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# The American Labor Movement

## [A reply to Eugene Debs]

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### I.

There seems to be considerable misapprehension, especially among Socialists, in regard to the trade union movement of the United States of America, and not only in regard to the trade union movement of the Western states, as Comrade Eugene V. Debs seems to think, according to the views expressed in his article on "The Western Labor Movement" in the November [1902] issue of *The International Socialist Review*.

Many years' experience has convinced me that the relationship between trade unionism and Socialism, i.e., the attitude of the politically organized Socialists toward the Trade Union and general labor movement, is the most vital question in the American Socialist movement. The very existence of the Socialist Party depends on the solution of this question, while the Trade Union movement will be greatly benefited and strengthened and its permanent success assured by the adoption of such fundamental Socialist tactics as will guarantee the healthy cooperation between the economic and political forces of labor in the great struggle of emancipation.

It is significant to know that the Socialist movement develops in about the same manner and ration as the Trade Unions. Compare the growth in the membership of the American Federation of Labor to the growth of the Socialist vote since 1893. The AF of L had just recovered from the general reaction that followed the 8 hour movement of 1885-86, with its Haymarket and Nov. 11th tragedies. For some time the Federation membership remained almost stationary at the 100,000 mark. Today its membership is nearly 1.5 million, or, to be very conservative, at least 10 times as high as in the early '90s. The same can be said of the

Socialist movement. In 1893 the Socialist vote in the United States was less than 26,000. Today the entire Socialist vote is about 300,000. Which goes to prove that the same economic causes that produce Trade Unionism also produce Socialism. The economic truth that "Labor creates all social value" is recognized and propagated by the Socialists and Trade Unionists; and the more powerful Capitalism, the more intense the exploitation of the masses of the people, the more hopeless the prospects for better times, the more general the unrest and the desire for economic, political, and social changes, hence the more intense intellectual activity among the working class and those directly and immediately dependent on the productive labor of others. All this tends to extend and strengthen the organization and influence of *Labor*, both economic and political.

It might be claimed that the economic organization of Labor in this country was stronger in 1885-86 than in 1893. This is not correct. With equal right we could assert that the Socialist movement of 1878-80 was stronger than in 1902, because 2 or more Socialists were elected to the Chicago City Council. The fact of the matter is that the Socialist movement of 1878-80 was a straw-fire of the first Socialist enthusiasm without any backbone, a political protest of Labor against the atrocities committed by Capitalism during the great railroad strike of 1877. In 1885-86 the American proletariat, for the first time in the industrial history of Capitalism, felt the general depression and the rapidly increasing misery and poverty. According to Carroll D. Wright's first annual report, that appeared in 1886, the number of unemployed had increased to over 1 million.

What was to be done? Reduction of the hours of

labor! "Eight hours!" soon became the general demand of organized Labor. After less than 6 months of agitation and organization on the part of a small number of American pioneer Trade Unionists and German-speaking Socialists this country witnessed one of the most wonderful proletarian uprisings in the history of the international labor movement. From those days on, the Trade Union movement became an important factor in the industrial and social development of this country.

Here is, in short, the historical recapitulation: The emancipation of the chattel slaves increased the desperate competition on the "free labor market." The new civil war began. While the capitalist tried to buy the commodity, labor, as cheap as possible, the wage-worker, in order to sustain life, had to demand as high a price for his labor-power as possible. These diametrically opposed class interests cause considerable friction, and soon a lively fight was begun. Seeing that the individual wage-worker was a mere straw in the wind when it came to the question of resisting the encroachments of Capitalism, the workmen united into unions — local, national, and international unions — and Knights of Labor assemblies. The capitalists lost no opportunity to reduce the wages the lengthen the daily working time of their employees. Wherever human labor-power did not realize the desired rate of profit for the employer, new labor-saving machinery was introduced, thousands of men being forced out of work. Women and children were hired to do the machine work, because they worked for considerably less wages. The conditions of the wealth-producing people grew worse from day to day, and this state of affairs caused general alarm. The workmen demanded higher wages and shorter hours of labor. While certain trade unions had existed many years before the Civil War broke out, and while efforts were made by these trade unions to better the condition of their members, it must be borne in mind that the modern labor movement, the struggle between Capitalism and Labor did not amount to much until 1885 and 1886, when the general 8-hour movement was inaugurated; i.e., the movement for a general reduction of the hours of labor.

The capitalist class had never dreamed of the possibilities of such a movement. Indeed, the movement was a surprise to them, and many granted the

demands of their employees out of sheer fear of an impending social revolution. However, the enemies of Labor were not resting on their oars; they soon organized for "self-defense and resistance." The struggle between Organized Labor and Organized Capitalism was on.

The Order of the K of L went out of existence; it had fulfilled its historical mission by demonstrating the power and solidarity of Labor. The K of L went down, not because Powderly was a demagogue, not because Sovereign was a capitalist politician, not because Professor DeLeon tried to use the "remnants" to mend the SLP coat, but because the very form of the K of L organization was not adapted to the modern forms of warfare in the proletarian class struggle.

## II.

The attitude of the Socialists towards the Trade Union movement during the last 15 years furnishes a most interesting subject for the student of the American labor movement. It is a fact that the old German Socialists, most of whom were compelled to leave their country, their homes, their relatives and friends under the Bismarckian Anti-Socialist laws, became the most active pioneers of American Trade Unionism. Hundreds and thousands of unions were organized by and through them.

When, after the Haymarket tragedy in Chicago, May 4, 1886, the capitalists seemed to have things all their own way, when the dark wave of reaction swept all over the country, threatening to destroy every labor organization, the small pioneer band of German-American Socialists once more appeared in the deserted arena of the class struggle, appealing to the wage-workers to resist the desperate attempts to crush Organized Labor, by organizing an independent political labor movement. This appeal was heeded. In the various parts of the country Union Labor Parties were organized and thousands of votes cast for independent labor candidates. In New York 67,000 votes were polled for Henry George, and the capitalist politicians were frightened like little children overtaken by a severe thunderstorm. "Labor laws" by the bushel were passed by the different state legislatures and city councils and everything possible was done to check this independent political labor movement. Labor leaders were pro-

vided with political jobs, thereby mortgaging themselves, body and soul, to the old capitalist parties. Democratic and Republican politicians tried to get control over the local central labor unions, and the struggles the Socialists had to get these elements out and force them to the rear are of historical significance and importance.

In 1890 the Socialists of Germany polled about 1 million votes, thereby putting an end to the political life of the Iron Chancellor, Prince Bismarck, the originator of the anti-Socialist laws. This tremendous Socialist vote surprised the entire civilized world, and, naturally enough, the Socialist movement in this country, being almost exclusively German up to but a few years ago, could not escape the influence of this great Socialist victory in the old country. The Socialist Labor Party decided to become an active political party and nominate straight Socialist tickets wherever possible. In 1892 the first Presidential candidate on a strictly Socialist ticket was put in the field and 21,512 votes were cast for the same.

As already mentioned, the Socialist movement of this country was almost exclusively a German-speaking movement, and with the exception of Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco there were almost no native American elements active in or for the Socialist Party. The conditions for a truly American Socialist movement were not yet ripe, and if a hundred silver-tongued Socialist agitators would have preached the doctrines of Socialism it would not have changed the political situation very much. In 1892 the great strike in Homestead, Pa., broke out; 10,000 state militiamen were called to arms to break this labor insurrection, after the Pinkerton hordes had been almost annihilated during the memorable battle on the banks of the Monongahela River. A decade of the capitalist reign of terror began. In Buffalo, Cripple Creek, Coeur d'Alene, Brooklyn, Tonawanda, Chicago (Pullman), Cleveland, St. Louis, and other cities the militia, federal troops, police, and deputy sheriffs were pressed into service against the onward march of Organized Labor. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, of men went on strike for better conditions. While the capitalists were celebrating their World's Fair in Chicago [1893] thousands of unemployed were holding meetings on the highways and byways all over the country and soon hungry, suffering American prole-

tarians were marching from the Pacific coast, "On to Washington!" singing Hamlin Garland's labor hymn:

We have seen the reaper toiling in the heat of summer sun,  
We have seen the children needy when the harvesting is done;  
We have seen a mighty army dying helpless one by one,  
While their flag went marching on.

Oh, the army of the wretched, how they swarm the city street,  
We have seen them in the midnight, where the Goths and  
Vandals meet;  
We had shuddered in the darkness at the noise of their feet,  
But their cause goes marching on.

But no longer shall the children bend above the whizzing wheel,  
We will free the weary women from their bondage under steel,  
In the mines and in the forest, worn and helpless, men shall  
feel  
His cause is marching on.

Meanwhile the capitalist system of production developed wonderfully into pools and syndicates and trusts, and the concentration of capital went on in ever-increasing rapidity. While the wage-workers were more and more pauperized, the middle class of manufacturers and merchants were driven into bankruptcy and despair.

