

ARTICLE

AN ADDRESS

To the Members of the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance.

By **DANIEL DE LEON.**

FELLOW-MEMBERS OF THE S.T.&L.A.:

From several of my fellow-members of the S.T.&L.A., letters have come to me asking whether, if our national convention, which meets early next June at Lynn, Mass., decides to send delegates to the industrial convention, that has been called to meet in Chicago on June 27th, I would consent to form part of the delegation.

Existing conditions render it imperative upon me to answer the question with something more than “yes” or “no”; and also that not those only who ask, but our whole membership should know. Moreover, this is the time to speak, and to speak fully, and I shall be all the more pointed because I am of the opinion that the occasion raised by the proposed Chicago convention excludes the idea of “instructions.” Even under ordinary circumstances “instructions” are unsatisfactory. Where they are needed, they are worthless; where they are not worthless, they are superfluous. He who wishes to evade his instructions can always find a loop-hole: no instruction net is imaginable through which a slippery customer could not squeeze out; on the other hand, the platform of an organization, together with its traditions, should be “instructions” enough, both to guide a delegate, and by which his organization can hold him responsible. Instructions, accordingly, will not stand at so critical a period as the one that the Labor Movement of the land is now traversing. For another thing, just because these times are critical, shifting conditions are apt to cause different interpretations of identical terms. The same term may mean materially different things in different mouths. Accordingly, nothing short of a “confession of faith,” so to speak, can offer a guarantee either to a

delegate that he is understood by his organization, or to his organization that it is understood by him. Such a confession of faith I shall now make.

The argument is frequently heard: “The privately owned and steadily improving mechanism of production and distribution as steadily displaces Labor; an excess of supply in the Labor-Market has two inevitable results—first, it is bound to lower the price (wages) of Labor, consequently false is the economic foundation of a strike for better pay, such an attempt is foredoomed to failure; secondly, the excess of idle Labor is a reserve quarry upon which the capitalist can draw with more or less ease for the forces that he needs to take the places of strikers; the two reasons combined point to the inevitable present and increased future impotence of the economic organization, or Union.”

The reasoning is only partially true, substantially false. How false the reasoning is may be incidentally judged from the circumstance that, although the leaders of “pure and simple” Unionism are not generally as disregarding of appearances as were the late P.M. Arthur of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Bobby Howard of the Spinners’ Union, who flaunted their affluence in the public eye, it is well known that they all amass a fortune, provided their incumbency be long enough. Where do they get it? The capitalist does not pay for nothing. What does he pay them for? He pays them for keeping the Union stuck fast in the ruts where the failure, pointed out in the above defective reasoning, is natural and inevitable. And why does he pay? Just because, instead of failure, success would crown the efforts of the Union if, instead of the wheels of its train being deep in the ruts of muddy ground, they stood upon the smooth steel-tracks of the revolutionary roadbed. The failure to grasp, what may be termed the Social topography of Capitalism in a thoroughly capitalist nation like America, is accountable for the failure of shallow men to grasp the power, and, with it, the mission of Unionism.

It goes without saying that the Union, whose goal is harmony between the Capitalist Class and the Working Class, stands upon economically and sociologically false foundation when it strikes for better pay: to grant capitalist premises and then bristle up against their results can obviously be followed only by failure: it is a foot-in-the-mouth posture. But it does not equally follow that the Union, whose goal is

the overthrow of Capitalism, stands upon equally economic and sociologic false foundation when it strikes for better pay. To expect an unsupported ball to rest on an inclined plane, let alone rise higher, is absurd: the expectation reveals a lack of knowledge of the “lay of the land”; but it is not, therefore, absurd to expect the ball to hold its own and roll up to the top, if, the “lay of the land” being known, the necessary measures are taken to counteract the law of gravitation, and propel the ball upward to where it can be brought into stable equilibrium.

The comparison brings out the fallacy that underlies the plausible claim of the labor-fakirs and the “Intellectuals” that the Union can only attend to “present needs,” the “needs of the moment,” and that all attempts to broaden the Union’s vision is “fine-spun theory” that can not engage the Union-man’s attention. The plight that “pure and simple” Unionism has left the Working Class in should be a sufficient answer—unless the position is taken that the emancipation of the Working Class is an impossibility, leastwise by itself. This alternative must be dismissed: it is untrue to historic evolution. The plight that “pure and simple” Unionism has left the Working Class in proves that, not unless the mission of Unionism is kept in mind, in other words, not unless the Union is switched upon the revolutionary track, can the ball be expected even to keep its place on the inclined plane of the capitalist hill, but will ever roll back, down to the bottom, where it now is.

