

Craft Unionism:
Speech in Chicago
(November 23, 1905)

We have met under the auspices and in the interests of the Industrial Workers of the World. Organized here in Chicago, less than five months ago, the Industrial Workers already number almost, if not quite, a hundred thousand workingmen and women, enrolled as dues-paying members, in a revolutionary, economic organization of the working class.¹

Why has this new organization been instituted? Why will not the old trade unions that already occupy the field serve the purpose? Why a new organization? These are questions that are up for consideration; that, address themselves to all the workers of the country, whether they favor or oppose the new organization.

For many years I have been connected with one and another of the old trade unions. Indeed, since February 1875, when I first joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, I have been an active member of a trade union; and during that time I have had some experience by virtue of which I trust I have profited sufficiently to enable me to determine whether a trade union is organized for the purpose of serving the working class or not.

At the very threshold of this discussion I aver that the old form of trade unionism no longer meets the demands of the working class. I aver that the old trade union has not only fulfilled its mission and outlived its usefulness, but that it is now positively reactionary, and is maintained, not in the interests of the workers who support it, but in the interests of the capitalist class who exploit the workers who support it.

Let me cite an instance or two for illustration. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers has been organized about forty years. It professes to be a trade union, an organization of and for the working class. This organization has the favor and support of practically every railroad corporation in the United States. The late P. M. Arthur was its grand chief for many years. In the beginning of his official career he was true to the working class. As the organization developed in numbers and in power, and became a menace to the corporations, they realized the necessity of securing control of that organization. And how did they go about it? By making

certain nominal concessions to that so-called brotherhood, by flattering its grand chief, by declaring that they had no objection to a labor organization such as this brotherhood, especially while under the supervision of so conservative a leader as Mr. Arthur. Every time the corporations made a concession to the engineers, it was at the expense of poorly paid employees in other departments who were unorganized; and when the men in these departments protested and when finally they went out on strike, the engineers have invariably been used by the corporation to defeat their fellow workers, who were in revolt against degrading economic conditions.

Mr. Arthur was, therefore, a prime favorite with the railroad corporations. They granted him annual passes over their lines; and when the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers met in convention, their delegates were provided with special trains to transport them to and from the convention, free of charge, as evidence that the corporation appreciated the value of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers.

Since the engineers were organized, the firemen, conductors, brakemen, switchmen, telegraphers, and trackmen have also been organized, and several other departments have been partially organized, and they all have practically the same form of organization. They are all conservative. They all operate within the bounds set and approved by the railroad corporations. Are they, can they be true to the men who pay the dues, to the workingmen who support them? I answer that they cannot. Not only are they not true to the wage-workers who support them, but they are pressed into service, politically and otherwise, when occasion demands it, in the interest of these corporations, and to the detriment of their own.

Only the other day, since this much-discussed matter of rate legislation has been pending, the grand chiefs of these various brotherhoods have been convened. By whom? By the railroad corporations. For what purpose? This will appear as I proceed.

Just after the grand chiefs of these labor unions met with the railroad officials, another meeting took place. Of whom? Of the representatives of the principal of these several organizations, who, acting under the advice of their grand officers, proceeded to the city of Washington, held a conference with President Roosevelt, and protested that the labor unions they represented, consisting of the railway workers of the country, were opposed to any sort of legislation that would have a tendency to reduce railroad rates in the United States. The announcement also went forth at the same time that these brotherhoods would make their political power felt in

the interests of the railroad corporations; that is to say, against the common people, the toiling millions of the land.

What a picture, indeed!

One glance proves beyond the shadow of a doubt, that these unions are exceedingly useful to the corporations; and to the extent that they serve the economic and political purposes of the corporations, they are the foes — and not the friends — of the working class.

The United Mine Workers, in point of numbers a powerful labor organization, embraces a large majority of the coal miners of the country. Is this organization of any real benefit to coal miners? What has it actually done for them during the last few years? What have the miners, who have paid millions of dollars from their scant earnings in support of the organization, what have they to show in return?

These miners are well organized. They have the numbers. They ought to have real economic power. But they lack it. And why? For the simple reason that they are not organized upon the basis of the class struggle. Their union principles are not right; and it is for this reason that their organization has the hearty support of the coal operators of the country, who, by the way, are in session in Chicago at this very time, for the purpose of uniting, for the purpose of dealing with the miners, not through the rank and file of their union, but, as they themselves declare, through their national board.

And this is a very important point for the union miners to take into consideration. These operators, these exploiters, who are conscious of their class interests, propose to deal, not with the union at large, not with the great body of the miners, not with the rank and file, not with the common herd, not with the black beasts of burden, but with their National Executive Board. They will fix things that are out of joint and settle matters generally. They will arrive at mutually satisfactory conclusions. They will harmonize beautifully. And when they do harmonize, it will be in the interests, not of the miners who do the work, who dig the coal, who produce the wealth, but in the interests of the operators who own the mines and exploit the slaves of the pits.

Why, the most zealous supporter of the United Mine Workers is the coal operator himself. The simple fact that the coal operator collects the union dues, and discharges the miner who refuses to pay his dues, is sufficient evidence of this fact.

