
The Western Labor Movement

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *The International Socialist Review* [Chicago], v. 3, no. 5 (Nov. 1902), pp. 257-265.

There seems to be considerable misapprehension, especially among Socialists, in regard to the trade union movement of the Western states, whose delegates, recently assembled in national convention, adopted the platform of the Socialist Party and pledged the support of their organizations to the International Socialist movement. This radical departure from the effete and reactionary non-political policy of the American Federation of Labor, so long and so earnestly striven for by the Western leaders, and so entirely compatible with the Socialist conception of class-conscious and progressive trade unionism, should have been met with the prompt and hearty approbation of every unionist and every Socialist in the land. That such was not the case, the lukewarm comment and half-approving, half-condemning tone of the Socialist Party press, with but one or two exceptions, bear convincing testimony, while the uncalled for, unwise, and wholly unaccountable official pronunciamento of the St. Louis "Quorum," purporting to speak for the National Committee, capped the climax of unfairness and injustice to the Western movement.†

Stripped of unnecessary verbiage and free from subterfuge, the Socialist Party has been placed in the attitude of turning its back upon the young, virile, class-conscious union movement of the West, and

fawning at the feet of the "pure and simple" movement of the East, and this anomalous thing has been done by men who are supposed to stand sponsor to the party and whose utterance is credited with being *ex cathedra* upon party affairs.

They may congratulate themselves that upon this point at least they are in perfect accord with the capitalist press, and also with the "labor lieutenants," the henchmen, and the heelers, whose duty it is to warn the union against Socialism and guard its members against working class political action.

The writer takes issue with these comrades upon this vital proposition; and first of all insists that they (including the members of the Quorum) speak for themselves alone, as they undoubtedly have the right to do, and that their declaration in reference to the American Labor Union is in no sense a party expression, nor is it in any matter binding upon the party, nor is the party to be held responsible for the same.

As a matter of fact the rank and file of the Socialist Party, at least so far as I have been able to observe, rejoice in the action of the Denver convention, hail it as a happy augury for the future, and welcome with open arms the Western comrades to fellowship in the party.

"Why didn't they stay in the Federation of La-

†- Reference is to a statement made by the St. Louis Quorum of the National Committee in its semi-annual report of Sept. 12, 1902: "*The independent tendencies of the state organizations find expression in different tactics by different states on questions of national policy, so that while the National Committee may be attempting to rally the comrades of the country on a certain line of action, conflicting policies may be urged by one or more State Committees. This confusion in organization and in tactics is well illustrated at this time by many of our comrades who seem to think that Socialist principles are justification for applauding a division on Socialist lines between the economic organizations of the working class.*"

"*While the Socialist Party in national convention has solemnly pledged itself to the unification of the trade unions, yet a contrary policy has been set up in the West by comrades acting in a dual capacity as organizers of the American Labor Union and the Socialist Party, thus misrepresenting the attitude of our party and compromising it in their attempts to build up a rival organization to the American Federation of Labor.*"

The entire Sept. 12, 1902 National Committee report is available as a downloadable pdf from www.marxisthistory.org

bor and carry on their agitation there? Why split the labor movement?" This is made the burden of the opposition to the Western unionists, who refused to be assimilated by Mark Hanna's "Civic Federation" — the pretext for the scant, halfhearted recognition of their stalwart working class organization and their ringing declaration in favor of Socialism and in support of the Socialist Party.

And this objection may be dismissed with a single sentence. Why did not those who urge it remain in the Socialist Labor Party and carry on their agitation there? Why split the Socialist movement?

It is not true that the Western unionists set up a rival organization from geographical or sectional considerations, or to antagonize the Federation; and they who aver the contrary know little or nothing about the Western movement, nor about the causes that brought it into existence. A brief review of these may throw some light on the subject.

