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ARTICLE

THE EVOLUTION OF UNIONISM.¹

By DANIEL DE LEON

COL. Thomas Wentworth Higginson once said that conservatism should be looked for last among the aged. The young, commanding a limited experience, may easily fall into the error of believing that as things are, so were they always, and would always be; the aged, on the contrary, commanding an extensive experience and having witnessed changes innumerable, should be all the readier to absorb new ideas. Upon this identical reasoning precisely the reverse of the principle should be applicable to nations. The older a nation the longer are the different social stages that it has evolved through during the distant past, and equally longer is the duration of the social stage in which it may find itself to-day; on the other hand, the younger a nation, all the more rapid must its evolutions have been from stage to stage, and all the fresher its recollections of these several changes. It should follow that, with nations, conservatism should be found stronger rooted in the old, and weaker rooted in the young. The youngest of all the nations entrusted with the civilization of the world is America. Whether or not Colonel Higginson's theory holds good with regard to individuals, that the logical reverse of the theory does hold good with regard to nations, is exemplified by America, if in nothing else, in the double circumstance of the launching of the Industrial Workers

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of the World, together with the acclaim that has greeted its appearance from the ranks of the working class, I may also add—and also in the angry frowns that immediately furrowed the brows of America’s capitalist class, and the groans and howls that have since gone up from that camp, together with its dependencies of various shades—altogether significant and significantly supplementary circumstances.

The economic organization of the working class, like everything else that we have, was transmitted to us from Europe; and like everything else, came rough-hewn into our hands. It was for us to shape it in keeping with the most advanced capitalist conditions found in America. We have done so. In doing so the hardest part of the work lay in overthrowing the baneful principle that “a union need not be a Socialist union,” which was tantamount to saying that “a labor organization need not be an organization of labor.” Like all ripened error, this error has its roots in early history; like all ripened error, accompanying circumstances presently rendered the error plausible; like all ripened error, the point was presently reached when this particular error served as the best shield to the very interests, the capitalist class, in this instance, against which, in fact, unionism, however unconsciously, was instinctively directed. It did not take the American capitalist class long to drop the conservatism of its European kin and perceive the profit to itself that would accrue from the error. The American capitalist class promptly and deftly appropriated the error, compounded it into a baneful pill and oiled the pill in an oil coating of equivoques; its labor lieutenants were charged with the administration of the pill in such doses as might be found necessary; and the rank and file of the working class swallowed the drug, and were thus seasoned into “condition” to be served to the capitalist exploiter. At the bottom of the history of the labor movement in America for the last fifteen years lies the struggle of the “disturbers” and “disruptionists” to inject into the working class the antidote to the baneful pill, and thereby to quicken “contented and peaceful” labor to a sense of its actual condition, its power, its rights, its mission in society and its duty to itself.

As well say that man should have fins and live under water, and that to have fins and live under water is the natural condition of life, on the ground that thus did life begin on our planet, as to say that the natural form of unionism is the pure and

simple style. Unionism started as pure and simple. The “naturalness” begins and ends there. Unionism made its appearance with capitalism. The facts that go to make experience were then wanting. The illusion, at that season, was natural that the workingman could cope with the capitalist the same as the capitalist copes with the purchaser, the consumer of his goods. In Europe, the continent especially, two circumstances, independent of unionism itself, stepped in to neutralize the illusion. One was the circumstance that the still semi-feudal social institutions were calculated to mark sharply the class distinction between the worker and the exploiter; the other, that sprung from the first, was the revolutionary movements for political rights. The joint effect of these two causes, was the revolutionary movements for political rights. The joint effect of these two causes was, as a general thing, to raise unionism in Europe, the continent especially, out of the original ruts in which it started. But lo! from this circumstance arose the most untoward of illusions. Seeing that in continental Europe unionism had become, besides a means to resist capitalist aggression, an aspiration, the question of the ultimate object of the union dropped to the rear, not that the object was neglected, or lost sight of, but that it was considered too obvious for discussion—the union was anyhow builded upon working class principles. The illusion that arose was, first, that the union need not; then, that it must not; and then, that criminal was any attempt to cause the union to concern itself about its ultimate mission. The practical manifestation of this illusion was the dogma that the economic or social opinions of the membership of a union were “private affairs” which did not concern the organization. “Unionism” thus became a term that covered certain acts only, such as wages and hours of work, regardless of the economic and sociologic principles inculcated in the union. That, of course, knocked the bottom from under the union’s true mission, and, as a consequence, from the hours of work and wages proposition also. With this plunge downward, unionism became just the thing for capitalism. It is curious to watch how the delusion invaded America, and furnished capitalism with its main prop.