The coal operator does not collect the dues from the man who happens to belong to the Industrial Workers. He knows enough to know what is good for him; and he knows that the miners, organized as they are at present, can do him little harm, but can do him great good. And this is why he wants the miners organized in the pure and simple old-fashioned way. He knows that if they were totally unorganized, they would spontaneously go out on strike. But they cannot strike as they are now organized without securing the sanction of their national, district and local officers; and so the operator keeps a friendly eye upon the union which fortifies and facilitates the exploitation of the coal diggers in his mines.

At stated periods the operators and representatives of the miners meet; and sometimes the sessions are very spirited, the miners insisting upon an increase, and the operators upon a decrease of wages, as was the case at the last interstate conference, when the union officials declared that under no circumstances would they accept a reduction, and the delegates voted by practically a unanimous vote not to accept any reduction, and for a while there was every indication of a strike. But the national officers met with the operators, and a reduction of wages was agreed to, and then the union officers went out among the rank and file and told them that if they were foolish enough to go out on strike, they would certainly be defeated, and that the best thing they could do was to accept the reduction. So these union officials, backed by the operators, virtually forced the reduction upon the miners.

The operator can well afford to support that kind of a labor union.

The United Mine Workers, under its present policy, denies and seeks to obscure the class struggle. President Mitchell² used to be quoted as saying that the interests of the miners and the operators were identical. He made an address the other day in which he claimed that he had been misquoted; he had not said that their interests were identical, but that they were reciprocal. I would like to have Mr. Mitchell show in what way the operator who fleeces the miner, reciprocates to that miner. The simple fact is that the operator — and I don't know why he is called that, he doesn't operate anything — the operator takes from the miner what the miner produces. He serves him in that capacity, and no other.

The miners' union denies, in effect, the class struggle, and vainly seeks to harmonize the economic interests of these two antagonistic classes — the exploiting masters and the exploited wage-slaves; the robbers and the robbed. It cannot be done; not permanently at least; and if it be done even

temporarily, it is always at the expense of the wage-slaves. Such an organization as that cannot truly serve the best interests of the working class. It is impossible.

There are many who concur in these views, yet insist that the organization must be changed from the inside; that it can only be brought to its proper position by "boring from within." I deny it. It is historically impossible. This organization has practically run its course. It has fulfilled its mission as a labor union, whatever that has been. It is now practically in charge of the mine owners; and the only way the miners can get away from that situation is to sever their relations with that capitalist-controlled union and join and build up one of their own upon the basis of the class struggle; and then they will be in position to fight the capitalist class with some chance of success.

The most important fact in all the world for workingmen to take cognizance of is the class struggle. The Industrial Workers expresses economically the interests of the working class in that struggle. The Industrial Workers declare that there can be nothing in common between the exploiting capitalist and the exploited wage worker; that there is inevitably a struggle between them, and that this struggle cannot end until the capitalist class is overthrown, and the wage-system wiped out. Then and then only can there be an end to class rule.

Now, if you are a workingman and if you believe that you have an economic interest in common with that of the capitalist who employs you, remain in the old trade union. That is where you belong. If that is your conviction we do not want you to join the Industrial Workers. You do not properly belong to us. You do belong to the American Federation of Labor and its affiliated organizations. But, if you believe as I believe, that the working class have economic interests of their own, separate and apart from and in conflict with, the economic interests of the capitalist class, then you should, and sooner or later will have to, sever your relation with the old trade union, and join the Industrial Workers, the only union organized upon the basis of the class struggle.

And now, let me ask, have we a class struggle? The answer comes of itself. This struggle finds expression daily, hourly, in strikes, in boycotts, in lockouts, injunctions, riots, assaults, and bloodshed. It is not an unmixed evil, however, for in this great worldwide class struggle, that is shaking the foundations of civilized society everywhere, there are being wrought out the most important problems of our modern civilization.

The working class are in an overwhelming majority. They have the numbers. They ought to have the power. And they would have the power, if only they were conscious of their interests, as a class.

Every effort is put forth by the exploiting capitalist to prevent workmen from seeing the class struggle. The capitalist insists that there is no such struggle. The editor in the employ of the capitalist echoes "no class struggle." The teacher, professor, and the minister, all of them dependent upon the capitalist for the chance to make a living, agree that there are no classes and no class struggle. In unison they declaim against class agitation and seek to obscure class rule that it may be perpetuated indefinitely.

We insist that there is a class struggle; that the working class must recognize it; that they must organize economically and politically upon the basis of that struggle; and that when they do so organize, they will then have the power to free themselves and put an end to that struggle forever.

Now, have not the workers, especially here in Chicago, had sufficient experience during the last few years? Have they not been defeated often enough to demonstrate the inherent weakness of the old trades union movement? Haven't they been enjoined by the courts often enough? Clubbed by the police and flung into jail often enough? Haven't they had experience of this kind enough to open their eyes to the fact that there is a mighty class struggle in progress, and that there will never be any material change in their condition until they unite their class in every department of industrial activity?