In 1896 the annual convention of the Federation of Labor was held in Cincinnati. The Western Federation of Miners, at that time an affiliated organization, was represented by President Edward Boyce and Patrick Clifford, of Colorado. The strike of the Leadville [CO] miners, more than 3,000 in number, one of the bloodiest and costliest labor battles ever fought, was then in progress and had been for several months. The drain and strain on the resources of the Western Federation had been enormous. They needed help and they needed it sorely. They had always poured out their treasure liberally when help was needed by other organization, East as well as West, and now that they had reached their limit, they naturally expected prompt and substantial aid from affiliated organizations. Boyce and Clifford appealed to the delegates. To use their own language they were "turned down," receiving but vague promises which, little as they meant, were never fulfilled. At the close of the convention they left for home, disappointed and disgusted. They stopped off at Terre Haute to urge me to go to Leadville to lend a helping hand to the striking miners, which I proceeded to do as soon as I could get ready for the journey. It was here that they told me that the convention was a sore surprise to them, that 3 or 4 men had votes enough to practically control the whole affair, and that the dilatory and reactionary proceedings had destroyed their confidence in the Fed-

eration.

Afterward I was told by the officers in charge of the strike that no aid of the least value, or even encouragement, had been rendered by the Federation of Labor and that the financial contributions were scarcely sufficient to cover the expense of the canvass for same.

It was not long after this that the Western miners withdrew from the Federation and a couple of years later, conceiving the necessity of organizing all classes of labor in the Western states, which as yet had received but scant attention, the American Labor Union was organized, the Western Federation of Miners being the first organization in affiliation with the new central body.

But notwithstanding the withdrawal of the Western Miners from the American Federation they continued loyally to support the Eastern boycotts levied by the Federation, and it is a fact not to be gainsaid that while some of those boycotts were so feebly supported in the East, where they had been levied, as to be practically impotent, the union men of the West recognized them as scrupulously as if imposed by their own organization, and in Montana and other states drove the boycotted Eastern products out of the Western markets.

So far as I am able to inform myself there is no instance on record where the American Federation of Labor, or any organization affiliated with it, ever sanctioned or supported a boycott levied by the Western unions.

On the contrary, cases can be cited where the Eastern organizations bluntly refused to recognize boycotts declared by the Western organization.

Not only this, but the Western unions have always contributed promptly and liberally to the financial support of all labor unions, East and West, North and south, affiliated and otherwise, Butte leading with thousands of dollars in support of all kinds of strikes, in all sections of the country, the liberality and loyalty of the Western Federation of Miners in such cases being proverbial — and yet I have never heard of an instance where the Western unions received a dollar from any Eastern organization since the withdrawal of the Miners' Federation.

At this very time, while the miners of the East are making a desperate struggle against starvation, the miners of the Far West, affiliated with the tabooed

American Labor Union, are contributing from their hard earnings to the support of the Pennsylvania strikers, though they never expect to receive a penny from the East; and President [Charles] Moyer of the Western Federation of Miners is sending messages to President [John] Mitchell of the United Mine Workers. Still more — notwithstanding the bituminous miners of the Middle states, members of the same organization as the anthracite strikers, decided not to strike in support of their anthracite brethren. President Moyer and Secretary [Bill] Haywood of the Western Federation wired President Mitchell that in their judgment all miners in the country should stand by the Pennsylvania strikers and that the coal miners of the Western Union were ready to a man to lay down their tools until the anthracite strike was won.

This is the militant, progressive, liberal spirit of Western unionism — now reinforced with a class-conscious political program — that could not brook the ultraconservative policy of the Eastern movement, and seceded from it with motives as loyal to labor as ever prompted men to action.

The opponents of the Western Labor Union may search the annals of organized labor in vain, all the circumstances considered, for as noble an example of fidelity to the principles of union labor, as that of President Moyer and Secretary Haywood of the Western Federation, speaking for the coal miners of the Western states, having no grievance of their own and belonging to another organization, to which the East, if not hostile, was at least not friendly, voluntarily agreeing to lay down their tools, and give up their jobs to help their fellow men more than 2,000 miles distant, whom they had never seen and never expected to see.

Had the situation been reverse and the miners of Montana had gone on strike, would the Eastern unions have sent any money out there, or would the Eastern miners have volunteered to strike in sympathy with their Western brethren?