Under such favorable economic and social conditions it was only natural that both the Trade Unions and the Socialist movement should grow. The eyes of the intelligent working class elements were gradually opened, and no longer could the capitalist politicians scare them by waving the red flag in the bull's face and by wrongfully denouncing the Socialists as the enemies of "our stars and stripes."

The Spanish-American War, with its contemptible feature of "Cuban Emancipation" by the speculators in Wall Street, resulted in tearing the mast of patriotic hypocrisy off the face of our American plutocracy. This Cuban Emancipation War, followed by the "benevolently assimilating" war against the Filipinos, 10,000 miles off our shores, disclosed the imperialist secrets and desires of American Capitalism. "Our stars and stripes" were used as a means to fool the people into a patriotism of the insane and to make them fight for American capitalist expansion in Central America and in far-off East Asia. "Overproduction" at home, with thousands of working people starving, induced our industrial lords and commercial pirates to secure foreign markets, by peaceful tricks and speculations, if possible; if not, by force of arms and at the price of

hundreds of thousands of human lives and the freedom of foreign nations that had been almost unknown to us 5 years ago.

During the last 3 or 4 years the American Trade Union and the Socialist movements have doubled and trebled their membership, which may be mainly attributed to the above-pictured economic, political, and social conditions.

In view of the fact that the German-American Socialists were ever anxious to get English-speaking elements interested in their movement, it can readily be understood how men with no exceptional or extraordinary intellectual powers or ability could play the leading roles in the Socialist movement. "We must have the Americans!" "We must reach the English-speaking elements!" were the often-repeated expressions of our old German comrades. I remember the great rejoicing of our old pioneer friends when in 1889 they succeeded in securing the services of the renowned adventurer, Professor Garside, of Baltimore. Professor Dan DeLeon entered the Socialist movement (as an inheritance of the Henry George campaign) as a man of less than average intelligence; but our German comrades were anxious "to reach the English-speaking people," and so Professor DeLeon was enveiled with a cloud of supernatural gift and power, was nursed and flattered until he himself got the idea of being the personification of Socialist wisdom and the incarnation of political omnipotence.

The attitude of the Socialist Labor Party towards the Trade Union movement from 1890 to the present day has been a most unfortunate one, and we should profit by their expensive experience. While theoretically the Socialist Party adopted an entirely new policy, in reality the everyday practice of many of our party members differs but little from the SLP methods. Unfortunately there are still many Socialists who look upon the Trade Unions as a movement without any historic missionary and emancipating merits of its own, but which should be made the tail end of some Socialist political movement.

### III.

In 1891 the American Federation of Labor met in Detroit, Mich. Our New York comrades made a serious break that caused them much trouble and

finally threatened the very existence of their Socialist movement for the time. Section New York, Socialist Labor Party was represented by delegates in the New York Central labor Federation. This Federation elected Lucien Sanial as delegate to the Detroit convention of the AF of L. This caused a fight on the floor of the convention, and Thomas J. Morgan, delegate of the Chicago Trades Assembly, although no quite in accord with the New York move, fought a splendid battle in favor of Sanial's admission as a delegate. The AF of L, however, decided not to admit Sanial because he did not represent any Trade Union, but was a direct representative of a political party.

Here the trouble began. A campaign of revenge was opened against the AF of L through Section New York, admitting their mistake of being directly represented in a central trade union body, withdrew its delegates from the Central Labor Federation soon after. Messrs. DeLeon, [Hugo] Vogt, Sanial, and others continued their nefarious propaganda, and when in 1895 the AF of L convened in New York, the above-mentioned "leaders of Socialism" had their plans and schemes cut and dried; they launched a Socialist Trades & Labor Alliance on the troubled waters of the American labor movement, and the birth of this "*enfant terrible*" was celebrated in grand style and with at least a dozen times more "enthusiasm and inspiration and hopes for the dawn of proletarian emancipation" than the late Denver convention of the Western Labor or American Labor Union.

The Socialist Labor Party was almost a unit in endorsing the new union movement. In 1896 DeLeon, Sanial, and Vogt succeeded in hypnotizing and deceiving the Socialist Labor Party convention held in the city of New York and the Socialist Trades & Labor Alliance was officially endorsed. DeLeon, Sanial, and Vogt pledged their word of honor that their new union movement was not directed against the AF of L or against any of the existing labor organizations. For hours they tried to prove by statistical figures how they would get the unorganized into line, and that they had not the least intention of organizing rival unions. Poor creatures!

