The Industrial Workers: The Convention and Its Work.

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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 30 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.

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 con-
siderable difference of opinion as to whether our com-
rades 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 mis-
taken 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 Demo-
cratic, 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 Fed-
eration 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 stand-
point of the Socialist Party, to join the Industrial Work-
ers as certain others have to be in the American Fed-
eration 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 control-
ing 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 Chi-
icago 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 Federa-
tion of Labor has had almost complete jurisdiction
and what does it consist of but a mass of snarling “au-
tonomists” and slugfing 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, look-
ing 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, economi-
cally 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 es-
sential part of the labor movement; and the “Indus-
trial Workers” is now in the field and progressive union-
ists 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 marshalled against
it, will march steadily to the front and hew out its way
to success.

Eugene V. Debs.