

Graft Unionism and the Progressive Alternative:
A Letter to the *Chicago Socialist*
(December 23, 1905)

Editor, *Chicago Socialist*¹

Dear Comrade:—

As many of your readers in Illinois and elsewhere are members of the Industrial Workers, and many others are interested in industrial unionism, a few words in regard to the progress of the organization may not be out of place.

The writer has just returned from New York, where a series of extraordinary meetings has been held under the auspices of the Industrial Workers. President [Charles O.] Sherman has temporarily made his headquarters there, and so numerous and urgent have the demands been upon him that from sheer exhaustion he was obligated to leave for home to recuperate his vital forces.

After the holidays a branch headquarters will be established in New York, with President Sherman in personal charge, until the office and its connections are in good working order. The lack of organizers in the eastern field has seriously handicapped the general officers, and as these will be provided for under the new arrangement, the work of organizing New York and vicinity will be prosecuted in a methodical manner and with renewed vigor and determination.

Five great mass meetings were held in New York, Brooklyn, and Paterson [New Jersey] while I was there. All of them were crowded and most of them overflowing. There could have been fifteen meetings held instead of five, and all of them packed full, if we could have made arrangements and provided speakers for them. At the last of the meetings I attended, 80 new members joined, nearly all of them old trade unionists.

The philosophy of industrial unionism is irresistible. The rank and file of the working class grasp it with vigor and enthusiasm. No labor union ever organized has met with such intelligent and decided approval.

From three to five local unions are being organized in New York City alone each week. This number will be doubled under the new regime to be

established on President Sherman's return to the East after his recuperation.

It is impossible to conceive of the rottenness of trade unionism in New York without being upon the ground and hearing the stories at first hand. It is not craft unionism that is inadequate there, but graft unionism that has gotten in its foul work until the very term is a stench in the nostrils of honest men.

It would be too sweeping an indictment to charge all the leaders with being corrupt, but it will not be denied that very many of them are not only dishonest, but criminally guilty of collusion with the bosses; and in that infamous capacity are sucking the very hearts' blood of their organized, betrayed, and helpless followers.

It is even worse than Chicago, and this is hardly imaginable.

In both of these cities craft unionism has gone to seed, and from it has spouted graft unionism of the most vulgar and debasing character. The local leaders, whose name is legion, have in many instances secret arrangements with the bosses, under which the leader gets his graft for wheedling his union dupes into a state of helpless and hopeless servitude to their capitalist masters. These are the labor-leading Judases who, for a few dirty dollars, lead their pure and simple followers into the slaughter pens of capitalism; and the unions of which they are the leaders are the corrals of wage-slaves, rounded up to have their own throats cut, and to be the means of cutting the throats of others in the struggle of the working class to free themselves from the piracy and brutality of capitalism.

Such rotten barracks as these, miscalled trade unions, and very properly denominated "bulwarks against socialism" by the *Wall Street Journal*, must be battered down and blown up to clear the way for industrial unionism, the real and complete unity of the working class, for the overthrow of capitalism and freedom from wage-slavery.

To talk about reforming these rotten, graft-infested unions, which are dominated absolutely by the labor boss, as is Tammany by the political boss, is as vain and wasteful of time as to spray a cesspool with attar of roses. The cesspool must be cleaned out and so must the rotten union, and that is the only rational way to deal with them.

Comrade [Victor] Berger expresses intense disgust with the American Federation of Labor, and well he may after the final drubbing administered to him at the Fakirs' Festival,² but he proposes to cling to the old hulk; and

with ardor that would be amusing if were not so pathetic, cries aloud to save the old graft-eaten derelict and turn it into a first class battleship.

It is far easier to construct a new man-of-war, and the Industrial Workers is well under way. Victor declares that the Industrial Workers will not do, because it has been “planned” and has no “connections.” To this it is only necessary to say that the new unionism has sprung from the old, just as socialism is springing from capitalism.

Let me ask our old Comrade Berger what is the matter with such an organization as the Western Federation of Miners, with its almost 40,000 militant members, the terror of the capitalist class, and the only union that class actually fears?

This union is affiliated with the Industrial Workers. What is the matter with its connections? Comrade Berger is all awry on the trade union question and he will realized it before the bluebirds come again.

There will be a regular landslide from the old unionism to the new in the near future, and Comrade Berger will be rapping for admission to the Industrial Workers before he knows it. He will not long ride the waves alone after his hulk has gone down.

The cry has gone up in New York that the Industrial Workers is organizing scabs. The charge, needless to say, is absolutely false. It is the croak of the grater, or nest of grafters, that have been uncovered. It is the last appeal to their dupes. The grafting little leaders who make this cry do not dare to meet the officers of the Industrial Workers before the rank and file of the working class. The simple truth is that the disgusted unionists are deserting their old craft concerns, in which they have been repeatedly betrayed, and through which their leaders, in collusion with their bosses, have a mortgage on their bodies and souls — and are joining the Industrial Workers, and the moment they do this, by the peculiar process of reasoning of the grafter, who sees his booty vanishing, they become scabs. The fact is that they are the best of unionists, and this is proven in their determination to turn their backs upon unions that betray the working class, and their faces toward a revolutionary economic organization that has been organized to fight fakirs of all descriptions and emancipate the toilers of the nation from the hell of industrial slavery.

The Industrial Workers is making grand progress in every part of the country, and its coming convention, in May next, will be the greatest revolutionary gathering of the working class ever held in America.

A sound and united economic movement is the supreme need of the working class. As long as the workers are economically divided, as they are in the craft unions, they will be politically divided, and the strong trade union centers will continue to be, as they are now, with but one or two exceptions, the weak spots in the socialist movement.

Economic solidarity cannot but express political solidarity. Without the former, the latter is impossible. With a sound economic basis to build on, we shall soon have a united working class party and the time is ripe for it.

Thousands have been driven from the socialist movement in disgust by the factional quarrels among socialists themselves, and this, more than any one thing, is the cause of the slough in the vote in places where all the conditions are favorable for a good showing.

The Industrial Workers, as a necessary part of its mission, proposes that the workers shall be trained and fitted in their economic organization to assume control of every branch of industry and operate it successfully when the working class take possession.

This means, not only economic solidarity, but the embryonic structure of the cooperative commonwealth.

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¹ Editor of the *Chicago Socialist* was A.M. Simons.

² That is, the most recent annual convention of the AF of L.