

The Crime of Craft Unionism

(February 1910)

Between the trade union and the working class union there is all the difference there is between unity and division, progress and reaction, victory and defeat. The trade union is outgrown and its survival is an unmitigated evil to the working class. The concentration of industry forces the concentration of the workers, and but for the trade unions which resist this tendency they would be united within a class union that would fight their battles with all the advantages possible in the existing system. But the trade unions hold out against the unification of the workers notwithstanding the multiplying evidences that craft unionism is not only impotent, but a crime against the workers.

The reason for this is not hard to find. Craft unionism is backed by the ruling capitalists for the very purpose of preventing the workers from uniting in a class organization. Morgan's Civic Federation¹ is sufficient evidence of this fact. Another reason is that an army of officials, big and little, are drawing salaries from the trade union movement. These salaries amount to millions of dollars each year. In addition to these salaries there are graft and pickings without end. The Morganzed capitalist monopolists and the army of official salary drawers account for the ability of trade unionism to withstand the forces of evolution. It is to be added that the leaders of craft unionism, like the members of the President's cabinet, graduate into high official position prepared for them by their masters. Mitchell,² Morrissey,³ and O'Keefe⁴ are shining examples in a long list of such graduations.

If there were no other proof that craft unionism is an unmitigated curse to the workers in this age of concentration of all things — except organized labor alone — the proceedings of a convention of the American Federation of Labor, devoted mainly to preventing the unification of the workers by vain attempts to maintain trade jurisdictions, would be entirely sufficient.

In this writing I propose to show by indisputable proof that craft division is a crime against the working class. At Buffalo, New York, four union men lie in jail, the victims of craft division, and unless the workers of that city take their cases in hand at once and staunchly back them up they will be railroaded to the penitentiary for a long term of years.

These four union men, Robert Cochrane, Joseph Meyers, Harry Milan, and John Norton, are members of the Marine Firemen, Oilers and Water Tenders, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. They have been engaged in the strike of the Lake Seamen's Union, with which they are also affiliated, against the Lake Carriers' Association, which is only a thin disguise for the steel trust. This strike has been in progress for more than two years and has cost this one union alone nearly \$200,000, its treasury being now empty and the resources of its members exhausted, with defeat staring them in the face. More than a score of good union men, members of the same craft union, have been assassinated during this strike by the detectives and hirelings of the Steel Trust, alias the Lake Carriers' Association. These private murderers of the Steel Trust are, of course, backed up by the authorities and their word is taken in preference to that of honest workingmen. The cold-blooded murder of union men is promptly followed by the acquittal of the hired hessians who murdered them, while other union men, innocent of crime, are thrown into jail upon a trumped up charge and sent to the penitentiary as victims of craft unionism.

Let me quote from a letter received some time ago from one of the union men engaged in this strike:

We have been persecuted all over the lakes by the police of all the lake cities and by an army of special detectives. Seven members of the union have been shot down like dogs in the streets of the different lake ports and no redress could be obtained from the authorities. In each instance the assassin was promptly released. Two of our members have quite recently been shot down, instantly killed, by one of these detectives, in as coldblooded a murder as was ever committed.

This is only a brief quotation from one of the numerous letters and reports before me, detailing the numberless outrages and crimes of which these craft unionists have been the victims in their struggle of over two years against the Steel Trust.

The point I wish to make and drive home with all the force I can is that it is the rank and file, the common workers, who are always the victims of craft unionism. They have to do the picketing, go up against the guns, and be shot down like dogs by the mercenary hirelings of the corporations, while their leaders drink champagne wine at Civic Federation banquets as the guests of the plutocratic owners of these same corporations.

It is not Samuel Gompers and John Mitchell who have to do the picketing and furnish the targets for the bullets of the corporation detectives. They never take any risks. They are never at the front. Gompers has never been in a battle in all his life. He lacks the courage to stand at the front. He is always safely in the rear. The misguided craft unionists who pay his salary are his bullet-stoppers. He is always the champion of craft unionism, but never its victim. The salary he draws is at the price of the craft unionists who are slain.

Every corpse of a union man shot dead in such a fight as that of the Marine Firemen bears ghastly testimony to the crime of craft unionism. If Gompers and the rest of the leaders believe in it and are honest let them furnish the corpses as well as draw the salaries.

But it is those who are foremost in advocating it who are hindmost in fighting its hopeless and disastrous battles.