Speaking for myself, I was made to realize long ago that the old trade union was utterly incompetent to deal successfully with the exploiting corporations in this struggle. I was made to see that in craft unionism the capitalist class have it in their power to keep the workers divided, to use one part of them with which to conquer and crush another part of them. Indeed, I was made to see that the old form of unionism separates the workers and keeps them helpless at the mercy of their masters.

Object lessons are presented to you every day in the week. You have hundreds of thousands of workers organized in Chicago, in every conceivable kind of a union, and under the direction of an infinite variety of leaders. I will not say that these leaders are all incompetent or corrupt. That would not be true. But many of them are corrupt, and in that capacity have it in their power to betray and sell out the workers who trust them. In this position the workers will remain—where there is no hope for them — so long as they cling to the outgrown old trade union and its inefficient

methods. We have had the proof of this over and over again. Take all the great strikes that have occurred in Chicago during the last few years. Have any of them been successful? Have they not uniformly failed?

The capitalists have not entirely stamped out the defeated unions, that is true. They have had the power to do this in the hour of the workers' defeat, but they have refrained from doing it, because they are shrewd enough to know that if they destroyed those unions, another and better one would take their places. Is it not a fact that they had the butcher workmen absolutely at their mercy, and could have compelled the members to entirely withdraw from the unions before giving them employment? They did not crush the unions out. When they had conquered they were satisfied. They had driven the unionists back to their reservations and they were perfectly satisfied that they should build up again along the same old lines.

The Employers' Association had the striking teamsters completely at their mercy, and could, had they seen fit, have utterly crushed out their union. They did not do it. In the closing part of the negotiations the settlement hinged upon the alleged privilege of the teamsters wearing their union badges, and this the Employers' Association finally conceded; and then the claim was put forth that the striking teamsters had come out victorious. The truth is that they lost everything; but the employer was not anxious to crush out their organization. He knew very well that if he did a stronger one would spring from the ruins; that a crushed union at least teaches workingmen to see its inherent defects.

The employer is shrewd enough to know that when you totally crush out organizations you drive the workers into solidarity.

The teamsters were entirely defeated, nothing left; and yet their leaders boasted that they had saved their organization. It reminded me of the dispatch once sent from a field of battle by a general who had been completely routed: "There is nothing left but honor, and damn little of that!"

It is true that there are some employers who are supposed to be entirely opposed to unionism, even the old form of trade unionism. But the great majority of capitalists, especially the shrewder, far-seeing ones, unqualifiedly approve the pure and simple labor union. And now let me show that between these two sections of the capitalist class there is, after all, no vital difference with regard to the trade union movement.

C. W. Post,³ president of the Citizens' Industrial Association, and David M. Parry,⁴ president of the Manufacturers' Association, who are opposing the American Federation of Labor, have repeatedly said that they

are not opposed to trade unionism if it will confine itself to its “legitimate” functions. In other words, they are not opposed to trade unionism if it does not antagonize the capitalist class. That is their position. Now, what is the position of the great body of capitalists who avow their friendship for the trade union movement? Precisely the same. They are in favor of the trade union as long as it does not menace or attack the capitalist class; that is, as long as it doesn’t do anything. And in its present shape it is not doing anything; and that is why the capitalists are not opposed to it. Let these trade unions unite tomorrow; let them declare in favor of waging this fight along the lines of the class struggle, and they will soon find out whether these capitalists are in favor of trade unionism or not.

The very fact that the great majority of capitalists favor trade unionism proves that it is doing little or nothing for its members. Were it really doing something for them it would be antagonizing the capitalist class, and that class would fight it. But the capitalists are not fighting the pure old brand of unionism; they have, in fact, formed an alliance with it and the union is the silent partner in the firm.

You have all doubtless heard of the Civic Federation. This federation is supposed to be fair and impartial. It is organized for the one purpose of dovetailing the interests of labor and capital, and every member of this body insists that these interests can be harmonized; that there is no necessary conflict between them. That is what Mr. Gompers says; that is what Mr. Mitchell says; that is what Archbishop Ireland⁵ and Bishop Potter⁶ say, and that is what they all say — that there is no necessary conflict between capitalists and wage workers. If there be no necessary conflict between them, it follows that all the fighting that is going on must be unnecessary. I suppose then that that ought to be very easily eliminated.

A gentleman named August Belmont presides over this harmonizing body. Not long ago, in an address, he claimed that there was no better trade unionist in the country than he, and he proved it during the Interborough strike in the city of New York, when several thousand union employees of that corporation, of which he is president, went out on strike because they were driven to that extremity by his pernicious policy. He proved that he was a loyal trade unionist when he employed James Farley, the notorious professional strikebreaker and his army of Hessians⁷ to take the places of his former employees. Just a little while after Mr. Belmont had thus defeated his employees and disrupted their unions, he met at the hospitable banqueting board of the Civic Federation with the national officers of the

American Federation of Labor, and its allied unions, and there made good his claim that he was a true trade unionist of the old school.

