

The Failure of Weak and Compromising Tactics in Chicago (August 22, 1911)

Chicago is the industrial center of the United States. Capitalism is in operation here upon the largest scale and in the most advanced stage of development. The trusts, having their industrial headquarters here, draw to themselves the resources of all the continent, while their products supply all the markets of the world.

In a word, capitalism is in full flower in Chicago. All that capitalism stands for, all it produces, all that flows from it, directly and indirectly, is here on exhibition.

A grand army of a million wage-workers are here employed producing wealth for their corporate masters. Hundreds of thousands of these are at the proletarian point of existence. Everything has been done that capitalism can do to leaven the mass for socialism, and nowhere can there be found a readier foundation or ampler and fitter materials for a towering and impregnable socialist movement.

If capitalism, as we contend, and as is undeniably true, makes for socialism, then why has not Chicago such a movement? Why is there such deplorable weakness at the heart and center where capitalism has generated such abundance of power for socialism to grasp and utilize; power that should ramify the continent and inspire the working class world?

There is surely something is wrong with the Chicago movement. What is it? I have been thinking about it a great deal, especially since the humiliating and disappointing returns of the last city election. In a campaign speech made there, Congressman Berger set the Chicago vote at 80,000. He missed it by some 60,000.

The candidates were eminently satisfactory, and led by the brilliant young Rodriguez¹ made a stirring campaign; the platform was entirely sound, but the socialists of Chicago, especially the labor unionists, did not vote the Socialist Party ticket.

For this there is a reason, as there is also a reason why the movement in Chicago, assisted by comrades in all the central, southern, and western states, will not support a socialist daily or only sufficiently so to keep it limping along on the ragged edge of despair.

What are the reasons for and the causes of this lamentable state of affairs? Can they be ascertained and removed, that Chicago may rise untrammelled and take her rightful place at the head of the American movement?

I believe this is easily possible, and to suggest what seems to me to be wrong and the way to right it, is the object of this writing.

My interest in Chicago is twofold. For years it was my headquarters, and the struggles and associations of that period have given me a peculiar personal interest there, while for reasons already mentioned, and which seem quite obvious, Chicago has tremendous influence, for good or ill, upon the entire country.

Chicago, soundly organized, economically and politically, with a powerful press to sustain it, would send its vitalizing currents thrilling through all the arteries of the American movement.

She has never been so organized, and why? For the reason, principally, as I believe, that she has catered too much, in her eagerness to catch votes and subscribers, to the reactionary trade unions and the corrupt influences which dominate these aggregations of disunion and reaction. This has been particularly marked during the last two or three years, the period of Chicago's greatest opportunities for socialist propaganda.

There is no question of the power of Chicago trade unionism under its present leadership, but it is not a power to which the Socialist Party can bow and scrape without serious if not fatal consequences to itself.

The Socialist Party cannot socialize the trade unions by such tactics, but the trade unions can and will trade-unionize the Socialist Party. Instead of the trade unions becoming revolutionary, the Socialist Party will become reactionary, and then its doom is sealed.

Nowhere is trade unionism in its totality more reactionary than in Chicago; nowhere its leadership more notoriously corrupt; nowhere the union ward-heeler more brazenly in evidence. In the aggregate this power is controlled by capitalism through its swarm of mercenaries that infest these unions, and to descend to their political level and compete with them for votes is not only to lose at a disreputable game at which they are adept, but to forfeit the confidence and lose the support of the straight, self-respecting, and revolutionary comrades, who are disgusted by such tactics and refuse to sanction them by their ballots on election day.

Chicago has had over 35 years of socialist agitation and organization, and yet it has no movement and no press. During all these years Chicago has had the best socialist speakers, lecturers, and organizers, and the

most of them; she has had all kinds of auxiliaries as feeders and nourishers, great meetings and demonstrations without number; thousands of the most earnest, active, and energetic workers, men and women, boys and girls, and the net result of all this enormous expenditure of energy and money is scarcely any sound economic organization at all and a Socialist vote smaller than it was twenty years ago.

