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# **Open Letter to the Conference Called by the Authorized Committee of the 16 Standard Railroad Labor Organizations from the Central Executive Committee of the Workers Party of America.**

**[c. Feb. 20, 1922]**

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To the Conference Called by the Authorized Committee of the 16 Standard Railroad Labor Organizations for February 20th, at Masonic Temple, Chicago, Ill.

The men and women of this country whose power to labor is their only dependence for a livelihood, and who at the same time are conscious of the social significance of their position, must hear with keen interest a call issued by representatives of 25 hundred thousand organized workers. More especially must this be true at a time when 6 million of us have been thrust into the desperate position of being deprived of the right to labor, by which alone we can live, and when the call declared its purpose to be the solution of this terrible problem, among others.

The signers of the call are all, as heads of great labor unions, sworn to defend the interests of the workers. This fact must be considered in connection with all that we say in this letter.

We remind you that the human liberties that the courts have construed out of existence are not the rights of the men of business, holders of capital. Bankers, stock traders, and railroad owners have suffered no appreciable loss of liberties in recent times. The kind of rights that the courts have sacrificed have been without exception the rights of the propertyless masses — those who live by labor. There has been a deadly progression by which the elementary and life-enabling rights of the working masses have disappeared. He would be blind who could not see that an organized

offensive, participated in as a whole by the class that lives by exploiting labor, is now and has been for many months advancing in an unwavering drive to exterminate the last of those rights of workers, which are the flickering light in this so-called civilization based upon exploitation of labor.

Out of the nightmare of crime in which the capitalist rulers of the world have killed and mutilated 30 million men in seeking gain to their narrow class, there has emerged but one constructive act, the only one bearing a promise for the future of the race, and that was an act of Labor — the establishment of a Workers' Republic in Russia. Elsewhere it has been Labor, and Labor alone, that has stood guard and fought for what human rights remain. Wherever the Labor front has been broken, disaster to the human race has resulted.

The tragic history of the years from 1914 constitutes a cry for the consolidation of the toiling masses as such — as distinguished sharply from the class which has ruled and ruined.

In America, where all Capital is in concerted action, while the forces of Labor are chaotically divided and consequently suffering a bewildering succession of defeats, a conference called by representatives of 16 great Labor Organizations cannot leave its meeting place with a claim to the rudiments of decency, unless it boldly does all in its power to unite Labor in a single front. In the face of the painfully obvious union of all Chambers of Commerce, Employers' Associations, businessmen's committees for

“enforcing wage awards” — all this veritable Ku Klux Klan of Capitalism — we hold that it would be nothing short of criminal betrayal of the working class to suggest that the condition can be met by any instrument less than a complete mobilization of all of Labor, industrially and politically.

These reasons impel us to address a conference initiated in the name of Labor.

The **Workers Party of America** is a revolutionary political party of the working class. We do not believe that the social or political maladjustments can be remedied by mere reforms in the manner of exploiting Labor, but only by the complete abolition of the system of Labor exploitation. We believe that this can only be done with revolutionary struggle, through the establishment of the Workers’ Republic. In regard to this goal and this method, we have no compromises to offer and no illusions of any willingness of those who initiated this Conference to compromise in our direction.

But there are necessary to the continued life of millions of workers certain simple steps about which there can be no sincere disagreement among partisans of the toiling masses. Nor can any sincere member of the ranks of Labor willingly lessen the number of those fighting together for those needs.

We suggest by way of illustration:

Nationwide action to break the Open Shop Drive.

A nationally organized counteroffensive to break the wage-cutting campaign.

To compel the protection of the unemployed on the basis of the right to labor, and the union standard of compensation out of the National military and naval budgets.

To prevent the enactment or enforcement of “industrial court laws” in any part of the country.

To defend and secure the right of Labor to organize, to strike, and to picket.

Large national credit to working farmers and absolute prevention of foreclosures upon their farms.

Release of political prisoners, including all workers imprisoned as a result of any phase of the labor struggle.

To stop the deporting of workers because of their views of the labor struggle or activity in it.