At this point the sapient “Intellectual” sneers. His loose grasp of the Social Question immediately raises before his eyes the police, militia, military and gatling guns on paper of the capitalist mechanism of government, and causes him to give the grotesquest of interpretations to the Marxian principle that “The Labor Movement is essentially political.” He jumps to the conclusion that the ballot is all that is wanted. The “Intellectual” seems not to realize that the identical police, militia, military and gatling guns on paper will at the right moment bar his own way at the hustings—unless he becomes a political fakir, in other words, sacrifices the emancipation of Labor to personal political preferment and personal glitter. The light-weight “Intellectual” is too much possessed with what Marx termed “parliamentary idiocy” to heed, or is too bent upon his own personal advancement, to preach and act up to the fact. The “political aspect” of the Labor Movement lies in

its revolutionary NATURE, not in any of the methods that it might adopt; nor is there, despite the importance of the ballot, anything more cravenly reactionary than the ballot, without MIGHT to back it up. That MIGHT nothing can supply to Labor except the class-conscious, and, consequently, revolutionary economic organization of the Working Class—and that might would be amply to the purpose.

In America, capitalist society has reached fullest development—politically as well as economically. For that very reason, paradoxical as the statement may appear, Capitalism, so far from being strongest in America, is here most vulnerable. The day when all the means of production and distribution will be under one hat is only a theoretical day: the feudal grandees of modern America are waging a positive White and Red Roses mortal feud among themselves; coupled with that are the freedoms—political, of speech and of the press—that the country still enjoys, and that are enjoyed in none other to the extent that they are enjoyed with us. These are conditions that can bloom only in a country of untrammelled Capitalism. They are so many weapons that lie ready at hand for the Union; but they are weapons that either break in the Union's hand, or whose points are turned against itself, if used for any but an uncompromising revolutionary purpose. There is not an industry—the larger ones conspicuously, the smaller ones substantially so—that is not criminally guilty, even under capitalist laws,—as shown in these very days by the revelations on the Gas Company in this city, the Equitable Life, the Standard Oil, etc.,—purely a feature of well-rounded capitalist society; consequently, there is not an industry before whom a revolutionarily conducted strike would stand impotent as the strikers of “pure and simpledom” do. Moreover, the floating mass of wild-eyed “reformers,” now missionless, will have found its mission: visionary as the “reformer” is, his conduct ever disturbs capitalist equanimity from within: the straightforward and well-aimed blows of Labor on the economic field would fire the “reformer” into antics most perilous to the capitalist concern involved: the simultaneous political unity of Labor, possible only then, would add grist to the mill of the tribulations of the capitalist establishment struck against: finally, what with all that, and the further fact, a fact of deepest significance, that—as betrayed by the above referred to Gas, Equitable Life, Standard Oil, etc., squabbles—there is not a capitalist magnate whom some other magnate is not “lying in wait for,” and must

“lie in wait for,”—what with all that, the capitalist concern struck against by a revolutionary Union can not choose but yield ground. To-day, the capitalist cuts deeply into his profits with the bribes he flings at his Labor-lieutenants. The power of these being gone or crippled, the capitalist will throw tubs to the whale of the class-conscious Union on strike. What it would be absurd for the “pure and simple” Union to demand—a higher price than the market quotations for the merchandise labor-power—becomes supremely sound on the lips of a body that is organized for the purpose of wiping the human being “Workingman” clean of the merchandise smudge that capitalism smears him with; and the demand is withal supremely sane when made by a body, the revolutionary spirit of whose organization brings the rest of the wage slaves into its fold, instead of barring them out, as the “pure and simple” Union does, and thereby challenging and urging them to break its strike. The stream of the wealth that now flows into the private channels of the fakir’s pockets, and only works a corrupting, would be turned into the channels of the rank and file’s pockets, and would have a stimulating effect. But in order to accomplish this end, the economic organization must, indeed, be a Union of the Working Class.

The lures in the path of the workingman, tending to draw him from the direct forthright, are so numerous that, at first blush, it would seem next to impossible to draw the Working Class into a revolutionary Union and keep them there. These lures rise of themselves like will-o’-the-wisps from the surrounding quagmires of Capitalism, and the agencies of the capitalist class are ever on the alert to raise additional ones, either for the general purpose of fettering him in the ignorance of his class condition, or for the specific purpose of exploiting him politically, or for the purpose of leading him off the scent when he is in hot pursuit of the oppressor—on the same principle that bullfighters draw the enraged animal aside by fluttering a disturbing rag before his eyes when he crowds one of their companions too closely. How is the workingman, the hard-worked, tired-minded workingman to acquire the vast knowledge, that, at first blush, it would seem one must have in order to guard him against these innumerable lures? It is an error that the knowledge need be so vast. Providence has vouchsafed to the Working Class the boon that it denied to the tyrant of old, who prayed that his enemies may have but one neck that he may cut them all off at one blow of his sword. No separate information is needed to cut off

the head of each separate lure as it rises. Innumerable as these lures be, they all stand on one neck—the wage-slave condition of the workingman.

