

Organized Labor's New Turn to Politics (August 9, 1908)

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In their platform declarations and campaign methods the dominant political parties concede the tremendous political power of organized labor. But this power is latent, and has never yet produced any really important result for the benefit of workingmen as a class; much less has it been effective in shaping any of our great principles or policies of government. There is a very good reason for this non-effectiveness of the so-called labor vote. And there is also a good reason, one that is rooted deep in the salient facts of our wonderful industrial development, why the power of organized labor to produce political results for its own benefit must be reckoned with from this time forth.

That the economic interests of labor and capital are identical is an argument that has controlled the political course of labor for many years. In this belief the workingman has voted for the political party favored by his employer on the theory that what was good for his employer must necessarily be good for him also. Recent developments in the industrial world have cast doubt upon the correctness of this theory and cause workingmen to become somewhat suspicious of it.

Since the campaign of 1876 the vote of organized labor has been pretty evenly divided between the Republican and Democratic parties, except that four, eight, and twelve years ago the railroad employees most generally voted the Republican ticket, because that was the course dictated by their employers and they believed their economic interests lay in that direction. This year will mark a decided change. Through the activity of such organizations as the manufacturers' association and the zealous and unremitting war of such leaders as Van Cleave, Parry, and Post upon the fundamental principles of labor unionism, a vast number of workingmen have perceived the hollow mockery of the plea that the interests of labor and capital are identical. they know that their interest lies in organization, and if the interest of capital lies in destroying their unions then the two interests cannot well be identical.

Why Labor Takes a New View

They know, too, that courts have declared their unions criminal conspiracies; they know that an attempt to boycott an unfair employer of labor has been declared illegal by the highest court in the land, and they know further that this same high court has declared that Congress has not even power to pass a law forbidding an employer of labor to boycott and blacklist a workingman simply because of his membership in a labor union. These results have been hailed with shouts of satisfaction by the capitalists, which joyful attitude on the part of their employers workingmen cannot reconcile with the theory that the interests of labor and capital are identical.

Also, when the representatives of organized labor, smarting under the injuries inflicted upon their unions by the decisions of the courts, have appealed to Congress for some measure of relief through legislation they have found themselves opposed by a vigorous and successful capitalist lobby and their pleas for justice treated with contempt. Again this attitude cannot be made to fit in with the theory that the interests of labor and capital are identical.

Therefore workingmen have been forced to develop what our strenuous president denominates "that evil thing which is called class consciousness." Finding themselves shut out from those methods of economic relief with which they are familiar, they naturally turn to politics. They feel the necessity of controlling the government and the lawmaking power, just as the capitalists now do, in order that their interests may be protected.

Labor Forced to Act

Never before in the entire history of trade unionism has a leader representing the whole field of organized labor, as does Mr. Gompers, boldly and publicly advised workingmen to vote for a particular political party. Such advice is contrary to one of the most sacred traditions of organized labor, namely, "we must keep politics out of the unions." This is an important and highly significant phase in the development of that "class consciousness" which Mr. Roosevelt contemplates with such holy horror, and of which the *Washington Post* says editorially, "It would be difficult to conceive a greater calamity that could overtake labor than its entry into the field of politics as a class." What these superficial observers fail to

perceive is that labor can do nothing else. Labor did not create the issue. It has been forced upon workingmen by industrial development, and they must accept it willy-nilly.

What is to be the effect of Mr. Gompers's pronouncement? First and foremost it will bend to the political solidarity of the working class. It cannot be expected that the vote of organized labor will be delivered solidly to the Democratic Party simply because Mr. Gompers favors that party and publicly announces his preference. Indeed, it may well be doubted that his attitude will have any appreciable effect on the general result. Nevertheless, it marks an epoch in the labor movement.

Naturally this change in the attitude of organized labor will be productive of some political surprises when the votes are counted next November. The truth is, politicians are at sea. No one at this time can estimate the effect of the labor vote on the general result this fall. What is practically certain is that a large number of labor votes will be cast for the Independence Party and a surprisingly large number will be cast for the Socialist Party.

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