which stands for Eugene Victor Debs); Tamiment Institute. The SDF and the Verband affiliated first with the American Labor Party, and when that party fell under Communist control, it formed the Liberal Party in New York, which still commands the mass vote formerly Socialist. In 1956, under pressure from the Socialist International, the SP-USA and the SDF reunited; but the Verband, the New Leader, the Rand School, WEVD, Tamiment, all stayed out, under the leadership of a small interlocking directorate headed by Dubinsky. What was actually gained was some 500 individuals who were mostly lower-level officials in the Liberal Party or the needle trades or both.

At this juncture the Socialist Party, USA was down to about 2000 members, plus a youth section, the Young Peoples Socialist League, whose membership fluctuated between 500 and 1500. The SP-USA by then had more or less withdrawn from electoral activities as a usual endeavor because its members were against token candidacies, and because of highly restrictive ballot access laws in most of the states where it was best organized.

Despite this, as of 1957 the SP-USA could be described as internally exactly the same kind of party it had always been from its founding in 1901, with the same spectrum of viewpoint. It was far and away the largest radical party in that period of post-McCarthy repression. And it was engaged in unity discussions with two more groups, the anti-Zionist Jewish Socialist Bund, and the Independent Socialist League. The ISL was a Trotskyist split led by Max Schachtman and Michael Harrington which may be unique in radical history as the only Bolshevik group to have evolved into a democratic socialist position; it had about 400 official members, and many sympathizers. The SP-USA itself still commanded an enormous reservoir of sympathy; it is perhaps the only left party in America to which large numbers of people referred as "my" party, in the same sense that people speak of themselves as Republicans or Democrats, who were people the SP-USA had never officially heard of.

In short, the 1957 the Socialist Party, USA was pervaded by a strong sense that the time had arrived when it could start all over again and build a major radical party in America for the third time, with a mass base.

That didn't happen. What instead has happened is organizational disintegration.

After merging with the ISL, the SP-USA found itself in the midst of a faction fight over the concept of "Realignment," advanced by Schachtman and Harrington. "What this country needs isn't a third party, but a meaningful second party." These men, and allies in the SP-USA who had always thought that way, argued that in sixty years, the SP-USA had failed to bring labor into the party, and in fact kept losing the labor people it had (such as the Reuthers) precisely because they saw they could do more within the Democratic Party, rather than because they had changed their ideology. It was also argued that in view of restricted ballot access, Democratic Party primaries were perhaps a better forum for electoral activities than direct candidacies. But the basic argument was Marxian: Labor is the motor for social change, labor will not come to the Socialist Party, therefore the Socialist Party must go to labor, which means going into the Democratic Party, either directly or as a by-product of labor involvements.

Many people now in the Debs Caucus (the minority caucus of the SP) bought this argument—but understood it as meaning, for instance, that if one ran in a Democratic Primary, one did so openly as a Socialist. Suppression of Socialist identity was no part of the thinking of the bulk of the membership at that time. Neither was the concept of trying to influence the labor movement by recruiting labor leaders. The SP had criticized that policy when the Communists tried it in the 1930's and earlier, Debs had narrowly missed being elected president of the AFL mainly because he had refused to electioneer and had discouraged others from campaigning for him. From its beginning the SP had opposed anything that smacked of manipulative politics; in Debs' words, "I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, someone else could lead you out again."

There is no doubt that the realignment strategy has been successful within its own] terms. Former SP labor people like A. Philip Randolph, or like the entire leadership of the teachers' union, have rejoined, and many new people of this type have been recruited. However, among many Socialists, realignment in practice turned out to be something they could not stomach. The realignment strategy has to do with getting hold of power, and socialism has to do with the redistribution of power.

Furthermore, "going where labor is" turned out to mean, in practice, toning down everything. Thus in 1970 the official position of the SP on withdrawal from Vietnam is to the right of the Wall Street Journal. Thus at the riotous Democratic Party convention in 1968, Debs Caucus Socialists were on the streets with the demonstrators, but Realignment Socialists were in the convention, with Bayard Rustin acting in effect as black floor manager for Hubert Humphrey. "Where labor is" is not at the left of the Democratic Party, but at the center, in alliance with big-city machines. Realignment people are opposed to anything that separates labor from liberals, so in practice they oppose the entire New Left, they oppose the peace movement, they oppose the New Democratic Coalition, they even oppose the radical caucus movement within the learned societies.

How could a legitimately left party have moved, in about a dozen years, so far so fast to the right? First, the Bund merger fell through. The Bund is part of the Socialist International with about 2500 members in the United States, and they are left democratic socialists. The failure of this merger was partly because of the rightward tendency

of the SP, partly over the issue of policy on Israel: the Bund wanted veto rights over the SP's position on Israel, and could not accept the very typical SP approach of saying, the Party will take what position it will, and you are free to take separate positions on this issue.