Such points furnish a common ground upon

which every Labor union and every political party of the workers can fight together, if not prevented from doing so by treacherous misleading. Beyond such immediate measures each union or party would assume no responsibility for the programs or policies of the others. Each would retain its individual program and the right to criticize the policies, principles, and tactics of the others.

Upon what line must such a fighting front be formed? Upon the line which divides the toiling masses from those who exploit them. Labor’s political and industrial cooperation with employers, with Chambers of Commerce, with corporations, or with the petty professional hangers-on and dependents of these elements, will not conduce to the freeing of Labor. There is nothing in common between such elements and the workers upon whose Labor they thrive.

Who are the “progressives” that you speak of? Who can be relied upon to fight to *progress* out of this slave-pen of misery and decay? Only those who SUFFER by misery and decay — the toilers themselves, of the city and farm. No other class is directly interested in banishing the misery and decay. Those who would form a “front of Labor” together with sections of the privileged classes are making sure that no privileges will be abolished.

Only with the toilers of the farm — with the farm laborer and the rent-ridden, mortgage-ridden small farmer — can the working class strike hands. The past few years prove beyond dispute of any man that the working masses of the farms and those of the cities depend upon each other. More and more the small farmers — the “dirt farmers” — are being driven to ruin. Today the plains and valleys of this country are dotted with a multitude of tragedies, of farm families, once sturdy and independent, now broken and desperate serfs, toiling as hopelessly as field animals for the enrichment of farm mortgage holders and grain speculators.

Cooperation with wealthy landlords and the mortgage holding capitalists, grain traders, and the multitude of petty parasites that serve them in politics, will not free the poor farmer. He can only find refuge in an alliance with the great mass of wage labor. With him the line of struggle can be formed.

No shapeless mixture of a few labor leaders with comfortable, propertied “liberals” can solve the prob-

lems of the comfortless millions. To grow dynamic power, the Labor mass must organize within its boundaries. To build upon any other outline is to build a shapeless mass without [organizable] qualities and incapable of action or of growth. A social power can be mobilized only by a great common economic need. The course of History itself has marked sharp and clear the line which must delineate the larger instrument that will free the toiling masses. That line is drawn between the toiling masses and their exploiters. It is the line of the class struggle. It is the natural line of organic structure. Divisions within the workers' ranks can be wiped out by boldly clearing the outlines of a class made organic by common need.

He who obscures this line of structure confuses, paralyzes, and defeats the workers. It is to accomplish this defeat that every Chamber of Commerce and their harlot newspapers scream "NO!" whenever anyone speaks of the workers as a "class." Labor leaders such as you have a heavy guilt in this matter. They have led the workers to hope for benefit through political instruments made up of themselves with their enemies. The result is the chaos of disaster which we all see, and of which the labor leaders who called this conference complain.

Now as spokesmen for Labor, you have called a conference avowing the purpose of finding a way out of the disaster. Will you again obscure the line of fundamental division between Labor and its exploiters? Will you again deny the class struggle? Will you issue another puny call for Labor to "punish its enemies and reward its friends (among the agents of privilege)?"

Or will you advocate that Labor form a united political and industrial front and support none but its own representatives, responsible to Labor alone?

The labor unions most prominently represented here have need enough for an economic front. We remember incidents a plenty in the past two years of railroad strikes deliberately broken by leaders, union officials calling through the capitalist press for strike-breakers and colluding openly with police and grand juries to punish striking members of their own unions with those same "oppressive laws" of which you complain.

If politeness to some of the participants of this conference will permit it, we recall that Alexander Howat was deserted in jail and the mine workers of

Kansas betrayed to the Kansas "Industrial Court Law" — the most loathesome of all the "oppressive laws" which you say you come to remedy. This partly accounts for the low degree of expectation that we have of results from this conference.

This conference cannot form a united front for the working class. Only the great mass of Labor itself can do that. Not a few leaders slipping into a room privately "to fix things up," but only a general Labor Congress of delegates elected for the specific purpose by the workers, can create a front that will endure and fight.

But if this conference has a character in keeping with the fact that it was called in the name of two and a half million railroad workers, then it could bring about such a Labor Congress by advocating it. The "fundamental economic principles" that can solve the problems of the misery of the masses can easily be found by eyes that have the courage to see in the glaring light of the present crisis. In fact, they are too easy to see. Labor leaders and "liberals" who see them usually turn to flee in terror.