The knowledge that he is a merchandise in the world's market, that the price of his merchandise is bound to decline by reason of the increase in the supply, due to the private ownership of the ever improving social tool that his class needs to work with; the knowledge, accordingly, that wages are the workingman's chain, that the size of his chain is bound to shrink and shrink,—that knowledge is simple and easy enough to acquire. It points directly to the path he must strike—the path that shall place the social mechanism of production in the hands of his class, that trains him to strike the blow that will strike off his chains as a wage slave, and that leads him to no effort that does not actually look in that direction; it, accordingly, points to the structure of economic organization that alone can secure his emancipation—the Union that plants itself upon these principles; that, as a consequence, embraces his whole class; and that, as a further consequence, jointly strikes at the ballot box, under the device of the unconditional surrender of the Capitalist Class, while it drills his own class into the body requisite to make that ballot good. Obviously, such a Union is structurally different from the “pure and simple” Union. No lures can prevail against it: their heads are cut off automatically as fast as they rise. Even industrialism, superior as it is in possibilities to craftism, would not of and by itself fill the bill. The form without the essence would be no real improvement.

Upon all these matters I believe no serious difference of opinion will be found among us. Should the Chicago convention fall short of this standard—a fear that the Manifesto calling the convention does not justify,—then all that convention would accomplish would be to justify the forecast that the hierarchical line of succession, which may be said to have started with Terence V. Powderly, will not close with Samuel Gompers. The dove will have returned back into the Ark with the message that land is not yet in sight above the waters. The Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance delegation should forthwith withdraw.

But there is another line of thought that must be considered by us—a line of thought without clearness upon which, we would all be very much at sea. The line of thought that I have in mind is certainly upon your minds also. It is the line of thought suggested by that clause of the Manifesto which declares that the proposed

new Union “should be established as the economic organization of the Working Class WITHOUT AFFILIATION WITH ANY POLITICAL PARTY.”

When the S.T.&L.A. was organized there was but one political party that flew the colors of Socialism—the Socialist Labor Party; the S.T.&L.A. affiliated itself with the S.L.P. Since then, another party has risen which, although it sails under three different names, everywhere flies the colors of Socialism. We know what that party is: its foundation, in so far as it has any, is the A.F. of L., whose emblem, the Arm with the Torch, it instinctively and even deliberately adopted; its policy is “possibilism,” which means log-rolling with fakirism on the economic, and, consequently, with capitalist candidates and principles on the political field—and it has bravely lived up to its policy; its press resembles a row of fishermen, each with his private line in the waters of the Labor Movement fishing for private gain; its principles vary according to latitude and longitude; its vote is largely typified by the Wichita, Kans., *Social Ethics*, which preaches, not even bourgeois radicalism, but downright populism; another portion of its vote is pronouncedly “radical bourgeois”;—in other words and to sum up, it is a drift-sand party, with no reason of being in America, bound to be scattered by the logic of events, and, already seen to-day in a wild turmoil of dissension, with its vote collapsing almost everywhere, and bearing out what I stated last summer in my report to the Amsterdam International Socialist Congress that it “may be said to have fairly entered upon its period of dissolution” after the stand that the placemen and journalistic beneficiaries of the A.F. of L. in its last national convention compelled it to take. We know all that; but all is not said when that is said. A perceptible number of the element that that party drew to itself—whether the number be one-fourth or one-eighth of its vote—joined it in the belief, not only that it was really a party of revolutionary Socialism, but that its methods were superior to those of the S.L.P. and, consequently, would sooner lead to victory; that element was attracted wholly by Eugene V. Debs with his favorable record for “Union Smashing” attempted against the fossil Brotherhoods of railroad workers; that element honestly and seriously wants Socialism; that element would be gladly welcomed in the ranks of the S.L.P.;—and that element is learning fast. What, in view of these facts—I consider them facts,—is the “treatment” applicable to the case?

I do not consider that there is one chance in a thousand of the Chicago convention's pronouncing for the so-called Socialist, alias Social Democratic, alias Public Ownership party. Should that fraction of a chance in a thousand happen, then, of course, there would be nothing for the delegation of the S.T.&L.A. to do but withdraw, and continue its independent stand until greater clearness shall prevail. But what as to the S.L.P.?

I am of the opinion that a motion to endorse the S.L.P. would be ill advised:—it would be a challenge to a conflict with the only element in the said S.P. upon which the Socialist Movement can be safely built, the Working Class element—an element that is drawing nearer to us over the only bridge over which the Socialist forces in the land can march towards unity—the bridge of the class-conscious, revolutionary economic organization, of which our own S.T.&L.A., on one side of the stream, and the A.L.U., on the other, may be considered the piers. Consequently, if I am a member of your delegation to Chicago I shall not make such a motion.