From that hour on the open hostilities and attacks on the American Federation of Labor began, and with this warfare of revenge and destruction on the economic field also commence the demoralization and

the suicidal work of the Socialist Labor Party itself. The ST&LA got unavoidably mixed up in fights against a number of national unions, the SLP could not escape the consequences, section after section of the party was suspended for violating the "Estiela" principles and tactics. Suspension and expulsion right and left, until Sanial expelled Vogt, and DeLeon expelled Sanial, and [Henry] Kuhn will expel DeLeon, and the dog's tail will swallow the dog itself.

These are historical facts.

In 1898 the Social Democratic Party was organized in Chicago after the secession from the Colonists. The SDP, not without considerable opposition, adopted a new policy concerning the attitude of the Socialists towards the Trade Union movement. This attitude was re-endorsed by the Indianapolis convention a year later, and in July 1901, the Unity convention [also held at Indianapolis] unanimously adopted the following declaration, determining the attitude of the Socialist Party of America towards the Trade Unions:

The Trade Union movement and independent political action are the chief emancipating factors of the wage-working class. The Trade Union movement is the natural result of capitalist production, and represents the economic side of the working class movement. We consider it the duty of Socialists to join the unions of their respective trades and assist in building up and unifying the trades and labor organizations. We recognize that trade unions are by historical necessity organized on neutral grounds, as far as political affiliation is concerned.

We call the attention of trade unionists to the fact that the class struggle so nobly waged by the trade union forces today, while it may result in lessening the exploitation of labor, can never abolish that exploitation. The exploitation of labor will only come to an end when society takes possession of all the means of production for the benefit of the people. It is the duty of every trade unionist to realize the necessity of independent political action on Socialist lines, to join the Socialist Party and assist in building up a strong political movement of the wage-working class, whose ultimate aim and object must be the abolition of wage-slavery, and the establishment of a cooperative state of society, based on the collective ownership of all the means of production and distribution.

This resolution is characteristic of our Socialist Party movement, and sharply and strikingly draws the line between the truly class-conscious Socialist movement and the misconceived, misunderstood, misinterpreted so-called class movement of DeLeonism.

#### IV.

In his article on "The Western Labor Movement" in November [1902] *International Socialist Review*, Comrade Eugene V. Debs speaks of "the lukewarm comment and the half-approving, half-condemning tone of the Socialist Party press and the uncalled for, unwise, and wholly unaccountable official pronouncement of the St. Louis 'Quorum'" in reference to the action of the Western Labor Union in favor of Socialism at its Denver convention.

Furthermore, Comrade Debs says:

Stripped of unnecessary verbiage and free from subterfuge, the Socialist Party has been placed in the attitude of turning its back upon the young, virile, class-conscious union movement of the West, and fawning at the feet of the "pure and simple" movement of the East, and this anomalous thing has been done by men who are supposed to stand sponsor to the party and whose utterance is credited with being *ex cathedra* upon party affairs.

They may congratulate themselves that upon this point at least they are in perfect accord with the capitalist press, and also with the "labor lieutenants," the henchmen, and the heelers, whose duty it is to warn the union against Socialism and guard its members against working class political action.

Having been the originator and most ardent supporter of the above-mentioned "Quorum" resolution, I feel justified in more clearly stating my position in the matter. Some Socialist papers have printed the "Quorum" resolution in full and commented on it. Others published the resolution without comment. Again, others commented or denounced the "Quorum" without publishing a line of the resolution. One comrade editor complemented the "Quorum" members as "Happy Hooligans" — but none of the socialist papers, with but one or two exceptions, saw fit to discuss the action of the "Quorum" intelligently, as it would have been their duty to do.

This showed a weak point in our party, a lack of clearness in the conception of the aims and objects of our movement.

The Western Labor Union convention endorsed Socialism and the Socialist Party.

Every Socialist applauded this action. So did the St. Louis "Quorum."

The Western Labor Union changed its name into American Labor Union and decided to extend its field of operation to the Eastern states.

My experience prevented me from applauding this second action of the convention. I do not care what the promises or arguments of the delegates were that took the above action. Whether the comrades and brothers were actuated by a spirit of resentment towards the AF of L, or by the desire to build up a Socialist trade union movement is not the question that concerns me in this case. Neither can we consider what our wishes would be. We are confronted by conditions and facts, not theories and wishes.

