THE I. W. W. AND THE RED INTERNATIONAL OF LABOR UNIONS

By JAMES P. CANNON

The Fifteenth General Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World, which is scheduled to remain in session for three weeks, devoted 30 minutes of its time to hearing representatives of the Red International appeal to them to send delegates to the forthcoming World Congress in order to discuss there the basis of a working program upon which all the revolutionary elements in the American labor movement may unite their forces for the common struggle. Without exaggerating the immediate results accomplished, I venture to say that this act of the convention was the most significant one in all its deliberations. The Red International appeared there as the advocate of unity in the struggle of all revolutionary labor unionists of America and the world. There is no bigger question before the working class than this; and the mere discussion of it, even tho it leads to no immediate result, is an event of major importance.

The friendly approach of the Red International toward the convention of the I. W. W. does not signify any change of policy on its part. It simply represented another step in its efforts to unify all the militant elements in the labor movement on a common platform of revolutionary struggle. It has already accomplished much toward this end. The Red International has been the leading and inspiring force in the organization, for the first time in history, of the left wing of the American trade unions into a compact, united body. It has gained a decisive influence in many of the radical independent unions, and has been the greatest power making for the harmonious co-operation of the members of these unions with the revolutionary workers in the conservative trade unions. The next necessary task is to bring about a unity of purpose between these elements and the I. W. W. It must be acknowledged that this will be a tremendous task. Thick walls of prejudice and misunderstanding stand in the way. But the Red International turns to it with such a record of real achievements to its credit as to give the promise that it will find the way to overcome all difficulties and achieve its purposes in good time.

It would be foolish to think this will be a simple or easy thing to accomplish. Real and serious differences stand in the way, and they will not disappear merely because we might wish them to. But it is worth while now to begin a serious discussion of the whole question. The Red International does not cover up real differences, it brings them out into the open and talks about them frankly. This is what we must do.

There are two main conflicts, one theoretical and the other practical, which have so far not only prevented unity between the I. W. W. and the revolutionary trade unionists and the communists, but which have charged the whole atmosphere with hostility and led to the most bitter controversies. All sorts of controversies have complicated the situation, but they are all subordinate to the main questions and spring from them. The main points of controversy are these two: First, the conflict in philosophy between communism and syndicalism, or industrialism which is its American variant, over the role of the state, the necessity for a proletarian party and the question of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat; Second, the conflict between the Red International program of working within the conservative unions, wherever they exist as mass organizations, in order to revolutionize them from within, and the I. W. W. program of organizing branches as rivals to the other unions. These conflicts are of such a deep seated nature as to absolutely preclude the possibility of an immediate complete agreement and organize unity between the I. W. W. and the communists on the one hand and between the I. W. W. and the trade unions on the other. But it does not follow from this that a state of war must exist between them along the entire front, with no co-operation anywhere. On the contrary, an examination of the concrete situation will show that a working agreement and co-operation in action is immediately possible in most places and on many questions of great importance.

For example, there is no valid reason to prevent a joint fight of the I. W. W. and the communists and adherents of the Red International for the release of class war prisoners, against criminal syndicalism laws and injunctions, in support of Workers' Germany, etc. Each organization could join in such a United Front without sacrificing any principle or jeopardizing its organizational integrity in any way. All that is required to bring it about is an alliance for the specific purpose, not a unity of the organizations. Such a joint fight would be of the greatest agitational value; it would multiply the power behind the drive and make for its success. The movement generally, and the I. W. W. in particular, has much to gain from it. A campaign of this nature can be carried out without regard to the points in dispute between us. Its effect would be to strengthen and stimulate the movement as a whole and to promote a feeling of friendship and solidarity which would make it much easier to work for a basis of united effort on other questions. To say that because we do not all agree on the question of the state, we cannot make a joint fight for the class war prisoners, is tantamount to saying that we can never work together as long as there is one point at issue between us. Such a view is dogmatic and unreasonable. The united front on the questions mentioned above is an immediate practical possibility. If we are serious revolutionists who put the interests of the working class above everything, we have to say this United Front is a necessity.

Turning to the field of organization, it can be shown that the differences between the I. W. W. and the adherents of the Red International are not nearly so great as to prevent co-operation in most cases of real importance. The story has been persistently circulated, and is believed by many members of the I. W. W., that the Red International wants to "liquidate" the I. W. W., and that it makes a fetish of the A. F. of L. There is no truth in this story. The Red International does lay it down as a cardinal point that the revolutionary workers must not isolate themselves from the masses, that they must join the unions to which the masses belong, no matter what their affiliation may be, and work there in good faith to build them up, to strengthen them in every way and to inspire them with the spirit of militant struggle. But this does not mean that the Red International has a special love for the unions affiliated to the A. F. of L., as such, and is opposed on principle to the I. W. W. and Independent unions. The Red International works according to the concrete facts as it finds them, not according to a cut and dried formula. It surveys each industry separately, and in each case asks the question: "Where are the Masses of the Workers?" The answer to that question determines its program for that industry. In the Coal Mining Industry it naturally supports the United Mine Workers, an A. F. of L. organization, because the organized workers are there. For the same reason, in the Men's Clothing Industry it supports the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, an Independent Union, and in such industries as Lumber and Agriculture it supports the I. W. W. In an industry having two or more rival unions it works for the unification of all of them into a single industrial union for the entire industry. Its approach to the question in each case is practical, not simply theoretical.

