

Labor's Fight for Freedom (April 11, 1908)

The trade union movement of the present day has enemies within and without, and upon all sides, some attacking it openly and others insidiously, but all bent either upon destroying it or reducing it to impotency.

The enemies of unionism, while differing in method, are united solidly upon one point, and that is in the effort to misrepresent and discredit the men who, scorning and defying the capitalist exploiters and their minions, point steadily the straight and uncompromising course the movement must take if it is to accomplish its allotted task and safely reach the destined port.

These men, though frequently regarded as enemies, are the true friends of trade unionism and in good time are certain to be vindicated.

The more or less open enemies have inaugurated some startling innovations during the past few years. The private armies the corporations used some years ago, such as Pinkerton mercenaries, coal and iron police, deputy marshals, etc., have been relegated to second place as out of date, or they are wholly out of commission. It has been found after related experiments that courts are far more deadly to trade unions, and that they operate noiselessly and with unerring precision.

Step by step the writ of injunction has invaded the domain of trade unionism, limiting its jurisdiction, curtailing its powers, sapping its strength, and undermining its foundations.

Injunctions have been issued restraining the trade unions and their members from striking, from boycotting, from voting funds to strikers, from levying assessments to support their members, from walking on the public highways, from asking non-union men not to take their places, from meeting to oppose wage reductions, from expelling a spy from membership, from holding conversations with those who had been taken or were about to take their jobs from congregating in public places, from holding meetings, from doing anything and everything — directly, indirectly, or any other way — to interfere with the employing class in their unalienable right to operate their plants as their own interests may dictate, and to run things generally to suit themselves.

The courts have found it in line with judicial procedure to strike every weapon from labor's economic hand and leave it defenseless at the mercy of its exploiter; and now that the courts have gone to the last extremity in this nefarious plot of subjugation, labor, at last, is waking upon to the fact that it has not been using its political arm in the struggle at all; that the ballot which it can wield is strong enough not only to disarm the enemy, but to drive that enemy entirely from the field.

The courts, so notoriously in control of capital, and so shamelessly perverted to its base and sordid purposes, are, therefore, exercising a wholesome effect upon trade unionism by compelling the members to note the class character of our capitalist government and driving them to the inevitable conclusion that the labor question is also a political question and that the working class must organize their political power that they may wrest the government from capitalist control and put an end to class rule forever.

Trade unionists for the most part learn slowly, but they learn surely, and fresh object lessons are prepared for them every day.

They have seen a Democratic president of the United States send the federal troops into a sovereign state of the union in violation of the constitution, and in defiance of the governor and the people, to crush a body of peaceable workingmen at the behest of a combination of railroads bent on destroying their union and reducing them to vassalage.¹

They have seen a Republican president refuse to interpose his executive authority when militarism, in the name of the capitalist class, seized another sovereign state by the throat and strangled its civil administration to death while it committed the most dastardly crimes upon defenseless workingmen in the annals of capitalist brutality and military despotism.

They have seen a composite Republican-Democratic Congress, the legislative tool of the exploiting class, pass a military bill which makes every citizen a soldier and the president a military dictator.

They have seen this same Congress, session after session, making false promises to deluded labor committees pretending to be the friends of workingmen and anxious to be of service to them, while at the same time in league with the capitalist lobby and pledged to defeat every measure that would afford even the slightest promise of relief to the working class. The anti-injunction bill and the eight-hour measure, pigeonholed and rejected again and again in the face of repeated promises that they should

pass, tell their own story of duplicity and treachery to labor of the highest legislative body of the land.

They have seen Republican governors and Democratic governors order out the militia repeatedly to shoot down workingmen at the command of their capitalist masters.

They have seen these same governors construct military prisons and "bull pens," seize unoffending workingmen without warrant of law, and thrust them into these vile quarters for no other reason than to break up their unions and leave them helpless at the feet of corporate rapacity.

They have seen the Supreme Court of the nation turn labor out without a hearing, while the corporation lawyers, who compose this august body, and who hold their commissions in virtue of the "well done" of their capitalist retainers, solemnly descant upon the immaculate purity of our judicial institutions.

They have seen state legislatures, both Republican and Democratic, with never an exception, controlled bodily by the capitalist class, turn the committees of labor unions empty-handed from their doors.

They have seen the state supreme courts declare as unconstitutional the last vestige of law upon the statute books that could by any possibility be construed as affording any shelter or relief to the labor union or its members.

They have seen these and many other things and will doubtless see many more before their eyes are opened as a class; but we are thankful for them all, painful though they be to us in having to bear witness to the suffering of our benighted brethren. In this way only can they be made to see, to think, to act, and every wrong they suffer brings them nearer to their liberation.

The "pure and simple" trade union of the past does not answer the requirements of today, and they who insist that it does are blind to the changes going on about them, and out of harmony with the progressive forces of the age. The attempt to preserve the "autonomy" of each trade and segregate it within its own independent jurisdiction, while the lines which once separated them are being obliterated, and the trades are being interwoven and interlocked in the process of industrial evolution, is as futile as to declare and attempt to enforce the independence of waves of the sea.

A modern industrial plant has a hundred trades and parts of trades represented in its working force. To have these workers parceled out to a

hundred unions is to divide and not to organize them, to give them over to factions and petty leadership and leave them an easy prey to the machinations of the enemy. The dominant craft should control the plant or, rather, the union, and it should embrace the entire working force. This is the industrial plan, the modern method applied to modern conditions, and it will in time prevail.

The trade autonomy can be expressed within the general union, so far as that is necessary or desirable, and there need be no conflict on account of it. The attempt of each trade to maintain its own independence separately and apart from others results in increasing jurisdictional entanglements, fruitful of dissension, strife, and ultimate disruption.

The work of organizing has little, if any, permanent value unless the work of education, the right kind of education, goes hand in hand with it. There is no cohesiveness in ignorance.

The members of a trade union should be taught the true import, the whole object of the labor movement and understand its entire program. They should know that the labor movement means more, infinitely more, than a paltry increase in wages and the strike necessary to secure it; that while it engages to do all that possibly can be done to better the working conditions of its members, its higher object is to overthrow the capitalist system of private ownership of the tools of labor, abolish wage slavery, and achieve the freedom of the whole working class and, in fact, of all mankind.

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¹ Reference is to the Pullman strike of 1894. See: Eugene V. Debs, *Selected Works: Volume 2: The Rise and Fall of the American Railroad Union, 1892-1896*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), *passim*.