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THE FIRST LIBERTARIAN SOCIALIST LEAGUE 1949-1956

On June 24, ¹⁹⁴⁹ about fifty socialists met for ten days for a combined summer school and political conference at the Workman's Benefit Fund Camp at Genoa City, Wisconsin. Most of them were people who had recently left, or were soon to leave, the Socialist Party and Young Peoples Socialist League. There were also a few members of the United Labor Party from Akron and Detroit, a Wobbly or two, some ex-bolsheviks and DeLeonists, and at least one anarchist. They came from nine states, and my notes also say that the group included 1 labor attorney, 6 members of college or university faculties, 3 active participants in the labor movement, (1 editor, one economist, one education director), 2 authors of books, at least a half dozen additional authors of pamphlets and articles, and 10 past or present full NDC members of the YPSL. There were 3 former national secretaries and one former national chairman of the YPSL.

This group formed the Libertarian Socialist League, and to my knowledge were the first to use this name. It was not intended to identify with anarchism, but to link socialism and freedom. The term democratic socialist at the time was badly mauled by people in Europe and America who aligned themselves with NATO. We rejected both capitalism and Communist tyranny. In fact, one of the documents which may have helped get our thinking together was Against Both War Camps, a pamphlet I wrote under the name of Victor Howard, which was published by the Socialist Education Committee. SEC merged with the new ISL.

This rejection of both sides in the great power struggle was the central tenet of our program. It therefore has much relevance for today, when we see so many people who think it is very revolutionary to identify with the totalitarian regimes of Russia and China, and others who place their hope in the US government.

Our program began by describing the exploitation and threats of war in the world, and blamed these on "the class system prevailing today, in both capitalism which is dominant in the United States and bureaucratic collectivism which is prevalent in the Soviet Union." As an alternative, we called for "a democratic socialist society in which the industry and resources of the world will be owned and controlled by the working class for the benefit of the producers." We held that "nationalization without workers' control is a step in the direction of bureaucratic collectivism rather than socialism."

We favored colonial freedom struggles, but said "we will give no political support to any war waged by the ruling class." We endorsed the slogan "against both war camps" and urged class action to battle the war system. Our third point said that "Socialism cannot be achieved by a putsch or utopian ethical and intellectual appeals, but only by the conscious class action of the majority of the working class."

Point four branded the state as "the instrument for domination by the ruling class, which rules by deception or coercion or both." Moreover, it said "we do not look upon the state machinery as an instrument for achieving socialism. Rather our task is, by means of dual power, to eliminate or destroy it." Because of ruling class resistance, however, "a coercive power directed against the bourgeoisie must exist. This power is composed of the dual institutions of the working class, and rests upon the organized strength of this class.

Point 5 rejected reformism, bolshevism, and sectarianism, and embraced revolutionary democratic socialism. Our kind of socialism would "encourage the widest voluntary association of the masses in democratically controlled institutions. In point 6 we endorsed "independent electoral action by the working class as one phase of the class struggle. Point 7 called immediate demands one means for carrying on the class struggle, but restricted our support to those demands which "harmonize with our tactics, principles, and ultimate objectives."

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The 8th and final point emphasized the need for the formation of "disciplined and democratic revolutionary organizations" which would work in all working class movements, "to bring forth the full socialist program and stress the need for class action to achieve it."

The program did not name our ideological mentors, but many of us were influenced by the ideas of Luxemburg, Martov, Gorkin of the Spanish POUM, Pivert of the French PSOP, and the British ILP. At the outset there were no acknowledged Leninists among us, a couple of DeLeonists, and only one anarchist. The anarchist ended up in the Shachtmanite Independent Socialist League. We were fairly united at the outset, but began life in a bad time. The cold war soon became hot with the outbreak of war in Korea. The McCarthy red-hunting terror was soon in high gear. Two of our members were fired from innocuous government jobs. Others were harassed by the FBI and lost their jobs--one of these an engineer. One had his passport lifted. One got a "general" discharge from the army. Another went to prison as a conscientious objector. Two of our members, poet novelist Maxwell Bodenheim and his wife were even murdered, in 1954, by a deranged patriot in New York.

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But these things did not kill ISL. We were done in by Bolshevik maneuvering. A proposal to merge with the Shachtman group was easily defeated, but we were not so skillful in dealing with Thomas H. Stone, a Richmond attorney of Oshlerite background. (i.e., Revolutionary Workers League, a 1935 offshoot of Trotskyism). He joined us, and soon held in his hand a fictitious paper local, all of its members having the same PO box as an address. He began to magnify differences, picked up followers here and there, and formed a bloc with the DeLeonists, including national secretary Frank Smith of New York. Differences sharpened at the December, 1952, convention, following defeat of the Chicago-Los Angeles group in a contest with Smith-Stone over the interpretation of "workers control." We held that even under socialism, trade unions should have the right to strike, and in order to be free to do so, they should not be directly saddled with the administration of industry. Management should be under elected workers committees, not part of the union structure. The Stone group also attacked the Spanish POUM when it asked for financial help. They opposed alternating conventions between Chicago and New York, wishing to meet always in NY where they had an advantage.

As a result of these things, Chicago and its followers withdrew and in January 1953, formed the Libertarian Socialist Committee. The ISL centered in NY, increasingly sectarian, lingered on for perhaps three years. The LSC (Chicago) started with some enthusiasm but could not grow much, and began to dwindle. In 1956, changing trends in the SP, including the departure of some its most anti-socialist elements, made it appear that we might work inside it once more. LSC never formally dissolved, but many of its members drifted back into the SP. Some of these people were active in the organization of the new Socialist Party, in May, 1973, after the old party transformed itself into the Social-Democrats, USA. Six people, or one half of the "faculty" at the 1949 meeting, are in the new S.P. Our work was not in vain. The ideas we promoted are still being pushed, even by some of the same people.

I believe the original program of ISL was a good one even for today, and perhaps would need only slight updating to be in tune with the present. Our organizational failure was due, I think, not to shortcomings in our program, but partly to the difficult times in which we operated, and to our tactical errors in bringing in some indigestible elements who were bent only on maneuvering their way into control in order to transform our group into something other than it started out to be. On the other hand, more of our people ought to have been able to see through the demagogues. In reality, a majority did, but due to the technicalities of geography and procedures followed by the clique (shotgun referendums with only one side of the proposition being stated in the mailing, for example) we lost out. Things like this have happened before, and we must figure out ways to thwart unprincipled operators in the movement.

I have in my possession several publications of the ISL-LSC which I will send to anybody for 30¢ postage. Address Virgil J. Vogel, 1819 Maple St., Northbrook, Ill. 60062.

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