

The Industrial Workers of the World: The Convention and Its Work (July 29, 1905)

A few words in regard to the new industrial union recently organized in Chicago may be of interest to the readers of *The Socialist*, especially since the capitalist press reports designedly played fast and loose with the convention and made special efforts to have it appear ridiculous and contemptible.

It is worthy of remark that the Chicago dailies rallied about the American Federation of Labor as loyally as if they had been its own official organs, and in the name of "organized labor" these capitalist mouthpieces poured their venom upon the industrial convention, misrepresented its mission, and lied outright about its personnel and proceedings. I state this fact not merely because of its obvious significance, but because these organs, during the Teamsters' strike, howled incessantly about the corruption of organized labor, the depravity of its leaders, and the barbarity of its methods, as if these talking tools of the capitalists wanted a clean labor movement. On occasion, when it suits their interest, they decry pure and simple trade unionism, but let there be an honest effort to unite the workers in a clean movement, and presto! these same organs rally round these same old unions and scrupulously guard them as their own precious charge, well knowing that a clean labor movement means death to the capitalist system and that the salvation of the capitalist class depends literally upon a rotten labor movement.

This preliminary statement will account for the uniform hostility of the capitalist dailies to the industrial convention and for the instructions that were issued to the reporters to "knock" it from start to finish.

In the thirty years I have been connected with organized labor I have never attended a more representative gathering of the working class. It was in the true sense a proletarian parliament, class-consciousness being the distinguishing characteristic of the body.

In all the convention there was not, so far as could be observed, a single delegate who sought office, or any personal favor whatsoever. If there was a self-seeker in the delegation I failed to see him.

The proceedings were marked with all the severities of debate, but at no time were the bounds of propriety exceeded; and although the delegates were intensely in earnest, they accorded each other the fullest privilege of being respectfully heard from the opening to the close of the proceedings.¹

It is quite true that the results of the convention are subject to criticism; that the objects of the meeting were not fully and perfectly carried out; but there is reason for this and it can be easily explained. The delegates who composed the convention did not meet upon the same uniform footing as is the case with other conventions; some represented organizations with full power to act, some with limited powers, some with instructions to report back, while others represented themselves only, and under such circumstances it was not to be expected that the work of organizing a full-fledged industrial union could be carried out according to the general plan and in detail, and the most that could be reasonably expected was that a provisional plan of united action could be adopted and a clean beginning made in the right direction, and this much was accomplished beyond all doubt, and in May next another convention will be held, more largely attended to complete the work and furnish the new organization its full equipment for its great mission.

The need for a great, sound economic organization of the working class, industrial in form and expressing the class struggle, is urgently felt in this country. The political movement depends largely upon it and I cannot conceive that the political movement could ever develop great strength without it. This, I think, is pretty generally conceded, but there is considerable difference of opinion as to whether our comrades should stick to the old unions and "reform" them, or join the new organization. Needless to say that I take the latter view. The comrades who still support the old unions are honest, no doubt, but they are mistaken in supposing that they can convert the old unions into new agencies in the interest of the working class. The capitalists have gotten hold of the old unions and will never relax their grasp on them. The comrades who imagine they can change these unions from within had just as well remained in the Populist, or Democratic, or Republican parties, expecting to change them from within, instead of pulling out and organizing a new party to accomplish a new mission.

Some of the criticisms upon the comrades who have joined the new organization prompt me to put it upon record that the Socialist Party is not in any way, directly or indirectly, committed to the American Federation of Labor; and there is nothing compared in the party

resolutions which prevents a member from joining any trade union which he may see fit; so that certain comrades have as good a right, from the standpoint of the Socialist Party, to join the Industrial Workers as certain others have to be in the American Federation of Labor.

With these differences the party, as a party, has nothing to do and if they are brought into the party to the detriment of the party it will be simply because certain comrades are officiously intend upon controlling the trade union action of certain other comrades.

To me it seems not only impossible but absurd to expect the American Federation of Labor, under its capitalistic Civic Federation supervision, to turn itself inside out, as certain of our comrades expect it will do in the course of a few years or centuries, but I do not in the least question their right to stick to the old unions. If the old unions suit them, well and good; they don't suit me, and what I claim is that I have as good a right to join a trade union that suits me as they have to join one that suits them.

When it comes to the charge of "splitting" the trade union movement, there is something so silly and stupid about it in the light of existing facts that it seems nothing less than idiotic. The Teamsters' strike in Chicago has just collapsed as the result of a "split" in the pure and simple movement, which is made up of "splits" and could not exist if the workers were really united, as they ought to be, and as they will be in spite of those who are dividing them while charging those who are seeking actually to unite them as splitters of the union labor movement.

Look at Chicago today. The American Federation of Labor has had almost complete jurisdiction and what does it consist of but a mass of snarling "autonomists" and slugging factions?

Under the old regime every handful of men that are ground through the hopper of industrial evolution must have a separate union, separate jurisdiction, and above all, and most important of all, a separate set of "grand" or "supreme" officers, of whom there is an army and to whose personal interest it is to keep the workers divided into innumerable petty factions, looking to and depending upon their "leaders" to keep the wolf from the fold.

An old backwoods preacher, in a moment of perfect candor, said to his flock: "I am your shepherd and ye are my mutton."

The working class are going to unite, economically and politically, for their emancipation. A united, class-conscious working class on the economic field has long been needed — needed by the workers, needed by the Socialist Party, and needed, above all, as an essential part of the

labor movement; and the Industrial Workers is now in the field and progressive unionists are rallying to its standard, and with the splendid start that has been made and the thousands of tried and true class-conscious workers already enrolled, there is not the least doubt but that the late convention will prove an historic one and that the new organization, with all the opposition that can be marshaled against it, will march steadily to the front and hew out its way to success.

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¹ An editorial note in *The Socialist*, probably by editor William Mailly, declares: "We must disagree with Comrade Debs's statement that the delegates to the recent convention 'accorded each other the fullest privilege of being respectfully heard from the opening to the close of the proceedings.' As Comrade Debs was absent from the convention part of the time he may not have been aware of the disgraceful treatment accorded [A.M.] Simons and [James] Murtaugh when they attempted to express their views, although in all justice it must also be said that those mostly responsible for this were the delegates who clustered around Mr. DeLeon. These gentry showed that they had not been chastened by the cleansing fire of industrial unity through which they had just passed."