When the test comes Chicago can always be counted upon to break her record for disappointments.

There are, I believe, a hundred thousand socialists and near-socialists in Chicago, but they do not vote the ticket. I have reason to believe that a great many of these are dissatisfied, not to say disgusted, with the party's weak and compromising tactics; its eagerness to roll up a large vote at the price even of its principles.² When a Socialist Party places itself in that attitude it is doomed. It does not get the vote controlled by the fakirs it is playing for and it forfeits the respect and loses the votes of the honest men who would otherwise support it.

There is everything to be lost and nothing to be gained by kowtowing to the so-called union leaders and getting down to the level of ward-heeling politicians. With but few exceptions the leaders are set against socialism — and that is why they are “leaders,” and any alliance the Socialist Party may make with them, open or covert, is certain to react with deadly effect upon the party.

The socialist movement can only develop power as a revolutionary movement. If for any reason its revolutionary character is weakened, its power, like that of a locomotive lacking steam, is impaired, and its life is threatened.

It is in no spirit of unfriendliness that this criticism is written and these suggestions offered. The Chicago comrades know what my personal feeling toward them is and always has been. No one better knows than I how hard they have worked, how freely they have spent themselves and given their substance to build up the movement, and it is precisely because of this that I feel moved to suggest this change of party tactics and methods.

Let the Socialist Party of Chicago refrain absolutely from making any further humiliating overtures to catch trade union votes or enroll trade union subscribers! Let it stand squarely upon the principles of the international movement and fight the clean and uncompromising fight of the working class! Let it make its appeal direct to the workers, drawing them toward its stainless standard by the force of its own militant character and its unswerving devotion to its revolutionary principles!

If the Socialist Party of Chicago and its daily press, the *Daily Socialist* in particular, will come out squarely upon such a platform, declare boldly for industrial unionism, the only working class unionism there is, and fight for it, defy all the brood of ward-heeling corruptionists, and stand four square to all the world for the working class and the revolution, there will be a marvelous change in the next twelve months.

Some there will be, I doubt not, who will balk at such a change and perhaps leave the party. But there will be many others to take their places, and they will come flocking eagerly in increasing numbers.

Such an attitude an program would appeal like a clarion to all militant spirits, the very ones who have become lukewarm or who have entirely dropped out on account of the present policy, and without whom it would be vain to hope for a triumphant revolutionary movement.

Confidence would be revived, new enthusiasm kindled, and unprecedented agitation would follow. The effect upon the propaganda would be instantaneous. All the springs of action would be at once quickened, the party would build up and develop amazing power, the *Daily* would stand secure upon a solid foundation, and at the next election at least 50,000 socialists would bear testimony by their voices that at last there is a socialist movement in Chicago.

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¹ William Emilio Rodriguez (1879-1970) was born in Naperville, Illinois, the son of a Spanish father and German mother. He went to work at age 13 in a cotton factory, putting himself through night school, from which he ultimately graduated with a legal degree. Rodriguez ran for mayor of Chicago in 1911, finishing a distant third, but was later elected to two terms on the Chicago City Council. From 1919 he became active in the labor party movement, actively fighting the Workers Party or America's effort to win control of the Farmer-Labor Party in 1923-24. He subsequently dropped out of politics but continued to practice law in Chicago into his eighties.

² This assertion drew a pointed editorial reply: "We would like to believe with Comrade Debs that there are one hundred thousand socialists or near socialists in Chicago. He says there are... Our precinct canvassers have not so reported. They ought to know. The merest ripple of dissatisfaction should reach the party headquarters here. We have in the past found complaints that the party is opposing the unions, but that is clearing away just as it did in Milwaukee." The editorialist further stated "We believe that all Chicago socialists earnestly desire to pursue the same policy toward the trade unions that has been followed in Milwaukee. It will be noted that the *Social Democratic Herald* of that city is the official organ of the trade unions. We wish the *Daily Socialist* to occupy the same kind of a position relatively in Chicago." ("An Answer to Comrade Debs," *CDS*, Aug. 22, 1911, p. 4.)