

Speech at the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World, Chicago (June 29, 1905)

Fellow Delegates and Comrades:—

As the preliminaries in organizing the convention have been disposed of, we will get down to the real work before this body. We are here to perform a task so great that it appeals to our best thought, our united energies, and will enlist our most loyal support; a task in the presence of which weak men might falter and despair, but from which it is impossible to shrink without betraying the working class. [*Applause.*]

I am much impressed by this proletarian gathering. I realize that I stand in the presence of those who in the past have fought, are fighting, and will continue to fight the battles of the working class economically and politically [*applause*], until the capitalist class is overthrown and the working class are emancipated from all of the degrading thralldom of the ages. [*Applause.*] In this great struggle the working class are often defeated, but never vanquished. Even the defeats, if we are wise enough to profit by them, but hasten the day of the final victory.

In taking a survey of the industrial field of today, we are at once impressed with the total inadequacy of working class organization, with the lack of solidarity, with the widespread demoralization we see, and we are bound to conclude that the old form of pure and simple unionism has long since outgrown its usefulness [*applause*]; that it is now not only in the way of progress, but that it has become positively reactionary, a thing that is but an auxiliary of the capitalist class. [*Applause.*]

They charge us with being assembled here for the purpose of disrupting the union movement. It is already disrupted, and if it were not disrupted we would not behold the spectacle here in the very city of a white policeman guarding a black scab, and a black policeman guarding a white scab [*applause*], while the trade unions stand by with their hands in their pockets wondering what is the matter with union labor in America. We are here today for the purpose of uniting the working class, for the purpose of eliminating that form of unionism which is responsible for the conditions as they exist today.

The trade union movement is today under the control of the capitalist class. It is preaching capitalist economics. It is serving capitalist

purposes. Proof of it, positive and overwhelming, appears on every hand. All of the important strikes during the textile workers at Fall River, that proved so disastrous to those who engaged in it; the strike of the subway employees in the city of New York, where under the present form of organization the local leaders repudiated the local leaders and were in alliance with the capitalist class to crush their own followers; the strike of the stockyard's employees here in Chicago; the strike of the teamsters now in progress — all, all of them bear testimony to the fact that the pure and simple form of unionism has fulfilled its mission, whatever that may have been, and that the time has come for it to go. [*Great applause.*]

The American Federation of Labor has numbers, but the capitalist class do not fear the American Federation of Labor; quite the contrary. The capitalist papers here in this very city at this very time are championing the cause of pure and simple unionism. Since this convention met there has been nothing in these papers but a series of misrepresentations. [*Applause.*] If we had met instead in the interest of the American Federation of Labor these papers, these capitalist papers, would have had their columns filled with articles commending the work that is being done here. There is certainly something wrong with that form of unionism which has its chief support in the press that represents capitalism; something wrong in that form of unionism whose leaders are the lieutenants of capitalism; something wrong with that form of unionism that forms an alliance with such a capitalist combination as the Civic Federation, whose sole purpose it is to chloroform the working class while the capitalist class go through their pockets. [*Applause.*]

There are those who believe that this form of unionism can be changed from within. They are very greatly mistaken. We might as well have remained in the Republican and Democratic Parties and have expected to effect certain changes from within, instead of withdrawing from those parties and organizing a party that represented the exploiting working class. [*Applause.*] There is but one way to effect this great change, and that is for the workingman to sever his relations with the American Federation and join the union that proposes upon the economic field to represent his class [*applause*], and we are here today for the purpose of organizing that union. I believe that we are capable of profiting by the experiences of the past. I believe it is possible for the delegates here assembled to form a great, sound, economic organization of the working class based upon the class struggle, that shall be broad enough to embrace every honest worker, yet narrow enough to exclude every fakir. [*Applause.*]

Now, let me say to those delegates who are here representing the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance, that I have not in the past agreed with their tactics. I concede that their theory is right, that their principles are sound; I admit and cheerfully admit the honesty of their membership. [*Applause.*] But there must certainly be something wrong with their tactics or their methods of propoganda if in these years they have not developed a larger membership than they have to their credit.

Let me say in this connection, I am not of those who scorn you because of your small numbers. I have been taught by experience that numbers do not represent strength. [*Applause.*] I will concede that the capitalist class do not fear the American Federation of Labor because of their numbers. Let me add that the capitalist class do not fear your Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance. The one are too numerous and the other are not sufficiently numerous. The American Federation of Labor is not sound in its economics. The Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance is sound in its economics, but in my judgment it does not appeal to the American working class in the right spirit. [*Applause.*] Upon my lips there has never been a sneer for the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance on account of the smallness of its numbers. I have been quite capable of applauding the pluck, of admiring the courage of the members of the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance, for though few in numbers, they stay by their colors. [*Applause.*]

I wish, if I can, to point out what I conceive to be the error in their method of propoganda. Speaking of the members as I have met them, it seems to me that they are too prone to look upon a man as a fakir who happens to disagree with them. [*Applause.*] Now, I think there is no delegate in this convention who is more set against the real fakir than I am. But I believe it is possible for a workingman who has been the victim of fakirism to become so alert, to so strain his vision looking for the fakir that he sees the fakir where the fakir is not. [*Applause.*] I would have you understand that I am opposed to the fakir, and I am also opposed to the fanatic. [*Applause.*] And fanaticism is as fatal to the development of the working class movement as is fakirism. [*Applause.*] Admitting that the principle is sound, that the theory of your organization is right — and I concede both — what good avails it, what real purpose is accomplished if you cannot develop strength sufficient to carry out the declared purpose of your organization?

