

a picture for you / report on the Socialist Party convention

I had not been home ten minutes late this Sunday afternoon when my cell phone rang - it was Dwight Welch, who had resigned from the Socialist Party but still loves it, and keeps in touch. He wanted to know how the convention went.

So this is my own report on the Newark convention of the Socialist Party. Not a secret report - it goes out to my list of SP members and to non-members active in the socialist movement.

There have certainly been times, God knows, in the past year when I've come close to giving up, from the deluge of mail on the SP members list, which suggested that what I'd call a "neo-Trotskyist/neo-Leninist" wing had taken over. Judging from the flow of email, the extended discussion of events in Russia in 1917, the assurances to me by one comrade that the new wave of revolutionists had taken over the Party, one might have thought this had actually happened. And my reason for thinking about "giving up" was that, having twice been the Presidential candidate, and having played a very active role in the Socialist Party from the time I joined it in 1951, I wondered if it had wandered so far from the Socialist Party I had once spoken for that I could not in good conscience continue.

But, judging by the convention, and by the NC that was elected, it did not happen. I declined nomination for the NC so we will never know if I would have been elected (I doubt it - this was a youth-oriented convention), but Marc Luzietti did not get elected to the NC, and placed third among the male alternates. Eric Chester was not elected to the NC or as an alternate. (I mention their names not as an attack - they are deeply committed and energetic people - but because of the political issues that had been under internal discussion).

The co-Chairs are Billy Wharton of the NYC Local and Andrea Pason, of New Jersey. The Vice Chairs are Jim Sanders of Florida and Diana Demers of Michigan.

The female NC members are, in order of election, Sally Joyner (Tennessee), Kristen Schall (New York), Stephanie Cholensky (Minnesota), Susan Dorazio (Washington State and Massachusetts), Sarah McLean (Maryland), and Steve Tash* (Michigan). (More about Steve in a moment - five of these NC members are young.

The females NC alternates are: Stephanie Gussian (New Jersey), Gretchen Van Dyck (New York), Mal Herbert (Vermont), Doris Lake (Vermont), Tessa Salo (New Jersey), and Alice Kelsey (New York)

The male NC members are, in order of election, Rafael Thurin (Michigan), Greg Pason (New Jersey), Matthew Andrews (Massachusetts), Peter Moody (New Jersey), Zelin Stern (New York), and Larry Burks (Kansas). And six male NC members are young.

The male NC alternates are, Jerry Stastny (Wisconsin), Amilcar Navarro (New York), Marc Luzietti (Florida), Brandon Collins (Virginia), Steve Sears (Maryland), and Art Kazar (Illinois).

There is actually a broad political range here, and more important and unexpectedly, a racial range. And, for the first time in the SP, the election of someone who is transgendered - which is why one of the female NC members is named Steve*.



Illustration 1: Marc Luzietti, the main (and probably only) brain behind the Neo-Trots.



I've selected one out of the number of photos I took, because it shows the old and the young at the convention - but the majority of those present were young. (If SP members want to see shots of some of the others, I'll send them - I need to find out how to put together a photo album - as individual shots of those NC members whose photos I have).

In terms of "tendencies" the only two I know of are the Debs Tendency, which was represented (I think - I may be wrong) by Peter Moody, and the Grassroots Tendency, which was represented by Susan Dorazio. (I could be totally wrong in my ID's. I'm convinced the overwhelming majority of the delegates didn't belong to either tendency).

The new leadership is not without experience - Andrea Pason of New Jersey is a long time activist and is married to Greg Pason, the National Secretary who is also on the NC. Billy Wharton is the editor of the SP paper, has a background in the socialist left and has shown a flair for involving younger people, and providing serious political training - something the SP needs badly.

By and large the convention went smoothly, was not acrimonious. There were some results I was sorry about - I don't always find agreement with Steve Sears, but he has valuable experience and I'm sorry he was not elected to the NC. (He is an alternate). Steve is one of those rare members who has a "sense of the organization" which helps keep the group on an even keel.

I think - I hope! - that the hard liners who had sought to drive the Wisconsin organization out of the SP were defeated. Time will tell - one of the unresolved conflicts was the question of whether in state organizations, such as Wisconsin, people who were members of a Socialist Party Local but not of the National Party could vote on anything at all (such as the date for a local picnic).