Your choice is narrow. If you have the courage, you call upon the workers as a class to close their ranks and fight for themselves. If you have not the courage, then turn and run back to the cowardly device of dividing and betraying the workers — recommending that they trust themselves to be saved by those that are destroying them. Tell them again to trust themselves to the Laddises, the Wilsons, the Palmers, the Hardings, and William J. Burns, whose collective name is Elbert H. Gary. The capitalist press will praise you for it.

The capitalist rulers of all countries, equally guilty in the world orgy of killing, have destroyed or disjointed the instruments of production to the extent that 6 million workers in this country are thrown out of industry, workless, hopeless, and ignored. What can you do for them in this "conference of progressives?"

"God knows?"....

Nothing can be done for the unemployed by this conference, because this conference could not dare to do the necessary things. The necessary measures for the unemployed poor would be dangerous to the unemployed rich. We do not believe that you would advocate that. During 1918, billions of dollars were

poured out of the United States treasury without hesitation, supporting many millions enrolled in the army or engaged in producing materials for war. Would you dare to demand that such amounts as were spent (with your consent) for killing men in 1918, be spent in preserving the lives and welfare of workless Americans in 1922? Or are there more taxpayers than starving workers in your conference?

Would you dare demand that aid be given the unemployed workers in the full measure of union-standard wages? Would you call for that aid from the Army and Navy appropriations, to be administered through the unions themselves? Or, if fearful of what the workers would do with such power, do you prefer putting such power into the hands of the political agencies that are now reducing Labor to the lowest degree possible?

Will you demand that public works be begun at union wages, under the management of the unions, at the expense of the national treasury, with the day of labor shortened to make room for all unemployed? Or do you tremble at such a “destructive” manner of helping hungry workers?

Nothing is clearer than that such practices would be destructive to the interests of the wealthy classes. None is readier than we to admit the interests of the comfortable classes are *irreconcilable* with the interests of the working class.

A “fundamental economic principle” which your conference cannot escape is that you cannot help the workers without injuring the comfortable classes. The “social and political maladjustments” which you express a desire to remedy have a purpose. They cannot seriously be touched without undermining the system of wage-labor exploitation in such a dangerous manner as may lead to its overthrow.

Of the ultimate method of the abolition of the system of labor exploitation, we say nothing here. We say nothing here as to what the ultimate form of this struggle is, but no man experienced in strikes, even if he casts no glance at West Virginia, can fail to know to what lengths it inevitably goes. To the lengths short of which the Labor struggle cannot be confined, the gentleman and lady progressives cannot progress. They

should not be asked to start.

Is it not clear that in Labor’s struggle no element of the wealthy classes can be relied upon — and especially no political parties that are instruments of the business class, or in any way acceptable to any portion of that class? Labor has been divided and betrayed in the past by its “leaders” trading, buying, and begging of a “superior class” that knows how to organize its own united front and how to prevent the workers organizing theirs. No more bargains between labor leaders and Labor’s enemies! No more strikebreaking by collusion of labor leaders with police and other governmental flunkies of the employers! *And no more fusion with employers’ political parties!*

We call for a United Front of Labor, politically and industrially. We confine the matter to the undeniable first requisites for ANY sort of functioning of the labor mass. Upon such immediate needs, we call for all political parties of the working class and all labor unions to fight together in this crisis.

Defend the unemployed from hunger; defend the workers’ organizations from destruction; defend the toilers from being abused into more miserable slavery — do it at the EXPENSE of the wealthy class’ interests.

Or, confuse, divide, and betray the workers, to protect the system of labor exploitation.

We speak only to such Labor elements as may find themselves in this “Conference of Progressives.” We ask this conference, if it has a character not entirely disgracing the 25 hundred thousand railroad workers in whose name it was called, to move for a general Labor Congress to be elected by the rank and file to consider these problems.

For a United Labor Front,

Central Executive Committee,  
Workers Party of America.

James P. Cannon, Chairman.

Caleb Harrison, Secretary.

***Edited by Tim Davenport.***

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