This realistic attitude of the Red International does not suit those who take a dogmatic view of the labor movement, who want to move always along a straight line and meet all its complex problems by the simple process of saying yes or no. They point to this flexible program as proof of their contention that it is impossible for the I. W. W. to even speak to the Red International, to say nothing of affiliating with it. But a sober consideration of the question for five minutes is sufficient to completely explode this theory. It is true that this policy of the Red International conflicts with the I. W. W. program of universal organization in such fields as the Coal Mining Industry, the Needle Trades, Building Trades, etc., where the workers are already organized in large numbers into other unions. In these fields there is a real conflict; but it is a conflict more of theory than of practice. In the daily struggle the question hardly ever arises for the simple reason that the I. W. W. does not exist there as a functioning labor organization. And the conflict there does not preclude the possibility of unity in other fields, where the practical situation is different. If we will turn to those fields where the I. W. W. functions as a labor union we will find that there is no real conflict between it and the Red International.

The financial report of the general office of the I. W. W. for the fiscal year ending Oct. 1, 1928, shows the average number of dues paying members for the year to be approximately 38,000. This report also shows conclusively that, in spite of all theories of universality, the I. W. W. is predominantly an organization of migratory workers. The great bulk of its membership consists of lumber workers, agricultural workers and general construction workers. In these three industries it has about 21,000 members. In these industries, as in practically the whole field of migratory labor, the I. W. W. is the only real labor union. The question of a conflict between the I. W. W. and other unions does not arise here, and consequently there is no conflict between the I. W. W. and the program of the Red International. The Red International can come to a complete agreement with the I. W. W. in this field on the basis of all of its supporters joining and supporting the existing unions of the I. W. W. At the very beginning we see that complete unity between the Red International and the I. W. W. can be realized immediately in the main fields of I. W. W. organization. The very first discussion of the problem will dispose of the charge that the Red International wants to "liquidate" the I. W. W. and it will also eliminate at least 75 per cent of the organizational conflicts.

In the metal mining industry and the marine transport industry the I. W. W. also has some organization. The problem is not quite so simple in these industries because rival unions exist and the great majority of the workers are unorganized. The total number of dues stamps issued to the Metal Mine Workers' Union of the I. W. W. (which also includes a small number of coal miners) by the general office during the past year was 2,680, while the total number of dues stamps issued to the marine transport workers was 6,426. The real problem in these industries is the problem of organizing the workers. A necessary preliminary to this is the co-operation of all the militant elements. It cannot be said offhand what precise form this co-operation would take; that could only be arrived at after the most thoro discussion and consideration of the whole situation on the part of all concerned. One thing is certain: friction between the militant elements could be reduced or eliminated entirely, and their whole energy concentrated on the fight against the bosses. In any event the question of "liquidation" does not enter.

It may be argued that this article deals only with a part of the differences which has caused the bitter controversy in the past, and that it leaves many points of conflict untouched. This is true enough. We have no patent prescription by which complete unity with the I. W. W. can be achieved at one stroke. Argument alone is not sufficient to erase the long-standing antagonisms. The struggle itself is the great unifier that welds all truly militant elements in the working class into one body and hammers all their theories into a unified system. My purpose here has been to bring to the front those questions upon which agreement can be reached, and to throw some light on the great possibilities for future co-operation opened by the proposed of the Red International that the I. W. W. send delegates to the next World Congress in order to discuss the whole question there. It is my contention that the differences of theory and doctrine between the I. W. W. and the Communists, real and serious though they be, do not justify a continuous state of war along the whole front. This war is all the more harmful to both because it is unnecessary; and, more than that, it is harmful to the interests of the working class as a whole. The conflict in the camp of militant labor, which goes to the point of preventing solidarity and unity in the class struggle, serves the capitalists and them alone. A thoro discussion at the World Congress may not succeed in settling all matters in dispute. But it will lay the basis for unity of action in the struggle. That is the important thing now. The rest will follow.

The militant labor movement of America is nearer to unity than ever before, and the greatest power making for this unity is the Red International of Labor Unions. Here in America, as everywhere else in the capitalist world, the Red International is fulfilling its great historic role. It is uniting the militant workers into a mighty army and marshalling them for the struggle. It has already won the devoted allegiance of the revolutionary workers in all the American labor organizations except the I. W. W. The members of the I. W. W. still stand aside from the Red International only because the flood of misrepresentation has prejudiced them against it. But the Red International will not accept this attitude as final. It is a fighting body, but it is willing to fight only against the capitalist class and its agents. To the I. W. W., as to all organizations of rank and file workers, it holds out the hand of brotherhood. Its answer to the narrow dogmatists who have misrepresented and slandered it, and to those members of the I. W. W. who have been deceived thereby, is to turn again to the I. W. W. with an appeal for a friendly discussion of all differences in order to find a basis for unity. The time is surely coming when the rank and file of the I. W. W. will hear that appeal and act upon it. And the result of their action will be to bring about a greater solidarity than the American movement has ever known, a tremendous stride forward of the movement as a whole and its unity under one banner, the banner of the Red International.