Should such a motion come from any other quarter, I would deplore it; I would oppose it. I would oppose it for the reason just stated, and for the further reason that, even if such a motion prevailed, it could not be the result of mature thought.—Healthy fruit does not ripen quite so fast.

But there is a third, and more important reason that guides me on this head.—An act of “endorsement,” a “pronouncement in favor,” by one body in the Labor Movement towards another on such matters, is an act of SELF-JUSTIFICATION. It is an act, not so much of approval for the benefit of the other, as it is an ATTESTATION OF THE APPROVER'S OWN TITLE TO A PLACE IN THE CAMP OF THE MILITANT PROLETARIAT. Now, then, when the Union, that the Manifesto justifies the expectation of seeing issue from the Chicago convention, is actually and finally born in the land, then the fact will be an evidence that the Labor Movement of America has reached that ripeness when, no longer the economic must justify itself to the political, but THE POLITICAL MUST JUSTIFY ITSELF TO THE ECONOMIC BRANCH OF THE MOVEMENT. It will be the evidence of the accomplishment, in the womb of the Movement, of a revolution akin to that which takes place in the mother's womb at about the seventh month of gestation, when the fetus, until then feet down, is by the law of gravitation turned

around, head down, preparatorily to that next and final revolution that consists in birth. A Union such as America demands, will rather be the bar before which political organizations, that claim to be of Labor, will be summoned to justify THEIR existence;—nor will such a Union's decree in the matter be of doubtful weight; it is the only guarantee imaginable in political America against the decoy-duck political parties of Labor that everybody knows one capitalist party has periodically set up against the other: it is the only guarantee against the ever threatening danger of the centrifugal force, that may cause the non-wage-slave element—which will inevitably crowd into the political branch of the Labor Movement—to yield to the ambitious and self-seeking designs that they bring along with them from their class, and split into rival political factions: it is the only guarantee for a united political vanguard of Labor. In short, the crude days when the S.T.&L.A. was compelled to make the demonstration of endorsing a political party will be past. Thenceforth it will be the political branch of the Movement that will be called upon to pronounce itself clearly, and by its pronouncement attest its title to the post of trust as the vanguard of the Labor Movement, or stand branded and collapse.

That this theory is founded upon experience may be gathered from two salient facts:—for one thing, the S.L.P., hounded and traduced by the Labor-lieutenants of the Capitalist Class from one end of the country to the other, has proved itself indestructible, even in point of votes, and its unterrified press—the largest of any in the political field, larger, in fact, than all the others put together—has continued its work with unabated, aye, with increasing effectiveness; for the other, the S.P., while denying the principle that a political organization, which claims to be of Socialism, is a reflex of some kind of economic organization, has been forced to render homage to the principle by seeking, however unsuccessfully, to conceal its Civic-Federated A.F. of L. material foundation, and is now seen crumbling together with its base.

If the Union, which, it is to be expected, will be born at Chicago next June, is the ripened Union that the American Labor Movement demands, it will be thoroughly alive to the responsibility of its body towards the Labor Movement of the land. If, on the other hand, expectations are deceived, why bother about the

“endorsement”?

There is just one consideration that may be made against the idea of the S.T.&L.A. going up in a new national Union “affiliated with no political party”—always, of course, supposing that the Union that will rise in Chicago will be what the Manifesto justifies the expectation of its being. That consideration is that the S.T.&L.A. endorsement of the S.L.P. will be dropped. That consideration is, however, purely sentimental. A thousand to one, the S.P. will be dumped at Chicago. In going up in the new Union, the A.L.U. does dump the S.P., alias S.D.P., alias P.O.P. In fact, it has dumped the thing already, by again and again pronouncing it a “scab-herding” concern, and proving the charge. It is otherwise with the S.L.P. and the S.T.&L.A. Never did the S.L.P. give the S.T.&L.A. cause for any such charge; never was any such charge made by it. By going up in the expected new Union, “without affiliation with any political party,” the S.T.&L.A. element does not dump the S.L.P.; it preserves for the S.L.P. all its respect, admiration and enthusiasm; it simply joins the revolution that I have pointed out above as indicative of a long step forward in the Labor Movement of the land.

These are my views in the matter; I have expressed them fully, and I hope clearly. Should they be substantially yours, I shall feel proud to receive your mandate as a member of your delegation to the Chicago convention. If, however, in any important respect, your views differ from mine, then I must request you, in justice to myself and to you, to drop me from the list of candidates.

Yours fraternally,

DANIEL DE LEON.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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