Do you think that a labor leader who is absolutely true to the working class could sit at such a banqueting board with such a capitalist as Belmont? Do you think he would be the guest of such an organization as the Civic Federation, whose only purpose is by subtle schemes to reduce the trade union movement to harmless impotency?

It is for this and this alone that the Civic Federation has been organized. This is its real mission. The American Federation of Labor has fallen within the fatal influence of this emasculating alliance, and has thus proven that it is not organized to advance the true interests of the working class.

The American Federation of Labor is now holding its annual convention in the city of Pittsburgh. What are its delegates doing there? Simply passing the same old resolutions. Once more they are going to petition Congress to enact an eight-hour law. They have done that over and over again, and their petition has been as repeatedly pigeonholed. They have also resolved to petition Congress to restrict the powers of capitalist courts in dealing with labor. They have done that time and again, and what have they gained by it? Absolutely nothing. No attention has been paid to these servile supplications. They have been disregarded, thrown aside, treated with contempt; but the delegates solemnly meet in convention once more to pass the same hoary resolutions, to introduce the same stale petitions, with the same inevitable results. Now, is not this a perfectly stupid procedure? Are these men incapable of profiting by experience? Do they not by this time understand the nature and essential functions of capitalist-class government? Can they not see that we have a capitalist-class Congress, and capitalist-class legislatures, elected in every instance by an ignorant working class, kept ignorant, designedly, in the name of unionism, and with the aid of the labor lieutenants of the capitalist class? And that it is the very height of folly and depth of humiliation for a committee of the working class to beg the representatives of the capitalist class to legislate in the interests of the working class?

They were elected to serve the masters. And they are serving them. And we have no right to find fault with them — at least, those of us who are responsible for their being where they are.

Now, we who have organized the Industrial Workers have had enough of this kind of experience. We have quit the old unions. We have organized

the Industrial Workers for the purpose of uniting the working class; the whole working class. Not only the skilled workers, not only those who are favored, but the working class, skilled and unskilled, male and female, in every department of activity, are united upon the principle of industrial unionism.

The old unions were built up on tools that have been discarded and upon trades that have ceased to exist.

Half a century ago the trade union was right; it was adapted to the then existing industrial conditions. For illustration, a cooper shop was a cooper shop. It contained coopers and coopers only, and the Coopers' Union was organized. That embraced the coopers who were employed at their trade in the shop. Since then there has been half a century of industrial evolution. Compare the great cooperage establishments of today with the cooper shop of fifty years ago, in which the old hand tools were used, in which the apprentice learned his trade, and having mastered this, could seize the small tools with which work was done and virtually employ himself. There has been a marvelous change since that time. A modern cooperage establishment is the result of industrial evolution; and if you will visit one of them you will find that scores of different kinds of labor are performed there. Indeed, you will find almost any kind of worker there except a cooper!

Now, we hold that the form of the union must correspond to the mode of industry. In other words, the union, like the trade, is subject to the inexorable laws of evolution. We want a union today that expresses all the various subdivisions of labor that are now engaged in a cooperage establishment. Suppose there are 500 such employees in a plant. We organize them all, and they are assigned to their various departments; and if one of them has a grievance it becomes the concern of every worker in that establishment.

How is it now? Certain departments are organized in craft unions, meet with the officials and make an agreement or contract. They do not care what becomes of the rest, if only they can get what they are after for themselves. After they are thus tied up, the employees in some other department present a grievance and are turned down and out. They go out on strike. Those tied fast in an agreement say: "We would like to help you, we are in sympathy with you, but you see we have an agreement, and that agreement is sacred; it must be preserved inviolate; and while we are in sympathy with you, and while we hate to see you defeated and lose your

jobs, we cannot go back on our agreement.” And in this way one union is used to crush another, labor is defeated and scabs are made by thousands.

It is a fact that nearly all scabs and strikebreakers are ex-unionists. Go among them and interrogate them and you will find that they will tell you in almost every case that at heart they are in favor of union labor, but that they were beaten by it and found this the only way of getting even. I know of hundreds of instances, of my own knowledge, of men who have been made scabs in precisely this way. Now, the trade unions feel very bitter toward scabs, and pursue them relentlessly until the unfortunates seek escape in suicide. And yet, while they so bitterly oppose the scab, they support the union that makes the scab.

What we want today, above all things, is united economic and political action, and we can never have that while the working class are parceled out among hundreds, aye, thousands, of separate unions, that keep them divided for reasons many of which very readily suggest themselves.

Who is it that is so violently opposed to the Industrial Workers? It is not the rank and file of the trade unions. It is their officers. And why are they so fiercely opposed to the Industrial Workers? For the reason that when the working class are really united a great many labor leaders will be out of jobs.

There are at present thousands of unions. Some of them have a few members and others have a great many; and every time, in the evolution of industry, there is a new subdivision of labor, however minute, a new union must be launched, clear down to the Grand International Brotherhood of Peanut Peelers, Polishers, and Packers, or whatever it may be. And they elect a staff of their own grand international officers, and their names are put upon the payroll; and let me say to you that their interests are primarily in keeping themselves there.

