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# The Failure to Attain Socialist Unity

by Frank Bohn

Published in *The International Socialist Review* [Chicago], v. 8, no. 12 (June 1908), pp. 752-755.

The unity of the Socialist movement should undoubtedly have been attained in 1901. Failure to secure the desired end by all of the then existing factions was due to a wrong position taken by some comrades, who will now pretty generally admit their error. There is no doubt, of course, that selfish conceit had no small part to play in the matter. The error was that each element in the Socialist movement of a nation should have a separate organization and oppose one another openly before the working class. This position, long felt to be wrong by those of the Socialist Labor Party who were active in the IWW, has finally been officially surrendered by that party. But every argument which can be massed for unity today was just as weighty in 1901.

The tactical position of the SLP on the political field since the convention of 1900 has been correct. This I have never heard disputed by members of the Socialist Party whose opinions carry weight among the thoughtful and well-informed. Whatever may be required by the peculiar exigencies of the movement in the various European countries, in America the revolutionary argument cannot safely be diluted by even a thimble full of compromise. I shall not take time to go over arguments pro and con which have been printed in *The [International Socialist] Review* 39 times. Why then the egregious failure of the Socialist Labor Party in its efforts to build up an organization?

It failed, first, because it attempted to sever the veteran revolutionary element from the forces which were developing to that position. Nor is this all. It strove to draw about itself the veil of absolute sanctity. It was supposed by certain of its leaders to have attained what the Salvation Army calls "Holiness"; therefore it durst not hold conversation with the unclean; therefore it refused to so far trust the working class' mind as to

risk its fundamentally correct principles in the rough and tumble of a united movement. The scientific truths at the bottom of the revolutionary upswing were made over into the mumbled litany of a sectarian clique. And thus Truth lost its beauty and saving power.

The SLP failed, second, because of its wrong methods of propaganda and organization. Men and women who will develop into revolutionists worthwhile to the movement are sure to demand respect and decent treatment from their teachers while they are learning. This consideration the honest utopians and reformers in the movement (and all of us were such) have never received from *The People*, by which the work of the SLP is ever judged. There may be countries (parts of South America, perhaps) where political revolutions are furthered by going after recruits with a sugarcane knife. But so far as I have been enabled to experience, the proletariat of North America is more impressed by other and more elevated methods of propaganda.

The pity of it all is that the revolutionary argument itself has often and wrongfully been made to bear the brunt of the opposition to wrong methods. Economic science and larger political forces should be considered apart from the manners of an individual or the peculiar methods of a group who are setting forth weighty arguments. And the revolutionary standpoint has suffered most severely in America because of the blunders, conceit, and malignity of some who have stood as its chief exponents before the public. This stigma must be removed. Its advocates must henceforth be most guarded in statement and accurately just in their estimates of those comrades who differ with them. Nine-tenths of the unclearness in the American movement has been due to mud-spattering.

**The Parable of the Field.**

Once upon a time a party of working people were making their way West to the free lands which there waited them. After much wandering they came to a great field which had been allotted them. The party included the wise and the foolish, the strong and the weak, the just and the unjust. The field before them contained forest and swamp, gentle plain and rocky hillside. The people fell to arguing as to how the land might best be reclaimed and homes built.

Now the argument was all well enough. In fact, it was most necessary. The party contained no all-wise prophet. By quiet discussion, only, could they resolve upon a plan and proceed with their labors, for the season was already far advanced.

Unfortunately the party became divided. The smaller group, whose councils were undoubtedly the wisest, laid hold of a high, dry parcel of land and tilled intensely. This group contained quite a number of strong, enthusiastic men, a quack doctor with a retinue of servants, a lady of the sewing circle, and a couple of half-witted fellows — perhaps a dozen in all. The larger group included all the others — every variety of intellect and character being represented, all desirous, however, of having a home in the wilderness.

While the active men of the smaller group were planting corn, the quack doctor and his servants busied themselves in building a high, tight board fence about their land. This fence not only separated them from their brethren of the other party, but kept out the sun's light and warmth. When the corn began to sprout the wise one pulled up some of it and planted a variety of seeds, which were to produce the cures. These he needed in his trade; various homely nostrums and pennyroyal and sage.

"Damn your nostrums," said the young men; "we want corn." The lady of the sewing circle was writing long letters East relating how nice the old doctor was. The half-witted fellows lay under a tree, making mud balls and throwing them over the fence at those outside.

And then the rain fell and the crops waxed high. And lo, it was seen that along with the harmless quack-nostrums the doctor had planted, nettles and poison ivy. The young men looked at each other and took counsel. The lady of the sewing circle, deep in the

shadow of the fence, was writing poems to the doctor. The half-witted fellows were sick and nigh unto death, but knew it not.

"Let us throw down this fence and be united to our brethren," said the young men.

"Disturb us not with your alterations," muttered the imbeciles. "Let us groan in peace." The doctor's servants, as ever before, stood ready to obey him.

"Where he goeth, I shall go," repeated solemnly the lady of the sewing circle, pointing to the quack; "his people shall be my people, and his God, my God."

"I am agreed," said the quack, as he shrewdly eyed the young men, "to throw down the fence. But they that are without must promise to leave us our corn and me my sacred plants. For in my medicines alone is there salvation from the ills which afflict us."

"Anything to please him," said the young men. "What we wish is to smash the fence, that we may labor in harmony and fellowship with our brethren who are without. We have planted corn and they have cleared much new land and drained swamps. Why should we be divided? Life here is unprofitable and unbearable. (For the imbeciles were dying, one by one, and the stench of their pollution filled the air.) Let him have his nostrums. The nettles and poison ivy have not struck root sufficient to live through the heat of summer."

But the many without would promise nothing. "Throw down the fence," said they, "and join us. You will be welcome. We shall all take counsel latter and decide about the corn as well as about the nostrums and nettles."

But the old quack's tongue was like unto the tongue of an adder. He crawled far into the poison ivy. Thither followed his servants, the lady of the sewing circle, and what were left of the imbeciles. They all sat there in gloom, and no one heard of them more. But those who were sound in mind and body picked a hole in the fence and joined their brethren on the outside, taking with them their corn which they had gathered.

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The Socialist Labor Party, some years ago, was the only effective revolutionary force in America. It has now become a veritable millstone about the neck

of the principle which it (judging from its official organ [*The People*]) claims to monopolize. Those of its members, whose hopes for the future of the movement outweigh their regrets for the past, will surely refuse longer to support an organization which is being used for purely negative and destructive purposes. One consideration alone has given IWW men in the SLP cause for sustaining it during the past 3 years. That consideration was expected unity. It was hoped that unity might be secured in such a way as to place IWW men upon at least an equal footing with their opponents in the united party. But the current events are showing what a drag upon the IWW the SLP is proving itself to be.

The Socialist Party is not what we might desire. It would have been all that the clearest and most ardent revolutionist might have hoped for, had the whole revolutionary element united to form it in 1901 and learned to use decent and educational methods in propagating their correct principles. A developing class-conscious proletariat will yet make it what it ought to be — the political organization of a class which is as firmly united industrially as political.

For each of the two essential working class organizations must be independent and supreme in its own field. The only “shadow” that the silly “shadow” theory has been the disordered theory itself.

In the IWW we who uphold political action find no difficulty in working with those who do not. On the political field we industrialists can surely labor with equal success beside those who do not realize the efficiency and the ultimate revolutionary purpose of industrial unionism. For these reasons members of the IWW who favor political action should support the Socialist Party.

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