Those who think in terms of a cadre party find it impossible to even understand how or why anyone could be a member of a state or local party but not the national. Others, myself included, think we are not, never have been, and never will be, a cadre party and a looser set of standards is far more useful in involving more people. Particularly in a nation made up of fifty states, and with thousands of miles separating the two coasts, and the North and South.

Looking at the "negatives" - and I think one has to be honest about this - the SP is not only a shadow of what it was when I came into it, but is one small national organization in a national scene where there are several groups which share our democratic socialist values, unlike the 1950's when the SP was the only group representing a democratic vision of socialism.

Back in the 1950's and 1960's we were still "running on the steam" of our great past, of Norman Thomas and Eugene Debs, of links with the international movement, with trade unions, etc. A convention was the occasion for more greetings from abroad than we had time to read, foreign guests who would be introduced, a convention journal with lots of ads from trade unions. In Newark the foreign greetings were few in number, and there were no foreign guests. The convention "book" was a thin few sheets of paper.

But the "positives" are also there. There have been seven new locals organized in the past year, the "webzine" that Billy Wharton gets out is terrific. The involvement of women is better than I've seen it, and there is clearly more involvement from people of color than the SP has seen in years.

The membership has been seriously active in issues such as single payer health care, opposition to the Afghan war, and in refusing to be coopted as a "left wing of the Democratic Party". That, however, remains an area of some confusion. A fairly large percent of the membership did not want a national campaign in 2004 or 2008. (I was in that number).

One of those defeated for the National Committee has often seemed more worried about possible support for the Democratic Party than about the reality of what the Republicans represent. (Do not misunderstand me - I do not think the answer lies in the Democratic Party, I simply think it is simplistic to equate the two parties). There was an effort by one comrade to re-write our recent history (I do not think he did this in bad faith) when he said that at the 2003 Chicago convention those delegates who had opposed a national campaign has supported Walt Brown, the candidate who won the nomination, because they felt he would wage a weaker national campaign. I don't think that was the case - I think Eric Chester lost the nomination simply because he didn't have the support of the majority of the convention.



Illustration 2: Matt Erard, spotted at SPUSA convention.

"After the 2003 Convention there was even an email sent to SP members by a homeless woman [Kathy Bushman] Walt had brought to the Convention regretfully explaining that she felt compelled to vote for Brown because of the money he spent on her." -Matt Erard 97-03-01

". . . [Walt Brown] is so impressed with Matt's insightful and well done research into matters, as well, his quick mind and passion for it, that he thinks Matt should and could be a formidable Civil Rights Attorney. But, since Walt does not make career choices for Matt, and Matt has just been accepted into a sociology major...then Walt feels that it is the legal field's great loss." -Beverly Brown

That convention came close to destroying the SP, in part because of the influx of a small group of people from a Marxist-Leninist group who made an active pitch for the nomination, were offering a powerful woman as candidate, and, when that bid was lost, helped spark a losing referendum to overturn the choice of Walt Brown. The SP is always going to be open to this danger, precisely because it is not a "cadre party", and a small group can have a heavy impact. This convention avoided, at least for the moment, a similar danger when it voted to continue a ban on dual membership in groups which operate under a democratic centralist discipline (this includes the Communist Party, Freedom Socialist Party, Workers World, etc. - the SP very often cooperates with these groups in local actions and coalitions but bans dual membership). Marc Luzietti of Florida, supported by Matt Erard of Michigan, wanted that ban lifted as it applied to the Freedom Socialist Party. The FSP are fine people, I know them well, but they are a committed, serious (and small) group of fairly orthodox Trotskyists who would inevitably function as a tight caucus if they came into the SP.

Ahead of the Socialist Party are problems that will eventually have to be faced. One is, in fact, whether we are truly a "political party" in the sense of seriously competing to become "the second party", a true major left party in the US. I sense this has been the thinking behind

Eric Chester's efforts to treat any contact with the Democratic Party as an act of treason.

In many respects Chester is right, and I agree with him, that both parties merely serve as the facade for the corporate/military structure that governs the country. The catch is that just as there were, actually, political struggles and conflicts even within the rigid structure of the Soviet Union's Communist Party (and between the various East Bloc countries and the Soviet Union itself - something to be discussed at another time), there are real struggles that occur in this country and are played out within the Democratic Party. It is our tricky job to both expose the Democratic Party as being fundamentally as "agency of military/corporate rule" and to relate to the various movements that function within the Democratic Party (trade unions, civil rights, gay/lesbian, the women's movement, etc.). Any "living political grouping" which is not a sect or a cult will be forced to relate, directly, or indirectly, to the major parties.

