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Manifesto of the Socialist Propaganda League of America

Socialist Propaganda League of America
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Issued in November 1916 by the far left of the Socialist Party of America, this document declares the decadence of capitalism, clearly anticipates the coming world revolution, and warns of the party's imminent repression by the democratic state. From <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spla/1916/1126-spla-manifesto.pdf>.

It is manifest to every thinking class-conscious worker that the present terrific struggle for world power is waged by the capitalist classes to secure a greater share in the exploitation of labor. It is a matter of paramount importance that we, as Socialists, apprehend the basic conditions underlying the strife, and that we prepare to meet the consequences to the world's workers that will issue from it. This address to American Socialists and the working class generally is directed to such an understanding.

The war opens a new era of great conflicts, impelled by the new form of absolutism – the rule of the monarchs of money and the subjugation of a more or less independent class of small capitalists. It means also a more aggressive policy towards labor. The proof of this appears in the United States, where the action of government in appropriating a larger portion of the public revenue to militaristic purposes than any other country, in a so-called time of peace, is accompanied by the massing of material capitals amounting to 8 billions of dollars in a single Board, to “fight labor.” War, with the American republic cooperating, thus becomes the highest form of exploitation by the capitalist class.

In the confusion arising from false issues of the capitalist class, put forward to mislead the workers, we must ever be on our guard against the crafty apologists of wrong posing as friends of labor. When we are told that we must produce more if we would get more, we know the advice is a bit of special pleading in the interest of those who live without producing. When we are told that we need compulsory arbitration or anti-strike laws, we know that such laws not only fail but are a denial of the working class right to develop all its powers to gain emancipation. When we are told that we must be patriots, which, when interpreted by the capitalist class, means readiness to serve in wars to kill our fellow men and defend the property interests of the owning class, as the President of the United States has said, we know that the proletariat is a propertyless class with no country to defend and no fatherland to fight for. This advice from the President – servant of big capital – is not less erroneous and is certainly more dangerous, when given under the name of Socialism, advocating a bourgeois citizens' army or military defense of capitalist interests. We strongly denounce all brands of social patriots and social imperialists as opposed to the interests of the working class. Instead of nationalism we must do all in our power to promote the true internationalism of labor.

To the thoughtful observer it must be apparent that the elements of wealth production in our present society have outgrown the bourgeois forms of existing nations in which they are restricted. The centralization of production, as well as of capital and the monied interests, the close relation of big business and trusts with finance capital – all these developments put great capital not only at the head of industry and production, as the dominating power, but also in controlling influence over the political life and activities of the people. All groups and classes of the people in every so-called civilized nation are dependent upon the all powerful financial interests of each nation. There is no difference in this respect between “darkest” Russia, with its autocratic form of government, and “enlightened” United States, with its “democratic” institutions that are distinguished by the denial of free speech and organization and shooting by militia and “company thugs,” for examples of which we do not forget Calumet and Ludlow.

In the demoniac chase for markets where national capital may be invested, for the acquisition or retention of colonies and the expansion of spheres of influence, capitalist power divides the universe for exploitation among a few groups of nations, and these are bent on world-control, even at the cost of exterminating each other, as well as their smaller and dependent associates in crime.

It is this higher phase of capitalist development – making futile the policies of free trade, free competition, and the hopes of social reformers – that compels the governments of the larger nations to provide military resources of increasing magnitude to fight for a leading position in the world scramble for supremacy. In this race for world leadership we see Germany and England, France and Italy, Austro-Hungary and Russia, the United States and Japan. The triumph of neither of them can be achieved without the destruction, immediate or impending, of them all.

The Dawn of a New Era.

Comrades and Fellow Workers:

The time is passed when our national Socialist parties, bound by old forms and moved by old ideals, can proceed with its old propaganda within the confines of capitalist legality and morals, and expect within these limits to advance the cause of industrial democracy. We are at the dawn of a new era; the day is big with the content of social eruptions, economic and political strikes, revolutions. It is an era in which the class conflict approaches its climax. The struggle, in all its variations, develops and intensifies from the new policies of imperialism; that is, from the encroachments of the capitalist class using the mailed fist of political governments.

In the class war, all constitutional rights and prerogatives of the people are ignored or abolished and the capitalist class, abominating Liberty and supported by guns, meets the working class with the armed power of the capitalist state. When the workers seek shelter in constitutional guarantees and essay to use these rights for the betterment of their conditions, they too often find that rights and guarantees are mere “scraps of paper.” The capitalist class, with political governments and judicial courts conniving, will tolerate no interference with their class schemes for world domination. Meanwhile the condition of the working class becomes steadily worse and the future less secure. With the cost of essential necessities of life rising to higher and prohibitive levels, the average workman is in constant fear of hunger, and with sickness and disease ever haunting him, has now reached the stage of habitual privation.

Reaction and Revolutionary Ideals.

The years immediately behind us are marked by inaction in the Socialist Party. A true revolutionary spirit and action has never been less in evidence among the party leaders than during the period of the war. But before that calamity befell us we were subjected to a flood of reformistic phrase-mongering, muddling municipalism, boring trade unions from within, captivating the American Federation of Labor, cramming the capitalist moral code down the necks of revolutionists to get middle-class votes, instead of staying on our own job with a consistent propaganda for revolutionary ideals. The four years of reformistic preaching and preparation for chronicling the rise of "socialist" votes to millions in 1916 have proven abortive, while almost none of the rosy predictions of political leaders have materialized. Still, with a strange fatuity, they cling to old forms and discredited methods, blind to the fact: First, That the organization we have is not adapted to develop political power and the principal function of the Socialist movement is to participate in the class struggle in such a way that the workers are educated to realize that their industrial power must back up a political or general class fight, in which the masses are to gain such a degree of organization and understanding that they can disorganize the political supremacy of capitalism and substitute the organization of the working class, by the exercise of their own influence on uncompromising Socialist principles. Is it not high time for a thorough reorganization of the party?

Our Socialist parties still fix their hopes on winning seats in congresses and parliaments, although the real and fixed location of government has been transferred to money exchanges and banking institutions of the money kings. Sacrificing principles of international brotherhood, they are fighting in wars not for the solidarity and independence of the workers of all nations, but for the aggrandizement of their respective national capitals.

Failing to give support to the mass action of the workers in the industrial field, as evinced at Lawrence, McKees Rocks, the Mesaba Range, and elsewhere in the United States, and similarly in Germany, England, and Belgium, the reformers have also failed by constant appeals to legality to crystallize the revolutionary sentiment on the political field.

Must Change With the Times – Or Perish.

What, then, can be the duty of present-day Socialists, except to recognize the collapse of the old and resolutely set to work building the new alongside the industrial evolution and complying with the requirements of the modern and intensified class struggle? It is high time for Socialists to abolish obsolete tactics, abandon middle-class ideals, put away the will-o'-the-wisps of reform, and proclaim a working class program conforming with and equal to the demands of industrial and commercial development. The times change; we must change with them – or perish.

The new aggressive policy of the capitalist class, which we call imperialism, has for its primary object the appropriation of a bigger share of the general surplus values. Under the operation of this feature of capitalist industry the possessing class appropriates increasing wealth while the producing mass can not, with the wages received, provide for themselves and their dependents the necessities of life. Therefore, we urge the workers, in America and all other countries, to organize in their respective industries in such a manner as to ensure for themselves a material reduction in their working time, a corresponding increase in their share of the social wealth, the expansion of their class power, in order that they become efficient workers for the final overthrow of capitalism and the organization of a cooperative

commonwealth. Finally, we adopt and recommend:

1. Instead of a form of labor organization on the economic field that conserves the interests of capitalist exploiters and of industrial democracy, INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM, i.e., MASS ORGANIZATION AND ACTION ON THE INDUSTRIAL FIELD.
2. Instead of pure and simple electioneering for getting votes and bourgeois parliamentary reform, RECOGNITION OF PARLIAMENTARY ACTION AS A PART OF THE GENERAL MASS ACTION, IN WHICH ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES SUPPORT THIS ACTION BY ADVOCATING FREE SPEECH AND THE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE AND BY ACTING AS SPOKESMEN OF THE WORKING CLASS, UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE WORKING CLASS ORGANIZATION, AGAINST THE PLUTOCRATIC GOVERNMENT AND CAPITALIST REPRESENTATIVES.
3. Instead of a divided struggle of the workers on the industrial and political fields, cooperation leading to UNDIVIDED MASS ACTION ON BOTH, TO ADVANCE REVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLES BY EDUCATION, AND MANIFESTING AS AN ORGANIZED EXPRESSION OF WORKING CLASS SOLIDARITY FOR THE ULTIMATE TRIUMPH OF SUCH PRINCIPLES.
4. Instead of surrendering to imperialism, THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALL OUR POWERS TO OPPOSE MILITARISM, OFFENSIVE OR DEFENSIVE, AND PROMOTE THE INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF LABOR.
5. By mass action we mean: Action by the workers in collective organization for protest and demand on both the economic and political fields, for exercising the power of the strike, opposing anti-strike legislation, refusing military service to maintain capitalism, holding public meetings and demonstrations, and opposing all capitalist class means of repressing the rise of industrial democracy. In mass action we see the only means for the development of a new form of organized democracy in which the rank and file will control.
6. The Socialist Propaganda League of America endorses the position of the Left Wing Socialists of Europe and pledges itself to work in harmony with them for the upbuilding of the Third International, and in the United States for reorganization of the Socialist Party of this country.