Second, and perhaps crucial, was the defection of most of the youth into SDS. YPSL had always been to the left of the Party as a whole. With a YPSL faction fight shaping up, essentially around the issues over which SDS was to have its initial successes, left YPSLs got control of SDS, then the youth section of the League for Industrial Democracy. The LID and its youth section had been established early in the century to be this country's Fabian Society. The left YPSLs disaffiliated SDS from the LID, for an outside power base. In 1963 they discovered, to their astonishment, that they had an overwhelming majority at the YPSL convention. They also discovered that the SP was unable to tolerate some of their views—in particular, their view that the Communist Party had broken up into competing sects, was no longer a monolithic enemy, and therefore that Bolshevik grouplets could be worked with fraternally so long as they showed themselves to be organizationally honest. So the YPSL convention that year formally dissolved YPSL.

YPSL was immediately reconstituted, of course, and thrives today as a sort of button-down respectable radicalism on the campuses. It is to the right of the Party. As to SDS, deprived totally of contact with sympathetic older comrades within the SP, it made a series of errors which led to its disintegration in 1969.

Third, the ISL merger brought in some left ISLers who did not agree with the Schachtman-Harrington realignment theology. Just as Schachtman and Harrington had readily found allies within the SP, so did these comrades. Starting in Berkeley under the leadership of Hal Draper, a series of Independent Socialist Clubs came into existence, which in many places simply replaced the SP Local. For several years the LSC leadership included people still members of the SP; by 1970 virtually all of them were out, and a new splinter group, now renamed International Socialists, had come into existence. This group is closer to Trotskyist theoretical origins than any other democratic socialist body. There has been continual defection from the SP into IS.

And fourth, there was constant attrition as left comrades found they could no longer stomach the rightward trend of the SP. Every convention from 1964 onward produced a spate of resignations leading long-time members, some of whom virtually vanished from radical politics.

At the convention of 1968, what was left of the SP (about 1500 adult activists) became totally polarized into two mutually exclusive caucuses, the Realignment Caucus and the Debs Caucus. 1970, the Debs Caucus, consistently the minority, had established its own newspaper, Socialist Tribune, and its own national office (care of the Socialist Party of Wisconsin, 1012 N. 3rd St. #317, Milwaukee 53203). 1968 and 1969 were years of intense factional dispute; by 1970 each side seems to have settled on a policy of acting as though it, and only it, were the SP-USA, and of ignoring the other side. In 1970 the Debs Caucus also agreed that people could belong to it without having to be members of the Socialist Party.

This unlikely organizational pattern has to be explained in several ways. Part of the explanation is the historic extreme looseness of SP organization. The Socialist Party had always included some states, "fraternal" parties only some of whose members were members of the national organization. Though this pattern had all but died out in the 1960's, now it was resurrected. A 1970 convention decision disallowing most of the Wisconsin delegation, on grounds that most Wisconsin socialists were only members of Socialist Party of Wisconsin and not of the SP-USA, was voted for the actual reason of reducing the Debs Caucus delegate strength; but it had the effect of relegitimizing local or state-only membership.

A second factor is that the convention majority of the Realignment Caucus is based on two or so very large Locals (New York and Chicago) but mainly on members-at-large. The Realignment strategy is such as to make the very existence of state and local organization meaningless. Consequently, the Debs Caucus controls the great majority of organized states and Locals.

A third factor is that the Debs Caucus includes virtually all the people historically known to the public as SP leaders. One of its leaders, for example, is Frank P. Zeidler, long-time Socialist mayor of Milwaukee and former national chairman, who in the Midwest is the SP presence.

With the Realignment Caucus presenting a clear, disciplined, seemingly monolithic political line, does it follow that the Caucus is simply Everybody Else? The answer to this is Yes, and No.

Certainly, to start with, the Debs Caucus included the same ideological grab-bag which historically had been the SP as a whole. There were very rightist social democrats, who were with the Debs Caucus because of issues of internal democracy, with the official SP paper closed to any view other than that of the official majority, and with a growing democratic centralism in practice if not in theory. There were traditional electoral activists who had never bought realignment in the first place. There were also realignment people who still thought realignment made sense in the terms in which it had first been advocated, back in 1960; a number of Debs Caucus people have been active in Democratic politics. Then there were the pacifists, of whatever socialist orientation, all of whom found it impossible to co-exist with the Realignment position. And there were the left revolutionary democratic socialists of several varieties, who were repelled by the reformism of the Realignment Caucus. Such a political grouping makes sense only in terms of the peculiar history of the Socialist Party. The Debs Caucus can and does claim that it is today the only nonsectarian radical organization in America, with room for many tendencies; Debs Caucus socialists are the ecumenists of the American left.

