

Organization for Emancipation (September 1906)

If there had been any lingering doubt in the minds of those who organized the Industrial Workers as to the wisdom of their course, subsequent developments would certainly have removed it, as each passing day has served to vindicate the timeliness and emphasize the demand for the revolutionary economic organization of the working class.

That there are those, especially among socialists, who are opposed to the Industrial Workers, either because of their fealty to the American Federation of Labor or their fear that economic unionism may absorb some of the means and energy which should be devoted to political propaganda, seems strange enough, and in either case we shall have to ascribe their hostile attitude to superficial reasoning or improper conceptions of economic unionism in its relation to the labor movement and the historic mission of the working class.

It is difficult to understand why so many socialists treat contemptuously, or with indifference, the whole question of labor unionism, in view of the fact that the Socialist Party movement sprang from the trade union movement and the further obvious fact that if the political organization of the working class is to develop its full power and fulfill its mission it will be only as the necessary outgrowth and result of the revolutionary economic solidarity of that class.

In their everyday lives the workers have to fight for their economic existence and their fundamental need in this economic warfare is an economic weapon, and this weapon is the labor union, and without this the workers would be left naked and defenseless at the mercy of their enemy, and all attempts to interest them in the political aspects of the labor question and to build up a political movement would end in dismal failure.

The principal leaders of the socialist movement have all recognized the prime necessity of organizing the workers along economic lines, and conspicuously among these are Marx, Engels, Liebknecht,¹ Bebel,² Vandavelde,³ and others.

Marx, while urging the necessity of trade unionism, pointed out its inherent defects and shortcomings in the following words:

Trade unions work well as centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partly from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it; instead of using their organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wage system.

Here we have precisely stated the essential difference between pure and simple trade unionism of the old school and modern unionism of the revolutionary type represented by the Industrial Workers of the World.

While the old unions under the jurisdiction of the American Federation of Labor are “limiting themselves to a guerrilla war against the effects of the existing system,” the Industrial Workers has as its declared fundamental object “the ultimate abolition of the wage system.”

While proclaiming its economic mission in plain terms, the Industrial Workers as an organization also recognizes the need and importance of united political action and the necessary organization to secure it, and there is not a doubt that the economic solidarity and the class conscious teaching of the raw recruits admitted to the Industrial Workers will be followed as a natural sequence by their political solidarity and a united working class vote on election day.

It is not claimed that the form of the Industrial Workers has been fully developed, or that its constitution is free from defects or immune against reasonable criticism. On the contrary, it is freely admitted that the work of organizing the Industrial Workers, undertaken under great and peculiar difficulties, was but fairly initiated at the first convention,⁴ that what was actually accomplished was the embryonic structural work in outline, the features of secondary importance to be added and the necessary details worked out at subsequent conventions and in the natural course of the growth and development of the organization.

What has been and is claimed with increasing emphasis is that the fundamental principles and general plan of organization of the Industrial Workers are sound and logical and will bear the light of development and the test of events.

Upon this proposition the advocates and supporters of the Industrial Workers challenge the most searching scrutiny and are prepared to meet all comers.

Time and space forbid me to consider the approaching convention.⁵ A great work awaits the delegates and I have complete faith in their fidelity and ability to perform their allotted task and speed the Industrial Workers on its second year of *organization for emancipation*.

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¹ Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900) was a primary founder of the Social Democratic Workers Party of Germany, a forerunner of the Social Democratic Party of Germany. A contemporary of Marx and Engels, Liebknecht was imprisoned numerous times for his political activities throughout his life. He was editor-in-chief of the party's official organ, *Vorwärts*, from 1891. Liebknecht's son Karl (1871-1919) was a founder of the German communist movement.

² August Bebel (1840-1913) was originally a worker from the bench who was won over to socialism in 1865 through the influence of Wilhelm Liebknecht. An effective orator and journalist, he was elected to the Reichstag in 1871, where he was an outspoken supporter of the Paris Commune. Together with Liebknecht, Bebel was tried for treason in 1872 ostensibly for morally aiding the French cause in the war against Germany. The pair were found guilty and served two years in the fortress, with Bebel given an additional nine months of ordinary imprisonment. Bebel was a chief organizer of the unity convention that established the united Social Democratic Party of Germany in 1890.

³ Emile Vandervelde (1866-1938) was a Belgian socialist politician who as Minister of State supported Belgian resistance to German invasion in 1914. Vandervelde was president of the Second International from 1900 to 1918 and of the Labour and Socialist International from its founding in 1923 until the time of his death.

⁴ The founding convention of the Industrial Workers of the World was held in Chicago from June 27 to July 8, 1905.

⁵ The second convention of the Industrial Workers of the World was held in Chicago from Sept. 17 to Oct. 3, 1906.