
Direct Action and Sabotage.

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A great deal of heated discussion has gone on of late among our comrades as to Direct Action and Sabotage. Aside from the question of personalities unfortunately dragged in, what does it all mean?

Our recent national convention adopted a new enactment under which anybody advocating crime, sabotage, or violence as aids in the emancipation of the working class, shall be expelled from the party. A considerable minority of the delegates voted against this provision. They secured enough signatures to an amendment eliminating this dogmatic "omnibus" provision from Art. II, Section 6 of the party's constitution.

Both the original majority enactment and the substitute of the minority were submitted to the party membership for a referendum vote. Less than 20 percent of our dues paying members took the trouble to record their opinion by a vote. To cap the climax of confusion, both versions received a majority as against considerable minorities. But the printed and promulgated constitution contains Art. II, Section 6 in its full dogmatic text. The substitute, also carried by a majority, got lost in the shuffle.

What, then, is the clearly established will of the party as to this much mooted question? We don't know. The great majority of the membership has not declared itself. Only a small minority has spoken in a confusing, bewildering manner.

The case is by no means unusual or exceptional. Practically all our referendums result similarly, because we have not provided for a thorough

instructive discussion prior to the act of voting. The mode of submitting questions to the voters follows the methods of Napoleonic plebiscites rather than the democratic way of getting real opinions based on mature understanding.

But on this part of the question I shall not dwell now. Suffice it to state that prior to the Indianapolis convention [May 12-18, 1912] our comrades were startled and amazed by the assertion from within our ranks that in a republic in which the courts are the supreme lawmakers, all Socialists were in duty bound to obey all capitalistic legal enactments until they succeeded in effecting changes in the manner provided by the courts. Any other course was vehemently condemned as "ethically unjustifiable and tactically suicidal."

The lively discussion started against this new-fangled doctrine had not entirely subsided before the convention met. It is fair to surmise that the enactment of Art. II, Section 6 was intended to settle the question dogmatically, by sheer force of numbers.

But matters settled in such a manner have a tendency of not staying settled. Socialists cannot be successfully muzzled. Free and full discussion they will have. It is the breath of life to the movement.

Thus it happens that the underlying issues come up again and again. Just now the storm rages around the phrases Direct Action and Sabotage.

What is Direct Action? What is Sabotage? No definite authoritative answer is given or can be given at this time. A lot of dust is raised. As far

as an interested observer may gather, we are dealing with tactics of the working masses arising from their economic condition, bound up closely with their economic activities. We are dealing with mass action as distinct from isolated and individual action in the sense of anarchist doctrine and philosophy.

Considered as mass activity, Direct Action chiefly crystallizes in the General Strike idea. But no calm judge will say that the General Strike as a weapon of the working class under given conditions is either generally approved or generally condemned by International Socialism. We may still hold that the test of the pudding is the eating of it. As far as we know, this new weapon may be a two-edged sword or it may develop into an all-powerful engine of class warfare.

Virtually the same view holds good as to Sabotage. Perhaps even more so. For only the name is new, not the thing itself, which has been in existence before as "ca' canny," as "limitation of output," as "union rules," and so forth. Craft unions in the printing, building, mining, textile, and other industries have known and practiced it in various forms long before the word Sabotage was coined. We have here a weapon of defense against unbearable exploitation.

For illustration, let me cite a case in point that happened more than thirty years ago in a butter factory in Germany. The management introduced piece work in place of weekly time wages. Instantly a number of the workers rushed their work. They earned, under payment by the gross, nearly double their former pay. Thereupon the management cut down the price allowed for the gross. More hustling, harder work again produced good pay envelopes. More price cuts were the only result, until the workers realized that they were up

against an endless chain of exploitation. Then, rather late, ensued a limitation of the individual output for the protection of all. Here, as in other lines of piece work, appears an embryonic form of sabotage or striking on the job.

Sabotage, according to its advocates, is many-sided in its form and application. It may be slow work, poor work, literally carrying out of orders in the manner of the celebrated jester, Till Eulenspiegel, observance of all sham rules in mines, mills, and transportation systems, confusion and miscarriage of mail matter, and what not. To be successful, it must be mass action, obviously.

Is it then for the Socialist Party, the political organization of the working class, to condemn this weapon dogmatically? Are we ready to assume a lofty attitude of infallibility and to put our ban, the anathema of our church, upon every transgressor?

Surely, we should not be frightened by the furious howls against Sabotage set up in the capitalist camp. That camp howled with exactly the same rage against the other natural weapons of the workers, the Strike and the Boycott. And the capitalists did much more than howl platonically. They set their judges to work to dull the edge of these two weapons by practically declaring every effective strike and every effective boycott a criminal act, a conspiracy against sainted Property.

If we are now witnessing in the labor world the development and trial of a new defensive and offensive weapon of the masses, are we to get so frightened by a strange name that we must fall on our knees and promise to the united respectables, hypocrites, and kept tools of capitalism that we Socialists, at least, will be good, law-abiding children? Shade of Karl Marx, what an absurdity!

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