Why should the railroad employees be parceled out among a score of different organizations? They are all employed in the same service. Their interests are mutual. They ought to be able to act together as one. But they divide according to craft and calling, and if you were to propose today to unite them that they might actually do something to advance their collective and individual interests as workers, you would be opposed by every grand officer of these organizations. The payroll and expense account of the officers of the railroad brotherhoods alone amount to more than a quarter of a million dollars a year.

There is an army of men who serve as officers who are on the salary list who get a good living keeping the working class divided. They start out with good intentions, as a rule. They really want to do something to serve their fellows. They leave the shops or the mines as common workmen. They are elected officers of a labor organization and they change their clothes. They now wear a white shirt and a standing collar. They change their habits and their methods. They have been used to cheap clothes, coarse fare, and to associating with their fellow workers. After they have been elevated to official position, as if by magic they are recognized by those who previously scorned them and held them in contempt. They find that some of the doors that were previously barred against them now swing inwards, and they can actually put their feet under the mahogany of a capitalist.

Our common workingman is now a labor leader. The great capitalist pats him on the back and tells him that he knew long ago that he was a coming man, that it was a fortunate thing for the workers of the world that he had been born, that in fact they had been long waiting for just such a wise and conservative leader. And this has a certain effect upon our new-made leader, and unconsciously, perhaps, he begins to change — just as John Mitchell did, when Mark Hanna⁸ patted him on the shoulder and said, “John, it is a good thing you are at the head of the miners. You are the very man. You have the greatest opportunity a labor leader ever had on this earth. You can immortalize yourself. Now is your time.” Then John Mitchell admitted that this capitalist, who had been pictured to him as a monster, was not half as bad as he had thought he was; that, in fact, he was a genial and companionable gentleman. He repeats his visit the next day, or the next week, and is introduced to some other distinguished person he had read about, but never dreamed of meeting, and thus goes on the transformation. All his dislikes disappear and all feeling of antagonism vanishes. He concludes that they are really most excellent people and, now that he has seen and knows them, he agrees with them that there is no necessary conflict between workers and capitalists. And he proceeds to carry out this pet capitalist theory and he can only do it by betraying the class that trusted him and lifted him as high above themselves as they could reach.

It is true that such a leader is in favor with the capitalists; that their newspapers write editorials about him and crown him a great and wise leader; and that ministers of the gospel make his name the text for their sermons, and emphasize the vital point that if all labor leaders were such

as he, there would be no objection to labor organizations. And the leader feels himself flattered. And when he is charged with having deserted the class he was supposed to serve, he cries out that the indictment is brought by a discredited labor leader. And that is probably true. The person who brings the charge is very likely discredited. By whom? By the capitalist class, of course; and its press and pulpit and “public” opinion. And in the present state of the working class, when he is discredited by the capitalists, he is at once repudiated by their wage-slaves.

The labor leader who is not discredited by the capitalist class is not true to the working class. If he be unswervingly loyal to the working class he will not be on friendly terms with the capitalist class. He cannot serve both. When he really serves one he serves that one against the other.

The labor leader who is in high favor with the exploiters is pronounced safe, conservative, wise and honest, and the workers are appealed to to look to him for advice, for guidance and leadership. The unthinking accept the advice with enthusiasm. And so the labor leader who serves the capitalist class instead of the working class is hailed deliverer and basks in the public favor.

But let me say to you that in spite of all this, the honest and discredited leaders will be lovingly remembered long after the popular ones of today are forgotten.

Now, in these matters, I am not asking you to take my advice. I am not asking you to follow me. I simply want you to think over these things for yourselves. The very first need is that you open your eyes and see for yourselves. Take nothing for granted.

So many of you are satisfied to blindly follow where others lead; and so you are deceived and betrayed; you have to pay all the penalties.

It is high time you were ceasing to depend upon someone to “lead” you; that you were opening your eyes; that you were doing your own thinking. And that is all I am asking you to do.

I have already told you that I have had some experience and that I hope I have in some measure profited by it. I have been involved in strikes enough to satisfy me. I have so often been saddened by the outcome of such strikes.

I have seen men by scores and hundreds and thousands, after striking for weeks and months, lose their jobs. I have seen the poor wretches black-listed and I have seen them persecuted until they were in rags, and their families were upon the streets, and I have said there must be another and

a better way. I have seen enough of this to satisfy me. There is a better way. But you will never find it by pursuing the old lines. You have got to unite the whole working class, and this can be done. It is not an impossible task. Every worker, however limited his mentality, ought to be able to see that there is little or nothing to be accomplished along the old lines; that, in fact, there is no hope; that you are engaged in an unequal struggle, and that the ultimate outcome is certain to be defeat, despair, and death.

The capitalists have at present ten thousand advantages over us. They own and control all the sources and means of wealth production. They are the masters of the tools; they act together. They control all the powers of government. They can at their own sweet will shut down their mills and factories and mines, and they can wait patiently weeks and months and even years, until the impoverished workers become hungry and are glad to be taken back at any terms. The capitalists have all these advantages, and they never hesitate to do anything, everything, that may be required to keep the working class in subjection. And they can and will keep them there just as long as they are divided.