What are the facts?

Comrade Debs knows the Western elements, he knows their courage, their honesty, their energy, their progressive spirit. All well and good. I have no reason to disbelieve him. But what does this prove? Does it prove that the Westerners are more honest, more sincere than the Eastern wage slaves? That they are more honest and sincere than those hundreds and thousands of Socialists who assisted in the organization of the Socialist Trades & Labor Alliance?

But the conditions and facts?

The American Labor Union, if it wants to carry out its program as originally planned, will have to send its organizers East, to St. Louis, Chicago, Milwaukee, New York, Boston. Having endorsed the Socialist Party, the Socialist Party is expected to endorse the ALU and do what?

Organize ALU local unions.

Where?

In St. Louis, Chicago, Terre Haute, Milwaukee, New York, Boston, Haverhill, Brockton, and elsewhere, perhaps in the mining regions of Pennsylvania.

Next?

Nearly every trade is organized in the cities and regions named. Organized under the AF of L. Well, we organize rival ALU local unions.

What next? Will these new unions go 'way back and sit down?

No; they are anxious to expand, to grow. They will try to get new members. Where from? From the old AF of L unions.

Then they will make demands on the bosses. The demands are refused. The strike begins.

What next?

The ALU convention has endorsed Socialism; its members are supposed to be Socialist trade union-

ists. Strikers will get empty pockets, will get hungry, their families will suffer.

Will a Socialist stomach stand more hunger and contraction than the conservative miner's stomach in Pennsylvania? Will the Socialist striker's family stand the suffering and privations more patiently than the family of the conservative?

Answer, please!

There is a limit to the sphere of Trade Unionism. Keep this in your mind.

Well, our ALU will strike at the ballot box, I hear some say.

What have we got the Socialist Party for?

The fact is this: The ALU cannot expand east of the Mississippi without getting into a most disastrous fight against the AF of L.

Our Socialist Party movement cannot afford, has no right, to be dragged into a fight between two national Federations of Trade Unions.

The St. Louis "Quorum" took action on the ALU matter after it was called upon to issue an organizer's commission of the Socialist Party to a general officer and organizer of the American Labor Union, and after considerable confusion had been created amongst our comrades in various parts of the country, which goes to show that an attempt was made to drag the Socialist Party right into this trade union controversy and rivalry.

I do not speak for the "Quorum;" I express my personal opinion and accept the responsibility of what I write or speak on this question.

Would Comrade Debs go to work and organize the Terre Haute trades into ALU local unions? Certainly not. I don't recognize and "pure and simple" and "Socialist" Trade Unions, because I consider it ridiculous to make people believe that a mere pledge to a Socialist platform will make a man a Socialist or transform a conservative union overnight into a Socialist union.

Comrade Debs knows from experience that leaders, no matter how honest, good, and Socialistic they may be, cannot create a labor movement where conditions are not favorable. Sam Gompers is not the AF of L, and I must protest against the assertion that the AF of L unions have not assisted their Western brothers when in trouble. I remember one instance when the St. Louis Central Trades and Labor Union donated

the entire Labor Day picnic income, amounting to about \$700, to the striking members of the Western Miners' Union.

The Western brothers got sore at Sam Gompers and some other individuals and left the AF of L. They had a perfect right to do so. But if other radical elements had done likewise, would there be such a splendid Socialist progress among the rank and file of the AF of L as can be witnessed in every industrial center of the East?

Educate the rank and file, let them elect Socialist delegates, representing the carpenters, miners, cigarmakers, machinists, printers, etc., and you will soon get rid of leaders whom you consider detrimental to the progress of the movement.

Often, very often, have I been disappointed and discouraged in the Trade Union movement, but this is no reason why I should not continue the good work of Socialist propaganda in the movement.

I can fully understand the action of the American Labor Union, I may excuse it to a certain extent,

but I cannot endorse it, still less can I encourage the work in that direction.

Here, again, I fully agree with Comrade Debs when he says:

The party, as such, must continue to occupy this friendly yet non-interfering position, but the members may, of course, and in my judgment should join the trade unions East and West and North and South and put forth their best efforts to bring the American labor movement to its rightful position in the struggle for emancipation.

May the time soon come when these factional fights will cease and the work of the grand army of Organized Labor will be crowned with victory and success.

Comrades of the ALU, we may disagree as to tactics, but I am with you heart and soul in the glorious war for the economic freedom of Labor.

Yours for Labor and Socialism,

*G.A. Hoehn.*

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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