

**Building the Industrial Union:  
Open Letter to Tom Mann  
(circa June 1910)**

Your communication of the 19th ult. [May 19, 1910?] has been received and has been noted with special interest and appreciation. Of course I know you and have known you for a number of years by your excellent work. I followed you to Australia and read a number of your articles from there but did not know until your letter came that you had returned to England.<sup>1</sup>

Let me thank you most warmly for your kind words in reference to myself personally and to say in answer that I have the same high regard, the same strong attachment for you as a fellow worker and revolutionist.

Touching the matter of industrial unionism to which you refer, we have had, as you are aware, some peculiar and distressing experiences on this side. But we are not in the least discouraged, nor any less ardent in our advocacy of the principles of industrial unionism, while we have profited somewhat, I trust, by that experience.

By even mail I am sending you a few booklets in which you will find my views upon the essentials set forth pretty fully, if not as clearly as I would wish to present them. In answer to your direct inquiry I have to say that I too am opposed, like yourself, to undertaking to destroy the old unions. Such a policy can be fruitful only of mischief to industrial unionism, as we have reason to know on this side. It is true that the old unions are for the most part thoroughly outgrown, reactionary, and utterly hostile to revolutionary agitation and activity, and that their leaders are of the same character, if they are not corrupt besides, and yet to attempt to destroy them is to make them more impregnable as strongholds of capitalism, strengthen their leaders in the estimation of the rank and file, and give them a new lease of prestige and power.

I do believe that an industrial union should be organized and it should carry forward a most vigorous and comprehensive propaganda. There are millions of unorganized to whom it can make its appeal, as well as to those who are organized and lean toward industrial unionism. It should be distinctly understood that to smash the existing unions and establish industrial unions by force is not its mission, but that on the contrary, it has come as

the most intelligent and effective expression of labor unionism, that its purpose is to build and not to destroy, to help and not to hinder, thus inspiring the confidence of the workers, whether organized or unorganized, and recruiting its ranks from the most intelligent and experienced in every department of industrial activity.

The taunts and sneers of the “pure and simple” leaders who have nothing to lose but their jobs, and whose leadership depends upon their keeping the workers segregated in craft unions, may well be ignored, instead of allowing ourselves to be goaded into attacking them, thereby giving warrant to these leaders in charging us, which they are only too eager to do, with seeking to destroy their unions. The effect of this is invariably to fortify these unions more strongly in their reactionary attitude, and their so-called leaders in their corrupt and degrading domination.

It is far wiser, as our experience has demonstrated, to devote our time, means and energy to advocating the principles of industrial unionism, building up our organization and vitalizing our propaganda by an appeal to the intelligence and integrity of the workers, bearing with them patiently and perseveringly, while at the same time aiding and encouraging them in all their struggles for better conditions, than to waste time in denouncing, or seeking to destroy, these reactionary old unions and their leaders.

Industrial unionism, as organized and applied, to find favor with the workers, must give proof of its sympathy with them in all their struggles, rejoice with them when they win, and when they lose cheer them up and point the way to victory.

It matters not what union it is that happens to be engaged in a fight with the master class, or what its attitude may be toward industrial unionism, the invariable policy of the industrial union should be to back up the contestants and help them win their struggle by all the means at its command. This policy will do more, infinitely more to inspire the faith of the workers in industrial unionism and draw them to its standard than any possible amount of denunciation or attempted destruction of the old unions.

Nor do I believe in organizing dual unions in any case where the old union substantially holds the field. Where an old union is disintegrating it is of course different. Here there is need of organization, or rather reorganization, and hence a legitimate field for industrial unionism.

Industrial evolution has made industrial unionism possible and revolutionary education and agitation must now make it inevitable. To this end we should bore from within and without, the industrial unionists within

the old unions working together in perfect harmony with the industrial unionists upon the outside engaged in laying the foundation and erecting the superstructure of the new revolutionary economic organization, the embryonic industrial democracy.

The difficulties we have encountered on this side since organizing the Industrial Workers have largely been overcome and I believe the time is near at hand when all industrial unionists will work together to build up the needed organization and when industrial unionism will receive such impetus as will force it to the front irresistibly in response to the crying need of the enslaved and despoiled workers in their struggle for emancipation.

The economic organization of the working class is as essential to the revolutionary movement as the sun is to light and the workers are coming more and more to realize it, and the triumph of industrial unionism over craft unionism is but a question of time, and this can be materially shortened if we but deal wisely and sanely with the situation.

Believe me in the bonds of industrial unionism and socialism,

Your comrade and fellow worker,

***Eugene V. Debs.***

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Mann (1856-1941) was an English socialist and trade union activist, a member of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and the Social Democratic Federation, later the British Socialist Party. Mann emigrated to Australia in 1902 and became active in the workers movement there, returning to Great Britain in May 1910. Mann was a leader of the 1911 Liverpool transit strike and an outspoken opponent of British entry into World War I. Mann was a foundation member of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 and was later active in the Comintern's UK trade union appendage, the National Minority Movement.