There is but one hope, and that is in the economic and political solidarity of the working class; one revolutionary union, and one revolutionary party. It is for this reason that the Industrial Workers, an economic organization, has been launched and now makes its appeal to you as wage-slaves aspiring to be free. You can not be satisfied to live and die as beasts of burden; to toil unceasingly to enrich masters who hold you in contempt; to be dependent upon these masters for your jobs and crawl like sycophants at their feet. You may not be satisfied, even though you have sufficient food and clothing and shelter. You are a human, not a hog; a man, not a mere animal. You have a manhood to sustain; you have freedom to achieve, and you have an intellect to develop; and these questions will appeal to you with ever-increasing force and compel an accounting at last, if you have the pith and purpose of a typical, self-respecting workingman.

In the capitalist system you workers are simply merchandise; your master can at his own will sentence you to idleness, your wife to want and your child, perhaps, to a brothel. You can not be satisfied with such a slavish lot and now is the time to make up your mind to change it. In your heart you will feel the thrill of a newborn joy. You will join the Industrial Workers, the one international labor union that proposes to unite all workers, that all of them may act together in harmonious cooperation for the good of all; a union that recognizes no aristocracy, but the whole working class;

that insists that each member shall have all the rights that are accorded every other; a union built upon the class struggle, appealing to all workers to get together on the right side of that struggle and achieve the revolutionary solidarity⁹ of their class.

It is true that this is a stupendous task; that there are great opposing forces; that every falsehood that malignity can devise will be put in circulation to defeat the object of this industrial organization, but nevertheless, those of us who have quitted the old unions and organized the Industrial Workers have done so with the determination that no matter what opposing forces may be set in operation, we will stand together side by side in the true spirit of class-conscious solidarity; we will move forward, step by step, in one solid body; we will speak the truth as we see the truth, and defy all opposition that may be brought to bear against the Industrial Workers by all the capitalist class and all its vassals and emissaries.

This organization has a mission as high and as noble as ever prompted workingmen, or any other men, to action in this world.

The primal need of the working class is education. By education I mean revolutionary education; the kind that enables them to see that the twenty-odd millions of wage-workers in the United States are wage-slaves; that the economic interests of these many millions of human beings who do all the useful work and produce all the wealth are absolutely identical; that they must unite; that they must act together; that they must assert their collective power. When they reach this point they will cease to be slaves and become the masters of the situation; they will wipe out the wage system and walk the earth free men.

They can do this, and only they can do it.

I cannot do this for you, and I want to be frank enough to say that I would not if I could. For if I could do it for you, somebody else could undo it for you. But when you do it for yourself it will remain done forever. And until you do it you have got to pay the penalty of your ignorance, indifference and neglect. You have got to pay it to the last farthing. Nobody on earth or in heaven can relieve you of the consequences of your inaction. As long as you workers remain divided and at cross purposes, instead of closing up the ranks and acting together you will have to pay the penalty of defeat and humiliation and slavery and all their attendant brood of festering evils.

But day by day you are increasing the sum of your revolutionary knowledge. You are becoming wiser by experience. The Industrial

Workers would not have been possible a few years ago. It is an outgrowth of the very conditions I have described. It has become an imperative necessity. The workers everywhere are beginning to recognize it, and that is why they are flocking to its standard. That is why they are subscribing to its principles; why they are working for it day and night with a zeal that has never been known in the history of the organized working-class movement; and why it is rapidly spreading over the whole country, and increasing grandly in numbers and in power. Let me say to you that no matter what formidable or subtle opposition may be marshaled against it by the capitalist class the ultimate triumph of its principles is as certain as that tonight I stand in your presence.

There are a great many workers who insist that the old unions are good enough; and as long as they are of that opinion that is where they belong. So far as I am concerned I gave the old unions a fair trial. I am sure I had no prejudice against them. I am equally certain I did all I possibly could to build them up. For fifteen years I traveled almost continuously over this country organizing railroad men, and all kinds of workingmen, under the mistaken conviction that if we could only get them into the several unions of their trades and occupations we could in some way lift them out of their slavery. My mind was disabused. We had the railroad men, especially in this part of the country, pretty thoroughly organized. We had the numbers and to some extent the power, but we didn't know about the class struggle. We had that to learn. Then came the great conflict with the combined railroad corporations. We defeated them; and then we learned that the corporations control the powers of government. We got our first vital lesson in the class struggle. All the corporations had to do was to press the judicial button in their private office and the judges acted promptly in obedience to the command of their capitalist masters; the police and militia and regular troops followed in regular order; the press and pulpit and deputy marshals did the rest — and that was enough.