The conventions of the Western Labor Unions, the Western Federation of Miners and the Hotel and Restaurant Employee's Union, held simultaneously at Denver in May last [1902], attracted wide attention chiefly because of their declaration in favor of Socialism and their adoption of an independent political program. Prior to this these organizations were rarely mentioned, in fact unknown in the Eastern and Middle

states and no reference to them was ever made by the capitalist press outside their own immediate jurisdiction. But the very moment they declared in favor of Socialism, the capitalist press, the "pure and simple" union element, and, strange to say, some Socialists, "Cry Havoc, and let slip the dogs of war." As for the Socialists who joined in the outcry, or "damned with faint praise," they were perhaps persuaded, after a survey of the East and then the West, that it was wiser policy to curry favor with numbers than to stand by principles.

The impression prevails in some quarters that the American Labor Union was first instituted at the convention in Denver last May. This is erroneous, as the organization has been in existence several years, and at the late convention simply changed its name from the Western Labor Union to the American Labor Union to more properly describe its expanding jurisdiction.

Fault has been found because of the rival disposition shown by the convention of the American Federation and the purpose to invade other sections and organize rival unions, thereby dividing the movement and precipitating a factional labor war.

The delegates to the Denver convention considered this phase of question in all its bearings; they did not propose to antagonize the American Federation, nor to invade its jurisdiction, nor set up rival unions, they simply proposed to protect their own movement in the Western states and they did not propose to allow attacks to be made upon it without resenting them; and when they finally took action, even in the matter of changing their name, it was in self-defense, for from every quarter, even some of their own disgruntled element who sought to defeat the proposed adoption of Socialism, came the threat that if the Western Union did not return to the American Federation, the latter would send a corps of organizers into the Western states to institute rival unions and "wipe the Western movement off the earth."

The "pure and simple" element in Denver and vicinity, affiliated with the American Federation, and not a few of the local politicians, who saw their doom in the Socialist tendency of the convention, were loud and persistent in the threat of "annihilation" if the delegates refused to vote for affiliation with the American Federation. While there I heard it frequently upon

the street and elsewhere and in fact Secretary Morrison, who, with Thomas I. Kidd, of the Executive Council, represented the American Federation at the convention with the purpose of inducing the Western Labor Union to dissolve, and its affiliated organizations to join the American Federation, gave it out that if the delegates declined their overtures, the American Federation would proceed to organize in all the Western states, as it acknowledged no boundary line to its jurisdiction in the United States.

The charge, therefore, of "invasion" and "rival unions" against the Western movement, falls to the ground. It can be proven beyond doubt that the Western movement acted upon the defensive in this matter and that only when the threat to "wipe them out of existence" in their own territory was made, did they conclude to extend their jurisdiction to such sections as desired to embrace their organization.

If it is held that the American Federation had prior jurisdiction, it may be answered that George III and Great Britain had prior jurisdiction over the colonies, and that the jurisdiction of the Knights of Labor antedated that of the American Federation, and the National Labor Union that of the Knights of Labor and so on back without end.

Whatever difference may have prompted the separation several years ago — and whether it was wise or otherwise, I shall not now consider, having no share in the praise or blame, as the action was taken by the Western miners upon their own motion and they are entirely willing to accept the responsibility — it is certain that there is today a radical fundamental difference between the Eastern and Western wings of the American labor movement and that in their present state and with their present conflicting policies and tendencies, they can not be united and even if they could be, factional and sectional strife would be at once engendered and disruption would be inevitable.

The Western movement could only have consented to go *back and backward* to the American Federation by stultifying itself and betraying and humiliating its thousands of progressive members who are far enough advanced to recognize the futility of labor organization without class-conscious political action and who will never retrace their steps to the fens and bogs of "pure and simple" unionism.

The Western men want unity and they want

harmony, but they will not go backward, they will not sacrifice progress to reaction to secure it.

They have declared their class-consciousness and they can not and will not snuff out that beacon light of emancipation.

They have committed their organization to the Socialist Party and they can not unite with an organization that is hostile to independent political action by the working class.

There is one way and one only to unite the American trade union movement. The American Federation of Labor must go forward to the American Labor Union; the American Labor Union will never go back to the American Federation of Labor. Numbers count for nothing; principle and progress for everything.