Willful wrong could not live a day if not innocently supported by the well-intentioned but uninformed. It is from this well-meaning but uninformed source that American capitalism drew its spiritual force. Imagine a man born and brought up in Western Europe, for instance, and descended from a long line of indigenious

ancestors. Such a person, if at all given to watch the weather, will have learned that east wind brings dry, and west wind wet weather. If he is a superficial man he will say: "East wind, dry; west wind, rain," and think he is uttering a chunk of deep, natural wisdom. The fact is that he is merely expressing a manifestation of a fact in natural philosophy, a fact which underlies his observations. The underlying scientific fact is that wind which comes overland is dry, while wind which comes over the waters is wet. In Eastern Europe, for instance, east wind comes over land, and consequently, is dry, not because it comes from the east, but because it comes over land; on the other hand, west wind comes there over the waters, and, consequently, is wet, not because it comes from the west, but because it comes over the waters. He who has fathomed the phenomenon down to its scientific foundation will adapt his actions to it everywhere; he who has not so fathomed the secret will find himself in trouble the moment he changes his home. If such a one were to come to New York, for instance, rain will overtake him regularly when he expects dry weather, and he will find himself regularly burdened, unnecessarily, with an umbrella when he mistakenly looks for rain. The scientific fact remained; just because it remained what it was in Western Europe, in New York, which lies to the east of the waters and to west of land, east wind will bring rain instead of dry weather and west wind will bring dry instead of wet weather, as in Europe. In the identical predicament will the New Yorker be found who imports his weather wisdom without scrutiny. No better off is he in America who would follow European slogans. Such a slogan is that concerning the make-up of the union.

So to speak, in America, land does not lie, as in Europe, to the east, or the waters to the west. The total absence of feudalism from our land leaves the country wholly subject to capitalist influences. Chicanery is the breath in the nostrils of the capitalist class. False appearances is the standard of capitalist society. Here, accordingly, all the social institutions are calculated to blur the lines of class distinction. Under such conditions, in such an atmosphere, the consciousness of the class struggle and, along with it, the ultimate mission of unionism, is not "too obvious for discussion." Here it must be emphasized, and the emphasis must manifest itself in the structure of the union. In such a capitalist country as America, as well say that, because the capitalist class is prosperous, therefore, the "nation is

prosperous,” as to say that, because an economic body consists of workingmen, therefore it is in the interest of the working class. As in the former instance, so in the latter; the advertiser’s trick is but a deception. The capitalist class is not the nation; their prosperity does not imply national prosperity, it implies the reverse; it implies the misery of the nation’s majority, of the working class; so with the economic organization; the union is not necessarily a labor organization; it may be, like the army of the German emperor, a body of proletarians so organized and officered, as to be a weapon for imperial despotism and for the oppression of the proletariat. In America, accordingly, the conservative notion with regard to unionism has no place. Here the conditions demand the adoption of new ideas.

Among the things that we may learn from the recent populist uprising is its clear-sightedness and radicalism as to methods. It would be a pity if its confused and confusing economics were so to becloud the clearness of its radical methods as to have these lost to us. “The free coinage of silver at the ratio of sixteen to one regardless of international agreement” was supremely absurd as to economics, but as supremely luminous as to radicalness and clearness of temper. Long had the single standard men dillydallied {dilly-dallied}; they had held out offers that looked to sixteen to one, but always with a string attached. The string one day was this, and then it was that, and then it was the other. At last the free coinagists had made their experience, and in the wording of their demand cut all the strings. It was so at the Chicago Industrialists’ convention. There economics stepped abreast of clear-sightedness as to methods, and clear-sightedness as to methods stood abreast of economics. The stand taken was that a union is not a union unless it is a labor organization; that a labor organization is an organization of the working class for the working class, and consequently is in the field not to harmonize the vampire capitalist with his victim, the workingman; not to play at peace where there is no peace, but to bring a sword that shall separate the goats from the sheep; that naught is a union that is not so constructed, drilled and officered as to smite the capitalist class hip and thigh, and raise the republic of labor. In short, that a “union” is but an outpost, or even bulwark of capitalism, if it is not a Socialist union. Conservatism long pooh-poohed the idea. Radicalism has enthroned it.

The Industrial Workers of the World is the mature fruit of the old

International. True to the psychology implied in Colonel Higginson's maxim, the fruit has ripened in the youngest of the sisterhood of nations. It ripened in season. How fully in season may be gathered from the sheet lightning that is now crimsoning the social sky of old Europe. Our duty in America now is, on the one hand, to furnish the powder-laden cannon of the social revolution in Europe with the ball needed to render the charge effective, and on the other, to avail ourselves of the European powder to propel, out of the cannon of the social revolution in America, the ball that we have here cast in the foundry of ripened capitalism.

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