I never knew exactly how it happened until I understood the meaning of economic determinism and the class struggle, and then it was perfectly clear to me. And from that time I realized the imperative necessity for a different kind of organization. I then said, we have got to organize, not only the railroad employees, but the whole body of workers for concerted economic and political action; organize them all, so that all of them shall act together and assert the full measure of their power in the interests of all. As soon as a beginning was attempted the railroad corporations said,

“This vicious thing must be stamped out of existence,” and so, for two years, I scarcely traveled a foot without being shadowed by detectives of the railroad corporation. No matter where I went, the detectives were there. When I would reach the end of a certain line the detectives who had followed me would go back where they came from and others would take their places. I remember when I got to Providence, Rhode Island, one night, I was conscious that detectives were watching me very closely. I learned that the railroad officials in New England had announced that the American Railway Union should never get a foothold there. There were two or three loyal men there I knew I could trust; I sent them word not to come to the hotel and not to hold a meeting, but to come to my room at midnight, and come one at a time. And they did come to my room one at a time and I organized them in my room at midnight. I left the city early next morning, and when I got to the next point I received a telegram reporting that they were all discharged, every one of them.

Notwithstanding our secrecy the corporations knew who had entered my room and for what purpose; and the men were summarily discharged. Why was it that the railroad corporations would not allow the American Railway Union to organize? For the simple reason that the American Railway Union proposed to line up all the railroad employees as the beginning of a thorough reorganization of the working class in general, and the railroads did not propose to tolerate that kind of an organization.

They were and are entirely satisfied with the old brotherhoods, supplying their officers with annual passes and their delegates with special trains to take them to and from their conventions. To such an extent is this partiality carried on some railroads, that if a member of one of the brotherhoods refuses to pay his dues and is expelled by the brotherhood, he is promptly discharged by the corporation. The corporation favors the organizations that divide, but is implacably hostile to the one that unites the workers.

For the same reason the capitalist newspapers have so ferociously denounced the Industrial Workers.

They have warned workmen that the Industrial Workers consists of anarchists, socialists, revolutionists and chronic fault-finders and peace-disturbers, who have been kicked out of other reputable labor organizations; of discredited leaders who do not lead, in whom the workers have no confidence and for whom they can have no respect.

The capitalist press is a unit in denouncing the Industrial Workers, and practically a unit in commending the American Federation of Labor.

If you workers think that the capitalist press is a safe guide in such a matter, you properly belong with the American Federation of Labor. But if you believe, as I believe, and as every intelligent workingman must believe, that the kind of labor organization that the capitalists endorse is not the kind that is for your good — that the organization the capitalist press condemns is the one that has working class virtue and efficiency — then you will do as we have done; you will join the Industrial Workers of the World.

Think it over for yourself!

Take a backward look over the last three or four years; satisfy yourself by your own observation that there has been little but defeat for the workers in the struggle during all that period; that they have gained substantially nothing; that they are divided and disrupted and not organized in any true sense at all. The time has come for a real economic organization of the workers, and that organization is now in the field and makes its appeal to all workers, and its principles and purposes deserve the encouragement, the support and the loyalty of every workingman who has intelligence enough to understand his best interests and manhood enough to assert and stand by them.

I shall occupy your time no longer. I think that no great argument is required in support of our position. The preamble to the constitution states clearly and in few words the object of the Industrial Workers. You will find it written there that the workers and capitalists have nothing in common; that there are a few who have all the good things of life, while millions writhe in poverty and cry out in despair; that those who do nothing and produce nothing are rich, while those who do everything and produce everything are poor; that these two classes consist of capitalists who own tools they do not use, and of workers who use tools that they do not own; that the capitalists who own the tools have it in their power to take and do take from the workers what they produce, and that the workers must organize both their economic and political power to take and hold that which they produce by their labor.

This is brief and to the point, and every workingman is capable of understanding it.

As the chairman has stated, the Industrial Workers has no object in concealing any part of its mission, and while it proposes to ameliorate the

condition of the workers in every way in its power as far as that is possible in capitalist society, its ultimate object is to entirely abolish the capitalist system, by making the workers themselves the masters of their tools, that they may work freely, unrestrained and unexploited; that they may secure to themselves and enjoy all the fruit of their own labors.

This is the object of the Industrial Workers, and if it has your approval, join it and help it to fulfill its mission, and thus hasten the emancipation of the working class, and the brighter, happier day for all humanity.

Questions

Q. In the Industrial Workers are you going to separate the different trades, or has a man who joins, the privilege of going where he chooses?

Mr. Debs: He joins the department that represents his particular trade or occupation. The Industrial Workers is organized in separate departments, so that the autonomy of the trade is preserved within the organization. Take the men of a certain trade; they belong to a certain department of the organization; they have jurisdiction over their own trade affairs. They are subject, however, to the supervision of the general organization. Take the machinists for instance; they have a grievance; it will be adjusted, primarily, if possible, within their own department. If that is not possible then it becomes the grievance of the general organization — the concern of all. Instead of merely the machinists going out on strike as now, all their fellow workers lay down their tools and support them to a finish.

Q. Is it true that the Industrial Workers was organized because the workers cannot gain anything by political action?

Mr. Debs: No, that is not true. The workers have never yet tried to get anything by united political action. They will some time, I do not doubt. The Industrial Workers was organized because under the old form of organization they could get little or nothing by economic action. If they had secured satisfactory concessions under the old forms there would be no Industrial Workers. It has been organized because of the failure of the old unions on the economic field. Now, if it can be shown that they have succeeded, or even measurably succeeded, then there is no necessity for the Industrial Workers. But if, on the other hand, it can be shown that they have repeatedly and wretchedly failed, then there is an unanswerable argument in favor of the Industrial Workers.