Separate organization has led, however, to increasingly separate politics. It is hard to specify a particular view as Debs Caucus, but several trends can be discerned.

First, Debs Caucus socialists, with some exceptions, are relatively open to the New Left—to the point where many Realignment people think the Debs Caucus is "New Left." It isn't. Probably most Debs Caucus members would agree down the line with the substance of the hostile criticisms which the Realignment Caucus has issued of various New Left groups. Where the disagreement occurs is over the hostility of those criticisms.

There is, rather, a general sense that SPers should try to relate fraternally to New Left groups so far as this proves possible and so far as they prove honest, and make criticisms in a fraternal context. Debs Caucus people are inclined to see the New Left as a new opening, a new and important phase in American leftist politics; at very least, they would hope the SP (their SP) could serve as a repository for fall-outs from New Left groups. Some Debs Caucus people have worked actively with New Left groups. Thus, David McReynolds, field secretary of the War Resisters League, ran in New York in 1968 on a joint ticket with Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panther Party, over the strong disapproval of his Local.

This attitude makes sense in terms of the traditional SP approach of education rather than manipulation. If there's a group you can talk to, you talk to it. If there's a group you can work with, or sometimes work with, you work with it.

On reformism versus revolution, a problem many left groups are intensely preoccupied with, the Debs Caucus prevailing view is again SP-traditional: this just isn't seen as a problem. You don't need an ideology to decide what is reformist and what is revolutionary. If you are a revolutionist, you cannot relate to any reform movement except in a revolutionary way; and what movement you relate to depends on your own personal opportunities. It may be noted here that the Debs Caucus inherits a traditional weakness of SP organization: an organized Local will include a number of people who are involved up to their necks in work with other organizations, and may be unable to get its own members out in quantity to its own events. Strong orientation to the Party as the one central body, with meetings all the time, has never been an SP characteristic; this is both a strength and a weakness, creating difficulties for an organization which is now a federation of local groups and which does not control the national office.

A distinct emerging emphasis which may be highly important, being pushed by Frank P. Zeidler and many others, is anti-state socialism. The notion of "building the new society within the shell of the old" has always been a strand within the SP, usually expressed as an emphasis on co-ops (or co-ops as they ought to be but usually aren't) rather than in IWW terms. Debs Caucus people with this emphasis are highly interested in some New Left developments: the "other culturism" of part of the youth revolution, the "Power to the People" slogan of the Panthers, the community-control issues on urban problems, the "living now as though the Kingdom were already here" of some Christian radical communes. Contact with the new Socialist Labor Party split: Socialist Reconstruction, has introduced Debs Caucus people with this emphasis to socialist syndicalism. Some Debs Caucus people are long-time sympathizers, in some cases members, of the IWW. Zeidler argues that today's youth sees socialism, like liberalism, as an ideology that offers more government, more bureaucracy, as a solution to every social problem; that they see stronger government as the greatest threat now facing mankind, whether in terms of war-and-peace issues, or in terms of the manipulative character of mass society. There is a possibility of convergence between the Debs Caucus and SR, which is keeping its anti-state inheritance while moving away from DeLeonist orthodoxy.

Factionally, some Debs Caucus people regard themselves as still engaged in trying to recapture the Socialist Party. Others feel this is hopeless and see the Debs Caucus as the start of a wholly new organization. If this happens, though, virtually all Debs Caucus socialists are determined that it will not happen in a way that leaves the Realignment Caucus as official public inheritor of Debs and Thomas.

The Debs Caucus, in sum, is a national body with a paper apparatus closer to that of the major parties than of any other left group, with a strong desire to merge with as many compatible left tendencies as possible, with probably more members than any other non-youth radical body, with an emerging ideology, and with an ambiguous identity because of the faction fight it is still engaged in. Its members have personal contact with many resigned SP people who would rejoin if it clearly separated itself from the other half of the Socialist Party. It could go on to complete separation and rapid growth and moves toward unity, perhaps with Socialist Reconstruction, the International Socialists, and the Bund for starters, and become the beginning of a mass left party again. Or it is still possible that it could fall apart at the seams. One distinct possibility here is that the Realignment Caucus may break up, in which case half of it could well join with the Debs Caucus to regain control of the SP, forcing the other half of the Realignment Caucus out, but also nipping in the bud the slow trend within the Debs Caucus toward separate and distinct ideological identity. If this happened many of the leaders in the Debs Caucus would feel the new SP leadership was not something they could live with and would depart, while others would welcome the chance to seize Party control again. These and other improbables make it very hard to guess the future of the Debs Caucus or even to state clearly what and where it presently is. But the claim of its leaders—that this is now the only organization standing four-square in the tradition of historic American radicalism and not an ideological sect—is certainly a claim that can be readily defended.