At some point in the future it is possible a new party will emerge, but it will not be us. That card was played between 1900 and 1920. Various other efforts, most recently the Greens, have made similar efforts but failed. We can be part of such a party, but we cannot be it ourselves. We can be the yeast, but we, alone, will not be the bread.

No socialist group will be able to expand "socialist consciousness" if it spends its full time and energy simply attacking the two major parties rather than building an "alternative consciousness". It is possible to mount independent electoral action - Bernie Sanders did it in Vermont, and while his record is not perfect from a socialist point of view, he is far and away the best person in the US Senate (and, sadly, the target of those who think they represent the "left" in the SP, but in fact only represent a sectarian parody of the left).

This opens a long discussion for another time, not tonight. And the sad thing is that for the most part I agree with Eric Chester's basic politics. I'm irritated by his efforts to portray Norman Thomas as a knowing collaborator with the CIA, but not with the essential radicalism of his politics.

Certainly he has been closer to what I believe than Marc Luzietti of the Debs Tendency, who has been primarily concerned with imposing some mix of Trotsky, Lenin, and the Russian Revolution on the American experience. The irony of the Debs Tendency itself, within the Socialist Party, is that they never grasped how fundamentally American the Debs approach to socialism was. And our willingness to "forget" Norman Thomas discourages me - for Norman had the rare ability to make socialism itself seem like a reasonable and humane American option.

Tonight, as I bring these notes gradually to a close, I don't exempt myself, for having been factional in "fighting the good fight". I believe we need a "Socialist Party", but not one with the illusion it will become "the" party of the left. I do, however, exempt myself from having had any role in any caucus since the efforts in the 1980's to curb the sectarian wing of the SP. I have not even been a delegate to the past three conventions. (I was an alternate at this convention).

Which brings us to the second issue the Socialist Party - all the new young leaders - will have to cope with. That is what groups on the left actually matter. It is not healthy for us to treat DSA (Democratic Socialists of America) as an enemy group - they are to our political right (or at least to mine), but they are part of what any serious socialist movement will be. The same is true of CCDS (Committees of Correspondence for Democratic and Socialism), which is not monolithic, which may have "illusions" about the Democratic Party but has no illusions about how rotten to the core the military/corporate structure is. And, small as it may be, Solidarity has largely cast off its Trotskyist Roots, as Freedom Road has outgrown its Maoist roots, and both share far more with us than we realize. (Dual membership is permitted in these groups and I'm a dual member of DSA and CCDS).

Perhaps more alarming to those of us who come from the Old Left (at 79, I'm very much in that number) is the fact that the Communist Party has to be reconsidered. Some of our old bias has to be re-thought.

Where we have fundamental problems are with the groups that see themselves as absolutely the vanguard, which historically engage in splitting movements in order to control them, and these include Workers World, the Revolutionary Communist Party, the Party of Socialism and Liberation, and the International Socialist Organization. (Again and again I stress that these groups are serious, the people in them are good, but their methods of operating make any deep "integration" impossible. Coalition work, yes.) But our search for partners in building a movement [lies] in the broader and disillusioned public which does not even consider itself socialist but could be won to a socialist position.

We cannot build any kind of movement if we think in terms of clobbering together - "uniting", "unifying" the various parts of the left. That's time wasted. But nothing in the world stops us - all the left groups with which we share fairly common values - from having informal consultations on [strategy]. We seem to be afraid to even try this, lest an effort at "fraternal consultation" might lead to unity. Not all dates have to lead to marriage!

So, in summary, I think this convention cleared away a good bit of dead wood - myself included - and brought in a new generation. Some of us who have been active in the past can still be of use, but the burden is on a very new leadership.

I'm not suggesting to those who left the Socialist Party that they should rejoin it, but I want to emphatically lay to rest the canard that in some mysterious way the Socialist Party has become neo-Trotskyist. That it contains a small element that fits that description is true - but just how small that element really is was demonstrated by this convention. Chaotic as ever, the Socialist Party USA is alive and well.

Fraternally,
David McReynolds
NYC