Q. What is a tradesman or a skilled worker? Why should there be any distinction between a tradesman and any other worker in a shop?

Mr. Debs: That is not a very easy question to answer. There used to be a great many skilled mechanics who are now common workers. In proportion as machinery is improved the skill of the trade is transferred from the worker to the machine; and the skilled labor of one day becomes the common labor of the next. The locomotive engineer has always regarded himself as a skilled worker, and he has refused to affiliate with what is called the common laborer. Within the next few years the locomotive engineer will probably become a motorman and he will then come off the perch. The work will be so simple that almost any worker can perform it. I have already referred to the coopers. In the town where I live there used to be a number of cooper shops in which there were skilled men; and they had a large and strong Coopers' Union. All the coopers that worked there belonged to it. And these coopers didn't have anything to do with common labor. They flocked by themselves upon the theory that they were skilled men and could not afford to put their skill on the same level with the common labor of unskilled workers. During the last few years that trade has undergone a complete change. The skilled coopers have practically disappeared and but a shadow of the old union remains.

Now, if you will ask that old cooper, who was a skilled man and belonged to a union that represented skilled labor a few years ago — if you will ask him who the skilled man is, I think he can give you a satisfactory answer to your question. The skill of the trade is being gradually eliminated, and we are taking cognizance of this fact. We Industrial Workers recognize no aristocracy of skill. If any partiality were to be shown, however, I would give the unskilled man the benefit of it, because he needs it most. But there is no such discrimination in the Industrial Workers. The workingman, skilled or unskilled, is a worker; a man; and, whatever his occupation, has all of the wants and aspirations and is entitled to all the rights and opportunities of a human being for self-development. The machine is rapidly reducing workers to a common industrial equality, making the unskilled man the productive equal of the skilled man. The machine is the skilled man, and when he gets through, that question will have answered itself.

Q. Does the Industrial Workers make any provision for a wage scale?

Mr. Debs: Yes; it is going to get all the wages for its members that it possibly can, while the wage-system lasts.

Q. How are you going to prevent the leaders from being as bad as those of the trades unions are today?

Mr. Debs: In the first place, there will be but a single organization. There will not be a hundred different and conflicting organizations and as many different sets of officers.

Q. Then they will have only one to buy; it won't cost so much.

Mr. Debs: All the chances will be reduced to the minimum. Take the railroad brotherhoods for instance. If every locomotive engineer running into Chicago voted tomorrow to go out on strike, they could not go out without the official sanction of the grand chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, and he alone could prevent the strike. That is, they might vote unanimously to strike, but the power of one single grand officer would outweigh that of the entire organization. With us it is the rank and file that decides and is the supreme power. It is not likely they will sell themselves out. Besides, the Industrial Workers is made up of a body of class-conscious industrial revolutionists, who will not be sold out. They are wide-awake workers who think for themselves, and act for themselves, and that is why they are in the Industrial Workers. The old trade unions are mainly run by the officers. Didn't you notice in the papers this morning that the coal operators who were here in session declared that they proposed to deal, not with the rank and file, the common herd, but with the national officers of the union? They will settle things, and that is how they are generally settled in the old unions; but that is not the way they will be settled in the Industrial Workers.

This is an important point. Take a plant such as a brewery, for instance; a score of different kinds of labor represented by as many different organizations, and as many different sets of officers. Here are temptation and opportunity multiplied by twenty. Here we have wide-open chances and incentive to bribery, corruption, and treachery. Suppose now, that the same plant is organized in the Industrial Workers. Instead of being parceled out among twenty different unions they are all embraced in one. The men in one department have a grievance. That plant has a general committee; and if the grievance fails of adjustment in the department in which it arises, it is referred to the general committee that has supervision of the plant, and

if they fail to satisfactorily adjust it, the matter goes to all the employees, as Industrial Workers, for action. They vote to go out on strike and that settles it. In the Industrial Workers no national officer and no set of national officers have power to override the action of the rank and file. And when they vote to go out, they go out and stay out, until they vote to go back.

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¹ In his October 1909 revision, published by Charles H. Kerr, Debs drops the words “of the working class.”

² John Mitchell (XXXX-XXXX) mineworkers FOOTNOTE HERE

³ C. W. Post (XXXX-XXXX) FOOTNOTE HERE

⁴ David M. Parry (XXXX-XXXX) FOOTNOTE HERE

⁵ Archbishop Ireland (XXXX-XXXX) FOOTNOTE HERE

⁶ Bishop Potter (XXXX-XXXX) FOOTNOTE HERE

⁷ Hessians were German mercenaries who fought with the British against the colonists in the American revolutionary war.

⁸ Mark Hanna (XXXX-XXXX) FOOTNOTE HERE

⁹ Subsequent versions have “emancipation” in lieu of “revolutionary solidarity.”