Now, I believe that there is a middle ground that can be occupied without the slightest concession of principle. I believe it is possible for such an organization as the Western Federation of Miners to be brought

into harmonious relation with the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance. I believe it is possible that that element of the organizations represented here have the conviction, born of experience, observation and study, that the time has come to organize a new union, and I believe it is possible for these elements to mingle, to combine here, and to at least begin the work of forming a great economic or revolutionary organization of the working class so sorely needed in the struggle for their emancipation. [*Applause.*] The supreme need of the hour, as the speaker who preceded me so clearly expressed it in his carefully and clearly thought address — the supreme need of the hour is a sound, revolutionary working-class organization.¹ [*Applause.*] And while I am not foolish enough to imagine that we can complete this great work in a single convention of a few days' duration, I do believe it is possible for us to initiate this work, to begin it in a way for the greatest promise, with the assurance that its work will be completed in a way that will appeal with increasing force to the working class of the country.

I am satisfied that the great body of the working class in this country are prepared for just such an organization. [*Applause.*] I know, their leaders know, that if this convention is successful their doom is sealed. [*Applause.*] They can already see the handwriting upon the wall, and so they are seeking by all of the power at their command to discredit this convention, and in alliance with the cohorts of capitalism they are doing what they can to defeat this convention. It may fail in its mission, for they may continue to misrepresent, deceive and betray the working class and keep them in the clutches of their capitalist masters and exploiters. [*Applause.*]

They are hoping that we will fail to get together. They are hoping, as they have already expressed it, that this convention will consist of a prolonged wrangle; that such is our feeling and relations toward each other that it will be impossible for us to agree upon any vital proposition; that we will fight each other upon every point, and that when we have concluded our labors we will leave things in a worse condition than they were before. If we are true to ourselves we will undeceive those gentlemen. We will give them to understand that we are animated by motives too lofty for them in their baseness and sordidness to comprehend. [*Applause.*] We will give them to understand that the motive here is not to use unionism as a means of serving the capitalist class, but that the motive of the men and women assembled here is to serve the working class by so organizing that class as to make their organization the promise of the coming triumph upon the economic field

and the political field and the ultimate emancipation of the working class. [Applause.]

Let me say that I agree with Comrade DeLeon upon one very vital point at least. [Applause.] We have not been the best of friends in the past [laughter], but the whirligig of time brings about some wonderful changes. I find myself breaking away from some men I have been in very close touch with, and getting in close touch with some men from whom I have been very widely separated. [Applause.] But no matter. I have long since made up my mind to pursue the straight line as I see it. A man is not worthy, in my judgment, to enlist in the services of the working class unless he has the moral stamina, if need be, to break asunder all personal relations to serve that class as he understands his duty to that class. [Applause.]

I have not the slightest feeling against those who in the past have seen fit to call me a fakir. [Laughter.] I can afford to wait. I have waited, and I now stand ready to take by the hand every man, every woman that comes here, totally regardless of past affiliations, whose purpose it is to organize the working class upon the economic field, to launch that economic organization that shall be the expression of the economic conditions as they exist today; that organization for which the working class are prepared; that organization which we shall at least begin before we have ended our labors, unless we shall prove false to the object for which we have assembled here.

Now, I am not going to take the time to undertake to outline the form of this organization. Nor should I undertake to test your patience by attempting to elaborate the plan of organization. But let me suggest, in a few words, that to accomplish its purpose this organization must not only be based upon the class struggle, but must express the economic condition of this time. We must have one organization that embraces the workers in every department of industrial activity. It must express the class struggle. It must recognize the class lines. It must of course be class-conscious. It must be totally uncompromising. [Applause.] It must be an organization of the rank and file. [Applause.] It must be so organized and so guided as to appeal to the intelligence of the workers of the country everywhere. And if we succeed, as I believe we will, in forming such an organization, its success is a foregone conclusion.

I have already said the working class are ready for it. There are multiplied thousands in readiness to join it, waiting only to see if the organization is rightly grounded and properly formed; and this done there will be no trouble about its development, and its development will take

proper form and expand to its true proportions. If this work is properly begun, it will mean in time, and not a long time at that, a single union upon the economic field. It will mean more than that; it will mean a single party upon the political field [*applause*]; the one the economic expression, the other the political expression of the working class; the two halves that represent the organic whole of the labor movement.

Now, let me say in closing, comrades — and I have tried to condense, not wishing to tax your patience or to take the time of others, for I believe that in such conventions as this it is more important that we shall perform than that we shall make speeches — let me say in closing that you and I and all of us who are here to enlist in the service of the working class need to have faith in each other [*applause*], not the faith born of ignorance and stupidity, but the enlightened faith of self-interest. We are in precisely the same position; we depend absolutely upon each other. We must get close together and stand shoulder to shoulder. [*Applause.*] We know that without solidarity nothing is possible, that with it nothing is impossible.

And so we must dispel the petty prejudices that are born of the differences of the past, and I am of those who believe that, if we get together in the true working class spirit, most of these differences will disappear, and if those of us who have differed in the past are willing to accord to each other that degree of conciliation that we ourselves feel that we are entitled to, that we will forget these differences, we will approach all of the problems that confront us with our intelligence combined, acting together in concert, all animated by the same high resolve to form that great union, so necessary to the working class, without which their condition remains as it is, and with which, when made practical and vitalized and renewed, the working class is permeated with the conquering spirit of the class struggle, and as if by magic the entire movement is vitalized, and side by side and shoulder to shoulder in a class-conscious phalanx we move forward to certain and complete victory. [*Applause.*]

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¹ Debs was preceded by a journeyman paperhanger named Duncan McEachren.