
Berger and His Opponents.

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *The Socialist* [Seattle], v. 5, whole no. 248 (June 17, 1905), pg. 2.

To *The Socialist*, Toledo, O.

Comrades:—

That Victor L. Berger should be deposed from a position of trust in a party he helped to organize and for which he worked with all his strength of mind and body, seems to be the very irony of fate.

What has been his crime? He advocated the support of a candidate of a capitalist party in a local election in which the Socialist Party had no candidate.

Granted that he was wrong, are the peculiar circumstances surrounding the case to be ignored, and his many years of faithful service to the party to count for nothing in mitigation?

Victor L. Berger was wrong, flagrantly wrong, in my judgment; but in permitting the extremely exasperating indignities of a capitalist candidate upon the Socialist Party to sting him into preference for a rival capitalist candidate, his motive was pure and will not be impeached by any who know him or are familiar with the attending circumstances.

It is not my intention to defend Berger — to the extent that he erred in judgment he cannot be defended and to the extent that his motive was pure he does not need defense

To be as brief as possible, the Socialist Party in Milwaukee, for the very best of reasons, had no ticket in the field. Under such circumstances, Berger, for the moment absolved from the active support of his own party, saw, or thought he saw, an opening to rebuke a malodorously offensive tool of capitalism who had gone out of his way repeatedly to slur and discredit socialists; and seized by this impulse he struck the blow and by so doing violated the uncompromising ethics

of the Socialist Party. For this he should have been called to account, but there was, and is, nothing in the case to warrant the extreme measures that have been taken against him and that, if carried into effect, would make of an unfortunate tactical blunder an act of foulest treason.

Victor L. Berger is human; intensely so. He is apt as any man I know to make a mistake, but his heart is right and as a Socialist, there is no stain upon his honor.

The National Committee had the power to depose Berger and did depose him, but it did not humiliate him. In another year the National Committee may be given credit for having exalted him.

Not in the least do I question the motive of the National Committee, but I think they have erred by hasty action and undue severity, and that in due time they will realize it to their regret.

It is not that Berger was ignominiously beheaded, disproportionate as was this extreme penalty to his offense, that constitutes the gravest feature of the case, but the fact that *he was executed without a trial*. It will not do to plead that he admitted the substance of the accusation. Not a chicken thief or pickpocket is sentenced without a full hearing. Had Berger been *duly charged* with his offense, put upon trial and given full time and fair chance to make his defense, the verdict might have been the same, but it would not have been open to the serious objection now made to it and which may yet lead to its repudiation and to the rehabilitation of its victim.

A reasonable rebuke would have served a good purpose, while extreme harshness will react in favor of the accused and make his offense the means of praise instead of blame.

I yield to no comrade in any of the essentials to party integrity, but I am not scanning the party for flaws to vindicate my penetrating vision; nor am I ambitious to be first in crying treason when a comrade steps from the beaten path.

In dealing with Berger I am simply putting myself in his place; and knowing that I have made countless mistakes in the past and that I shall make as many more as time and opportunity will allow, I can well afford to counsel lenient judgment for my comrade, knowing not how soon my own turn may come to face the executioner.

Let us have done with the Berger case. He has been more than punished and the incident should now be closed. There is no danger of repetition of the offense. The Berger decapitation will stand as an awful warning; and as a deterrent will have greater effect than a constitutional inhibition.

The resolution of the National Committee that the state of Wisconsin investigate itself to see if it has been guilty of collusion is inoperative and would better be rescinded; and the further measures to expel Berger, which only his local has the power to do, and which it never will do, can serve no good purpose and ought to be abandoned.

A noteworthy feature of these extreme measures is that most of those who advocate them are comparatively new members, and it seems strange that these should pursue with relentless fury an old comrade who was battling for the cause of socialism when a Socialist was regarded as an imp of hell and when they were yet in their mother's arms.

Let us preserve the party purity and vigilantly guard its uncompromising tactics, but let us not be too swift to condemn a mistake as a crime and an erring comrade as a vicious traitor.

For many years I have known Victor Berger and I have known him well. He needs no words of mine to shield or defend him. His record has been made and there it stands. For more than 20 years he has been a commanding figure on the battlefield. In the fiercest trials he never wavered, never lost courage, and never struck his colors to the enemy.

In every secret fiber of his being he is a Socialist. Impulsive by nature, hot-blooded to fieriness, his judgment may at times go wrong, but never his argant loyalty and passionate love for the socialist movement.

As to the Milwaukee local and Wisconsin state movements, they can and will take care of themselves. All that is required on their part is that they conform to the national constitution and party regulations as interpreted by the National Committee, and this they are undoubtedly willing to do. Beyond that it is not necessary to go, whether in the case of Wisconsin or any other state.

Having spent considerable time in Wisconsin I know the comrades of that state and there are none anywhere who, as a whole, are clearer in their economics, more loyal to the party, or more active in pushing it to the front. They give their time and their substance freely to build up the party and if some of those who are finding fault with them would do the same they would be farther advanced than they now are and there would soon be a Wisconsin movement in every state in the union.

The general outlook for the party is far better than at any previous time, and if we do not suffer ourselves to engage in hairsplitting and in factional feuds and internal dissensions over nonessentials, but rather close up the ranks and face and fight the enemy all along the line, the coming months will surpass all records in party achievement.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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