Let us examine the situation just a moment. Here is Morgan and his Steel Trust, who have crushed the Steel and Tin Plate Workers' Union until only the shell is left, the shell of craft unionism, and are now crushing the Marine Firemen and other unions connected with the Lake Seamen and affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. These craft unions are all but annihilated, as others without number have been before them. Their treasuries are bankrupt, their members impoverished and out of jobs, and about all there remains is the charter on the wall to remind them that they owe what has come to them to craft unionism. And while these poor devils are facing the automatic revolvers of the detectives and having their heads beaten into pulp by the police, and while their families are being evicted for non-payment of rent and their children are suffering for bread, their grand leaders are banqueting with the plutocratic lords and dames under the prostituted auspices of the Civic Federation of labor, making merry over the beatitudes that flow from the brotherhood of capital and labor, and glorifying the marvelous triumphs of trade unionism in the United States.

It is in the name of the rank and file that I write. I care nothing about the leaders. About all they are good for is to keep the workers divided. At conventions they exploit themselves, grow jealous of each other, and to maintain their petty leadership rend organized labor into factions and keep the workers at each others' throats.

All about us are the evidences of decaying craft unionism in spite of the powerful influences that are propping it up. The workers themselves are beginning to see it. They realize that the forces of capital are united

against them and that their craft divisions make them an easy prey to the enemy.

The strike of the garment workers at Chicago is almost sufficient to open the eyes of the dead. The strike of the nine thousand cigar makers at Tampa is another frightful object lesson. Here union men have been lynched, deported, marooned, slugged and outraged in every conceivable way, and all because of the impotency and treachery of craft unionism.

The strike of the Resistencia at Tampa some years ago may be recalled in the present strike, where the same outrages are being repeated and the same rank and file furnishing the victims. The strike of the Resistencia followed a series of meetings I addressed at Tampa and the papers charged that it was due to my agitation. The strikers, who were Cubans, struck as bravely as ever men did under the flag of a craft union, and they would have won without a doubt had not the members of the cigar makers' union, another craft union, allowed themselves to be used by the manufacturers to crush the strikers. The present strike is an echo of that strike and the treachery of craft unionism is bearing its usual fruit. Of course, I am with the nine thousand striking cigar makers at Tampa, as I was with the Resistencia, and I want them to win and will help them in any way in my power, regardless of the past, but I insist that they shall profit by its appalling lessons.

Only a few days ago, after a prolonged strike on the Missouri Pacific, the Machinists' union surrendered after being completely beaten by the other craft unions, whose members were all diligently at work all around the scab machinists, helping the railroad company faithfully, under their time contracts, to crush their own fellow workers. The leaders are as usual making the claim that it was not a complete defeat since the company allowed them what it had originally offered and against which they went out on strike.

It takes very little to constitute a victory for a craft union leader. To admit defeat is a menace to his job and his salary. He is therefore compelled to make out a victory and the capitalist papers usually support his claim. The "magnificent victory" of John Mitchell in the Anthracite, which made him "the greatest labor leader the world has ever known," and which was I so fulsomely lauded by the capitalist press, is written in the desolation of many a miner's cabin and in the practical annihilation of the union in that region.

And now, what of it all? Simply this: industrial unionism, the unity of all the workers within one organization, subdivided in their respective departments, and organized, not to fraternize with the exploiting capital-

ists, but to make war on them and to everlastingly wipe out their system under which labor is robbed of what it produces and held in contempt because it submits to the robbery. If ever there was a time to unite the workers to fight their battles, and to have it clearly understood that they mean war on capitalism, war without quarter, and that they mean to overthrow that system, wipe out wage-slavery, and make the workers the world's rulers, that time is now.

To step from the craft union into the class union is to step from the darkness into the light, to emerge from weakness into power. All the failures of craft unionism and all the crimes perpetrated upon its victims cry out for industrial unionism. This is now the supremest need of the workers. Without the unity and power such organization confers they can make no substantial progress toward emancipation.

Industrial unionism is the structural work of the Cooperative Commonwealth, the working class republic. Every wage-worker ought to bend his energies to the task of uniting the workers in one mighty economic organization.

This change cannot be effected from within the craft unions or the federation that is supposed to combine them, although an effective propaganda can and should be carried on within those unions. Industrial unionism is a new and revolutionary unionism which requires a new and revolutionary organization. The new spirit may ferment in the craft unions, but it cannot express itself in the old molds. It must be remembered, however, that there are many whose jobs and means of livelihood are bound up in craft unions. Let such as these do what they can within their unions while others set to work without to build up the new organization.

But whether within or without let all the awakened workers put forth their efforts, according to their means, to supplant decadent, corrupt craft unionism with industrial unionism, and unite all the workers, regardless of trade, occupation, nationality, creed or sex, within one powerful economic organization to fight their battles and achieve their emancipation.

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¹ Civic Federation INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE

² John Mitchell INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE

³ Morrissey INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE

⁴ O'Keefe INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE