

Fixed Conventions and Costly Courts (November 24, 1903)

Terre Haute, Ind., Nov. 24 [1903]

The American Federation of Labor went on record against what purported to be socialism by an overwhelming majority at the Boston convention.¹ Three men control and cast the vote that controls the convention.² The Socialist delegates cut a small figure in the meeting and were sat down upon hard, and now the pure and simple labor leaders and the pure and simple capital leaders join lustily in singing the doxology.

At the New Orleans convention last year³ the Socialists compromised on a milk and water resolution to get the vote of the miners. This year on a resolution that meant but little more the miners slammed them down good and plenty.

Instead of a dozen resolutions the Socialist delegates should, in my opinion, have united upon a single one committing the convention (1) to a recognition of the class struggle, and (2) in favor of working class political action, forcing the pure and simple delegates to go on record against that plain proposition.

But as the Federation convention is controlled absolutely by three or four delegates who have votes enough to do as they please and as these will never change until they are forced to do so by their constituents, it is questionable if there is anything gained in going up against such a brace game. The same debates take place year after year and what the pure and simple fellows say is put on the wires, while the speeches of the Socialists die in the convention hall. As well might the Socialists orate to a log of wooden Indians as seek to change the controlling clique of the convention, who are as impervious to socialist logic as flint is to feathers.

Just now the capitalist press is busy showing how much ground the Socialists have lost in the Federation since the New Orleans convention and commending the conservatism and sagacity of its leaders. Every labor skinner in the land is patting the Federation on the back and spewing his fulsome flattery upon his pure and simple saviors.

The reason the leaders give for opposing socialism is that they “don’t want the labor movement to be the tail end of a political party.” Gods! Isn’t that just what it is today? Is not the pure and simple trade union movement controlled largely by jackleg politicians and city hall henchmen? And is not the organization itself, under its present leadership, the tail end of the capitalist hybrid Republican Party? And do not these pure and simple leaders graduate into fat political jobs in this same capitalist party for keeping the working class at the tail end of it? Is it not the “tail end” of the labor movement that wags around ... the same capitalist political party every time the legislature meets and begs like a dog for a bone? [It is] kicked into the gutter and howls until it meets in its own convention under a leadership that poultices its bruises with pure and simple plaster. Then the next legislature can apply another and more vigorous kick to the same tail end that has no business to emerge from its kennel until it is whistled for to elect fresh kickers to boot it back to the stern end where it properly belongs.

My conclusion is that Socialists would better stop wasting their time on a convention controlled by three or four men who are dead set against socialism and progress, and who will never move an inch until they are lifted by the rank and file. Let them make the next convention unanimous against socialism and that day they see their finish. Socialism is about the only thing that vitalizes the pure and simple movement enough to attract any considerable attention.

Instead of wasting time and money on a fixed convention let us go among the rank and file and dare the pure and simple leaders to face us there. They can barricade themselves behind their majority at the convention, but out among the rank and file we can meet them upon equal ground and make them defend their pro-capitalist policies.

Between the pure and simple labor leaders and civic federationists and the Socialist agitators there is war and the place to fight it out is not in an Alamo where they outnumber us a dozen to one, but out in the hearing of the working class, who shall know the truth and smite their misleaders to earth.

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The story is being circulated — for what reason may be surmised — that the American Railway Union and its president never paid a dollar of

the court costs assessed against them during their trials and that they also let their attorneys' fees and other claims unpaid. The story is an absolute falsehood. The ARU and its president paid every court claim and every lawyer fee in full and owes neither the one nor the other a farthing.

In this connection it may be said that it cost a fortune to reach the Supreme Court of the United States to be told there that the lower court had final jurisdiction in a contempt proceeding. The writer was opposed to making the effort, but was overruled, the plea being made, especially by the lawyers, that the decision would be of incalculable value as a precedent to the working class. The litigation cost many thousands of dollars — all the money we had in the treasury of the ARU, all we had personally, all we could beg, borrow, or raise in any other way went to satisfy the lawyers and courts — this was the price of our conviction.

It is true that we agreed to pay some of the lawyers still more in case the ARU recovered financially, but it was distinctly understood that if the organization did not recover its financial standing there should be no claim and the large fees already paid were to be accepted as payment in full.

The ARU did not recover, for all the railroad corporations combined to crush it. Therefore the contingent fees were not due and were never claimed. The lawyers were well paid and every dollar due them was settled in full according to agreement, and every dollar due on every other claim was paid in full.

Neither the ARU nor its president owes any court or any lawyer a dollar, and any assertion to the contrary is a lie and a calumny.

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How grand these lines of Longfellow:

The world rolls into light;
It is daybreak everywhere.⁴

There is light ahead and all about us, and the sun of socialism will soon rise to meridian glory.

¹ The 23rd Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor was held in Boston at Faneuil Hall from November 9 to 23, 1903.

² Unions were allocated votes in proportion to their paid memberships, with the largest organizations casting the most votes.

³ The 22nd Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor was held at Odd Fellows' Hall, New Orleans, from Nov. 13 to 22, 1902.

⁴ Closing lines of "The Bells of San Blas" (1882), by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882).