

The Class Struggle and Its Impediments (July 30, 1904)

From the small beginnings of a century ago the trade union movement, keeping pace with the industrial development, has become a tremendous power in the land.

The close of the Civil War was followed by a new era of industrial and commercial activity, and trade unions sprang up on every hand. Local organizations of the same craft multiplied and were united in national bodies, and these were in time bound together in national and international federation.

The swift and vast concentration of capital and the unprecedented industrial activity which marked the close of the nineteenth century were followed by the most extraordinary growth in the number and variety of trade unions in the history of the movement; yet this expansion, remarkable as it was, has not only been equaled, but excelled, in the first years of the new century. The tide of unionism is sweeping over the whole country and rising steadily higher, notwithstanding the efforts put forth from a hundred sources controlled by the ruling class to restrain its march, impair its utility, or stamp it out of existence.

The history of the last 30 years of trade unionism is filled with stirring incidents and supplies abundant material for a good-sized volume. Organizations have risen and fallen, battles have been fought with varying results, every device known to the ingenuity of the ruling class has been employed to check the movement, but through it all the trend has been steadily toward a more perfect organization and a more comprehensive grasp of its mighty mission. The strikes and boycotts and lockouts which occurred with startling frequency during this period, some of them accompanied by riots and other forms of violence, tell their own tragic story of the class struggle which is shaking the foundations of society, and will end only with the complete overthrow of the wage system and the freedom of the working class from every form of slavery.

No strike has ever been lost and there can be no defeat for the labor movement.

However disastrous this day of battle has been, it has been worth its price, and only the scars remain to bear testimony that the movement is invincible and that no mortal wound can be inflicted upon it.

What has the union done for the worker? Far more than these brief paragraphs will allow us to place on record.

The union has from its inception taught, however imperfectly, the fundamental need of solidarity; it has inspired hope in the breast of the defeated and despairing worker, joining his hand with the hand of his fellow worker and bidding them lift their bowed bodies from the earth and look above and beyond the tribulations of the hour to the shining heights of future achievement.

The union has fought the battles of the worker upon a thousand fields, and though defeated often, rallied and charged again and again to wrest from the enemy the laurels of victory.

The union was first to trace in outline the lesson above all others the workingman needs to learn, and that is the collective interest and welfare of his class, in which his own is indissolubly bound, and that no vital or permanent change of conditions is possible that does not embrace his class as a whole.

The union has been a moral stimulus as well as a material aid to the worker; it has appealed to him to develop his faculties and to think for himself; to cultivate self-reliance and learn to depend upon himself; to have pride of character and make some effort to defend himself; to sympathize with and support his fellow workers and make their cause his own.

Although these things have as yet been only vaguely and imperfectly accomplished, yet they started in and have grown with the union, and to this extent the union has promoted the class conscious solidarity of the working class.

It is true that the trade union movement has in the same essential respects proved a disappointment, but it may not on this account be repudiated as a failure. The worst that can in truth be said of it is that it has not kept up with the procession of events, that it lacks the progressive spirit so necessary to its higher development and larger usefulness, but there are reasons for this and they suggest themselves to the most casual student of the movement.

When workingmen first began to organize unions every effort was made by the employing class to stamp out the incipient rebellion. This was kept up for years, but in spite of all that could be done to extinguish the

fires of revolt, the smoldering embers broke forth again and again, each time with increased intensity and vigor; and when at last it became apparent to the shrewder and more far-seeing members of the capitalist family that the union movement had come to stay, they forthwith changed their tactics, discarding their frowns and masking their features with the most artful smiles as they extended their greeting and pronounced their blessing upon this latest and greatest benefaction of the human race.

In fewer words, seeing that they could not head it off, they decided to take it by the hand and guide it into harmless channels.

This was precisely the policy pursued, first and last, by the late Marcus A. Hanna, and it will not be denied that he had the entire confidence of the capitalist class and that they clearly recognized his keen perception, astute diplomacy, and sagacious leadership in dealing with the union movement.

Mr. Hanna denominated the national leaders of the trade unions as his "lieutenants;" had the "Civic Federation" organized and himself elected president, that he and his lieutenants might meet upon equal ground, and as often as necessary he slapped them familiarly on the back, had his picture taken with them, and cracked jokes with them; and all the time he was doing this he was the beau ideal of Wall Street, the ruling voice in the capitalist councils, and all the trusts, syndicates, and combines, all the magnates, barons, lords, and plutocrats in one voice proclaimed him the ruler of rulers, the political prophet of their class, the cornerstone and central pillar in the capitalist system.

Mr. Hanna did not live to see his plan of "benevolent feudalism" consummated, nor to be elected president of the United States, as his Wall Street admirers and trade union friends intended, but he did live long enough to see the gathering clouds of the social revolution on the political horizon; and to prevent the trade union movement from becoming a factor in it, he taxed the resources of his fertile brain and bended all the energies of his indomitable will. Clearer sighted than all others of his class, he was promptly crowned their leader. He saw what was coming and prepared to meet and defeat it, or at least put off the crisis to a later day.