When the American Federation of Labor sheds its outgrown "pure and simple" policy, when it declares against the capitalist system and for union, class-conscious action at the ballot box, as the supreme test of union principles, as the American Labor Union has done; when it relegates "leaders" to the rear who secure fat offices for themselves in reward for keeping the rank and file in political ignorance and industrial slavery, when it shall cease to rely upon cringing lobbying committees, begging, like Lazarus at the gate of Dives, for a bone from a capitalist legislature and Congress it helped to elect, and marshals its members in class-array against their exploiters on election day to vote their own class into power, then unity will come and the Western men will hail with joy that day. And it is coming. It is simply bound to come.

In the meantime there need be no quarrel between the East and West and there will be none unless the threatened attempt to "snuff out" the West should materialize, in which case the "snuffers" will be entitled to the credit of having inspired a refreshing exhibition of the "staying" qualities of the class-conscious trade union movement of the Western states.

The speaking tour of the national officers and Executive Council of the American Federation in the Mountain states following the Denver convention, and widely heralded by the capitalist press as an "uprising of the conservative element of organized labor to squelch the Western radicals" can claim anything but a victory if that was the program of President Gompers and his colleagues. Some of their meetings, with

all the advertising they received, scarcely amounted to a "corporal's guard," and where they had hundreds, the meetings held under the auspices of the Western Union had thousands in attendance without the aid of capitalist newspapers and in spite of the opposition of capitalist politicians.

As to whether the Western movement is growing or declining since the Denver convention, it is sufficient to say that the reports show that during the month of September [1902] the organization affiliated with the American Labor Union added more than 4,000 new names to their rolls of membership.

Passing through Denver recently I noticed by the papers of that city in scare-head articles, that the organizer of the American Federation, who had just been interviewed upon the subject, declared in emphatic terms that he had been instructed from headquarters at Washington to organize rival unions at every available point and where there was even one applicant, to admit him, totally regardless of the American Labor Union. If this is to be the policy of the Eastern Federation it will have to be that of the Western Union and as a result we shall have an era of unprecedented activity in the work of organizing the trade union movement of this country.

One thing is noticeable in this connection and that is that the American Federation has evinced a greater interest in the Western states, spent more money, and worked harder to organize them in the comparatively short time since the Western Union is in the field than in all previous years.

The rise of class-conscious trade unionism in the West was not the result of mere chance or personal design, but obedient to the rising tide of the revolutionary spirit of the proletariat of the rugged and sparsely settled Mountain states, a composite population composed of pioneers, the most adventurous, brave, and freedom-loving men from all states of the American continent, and it is impossible that they, with their keen instinct and revolutionary tendency could be long content to creep along in the creaking chariot of conservatism, even though it still bear traces of the union label.

The class-conscious union movement of the West is historic in origin and development and every Socialist should recognize its mission and encourage its growth. It is here that the tide of social revolution will

reach its flood and thence roll into other sections, giving impetus where needed and hastening the glorious day of triumph.

I am the friend, not the enemy of the American Federation of Labor. I would conserve, not destroy it. I am opposed, not to the organization or its members, many of whom are personal friends, but to those who are restraining its evolution and preventing it from fulfilling its true mission.

I would not convert it into a political organization, but simply bring it up to date and have it, as it must become if it is to survive, a class-conscious industrial union, its members recognizing the Socialist ballot as the weapon of their class and using it accordingly, thus escaping the incongruities and self-contradictions of the present "pure and simple" union, whose members strike against and boycott the effects of the capitalist system while voting industriously to perpetuate the system.

It is true that there are elements of progress at work within the organization. Let them continue their efforts. Such men as Max S. Hayes, J.W. Slayton, J. Mahlon Barnes, and many others who have done and are doing excellent work on the inside have all help and no hinderance to expect from the Western movement.

Certainly Max Hayes, elected delegate to the approaching convention of the American Federation of Labor by a popular vote of his organization, the International Typographical Union, upon the issue that he was a Socialist, and now muzzled by an order of a delegate convention instructing him to vote against Socialist measures, will not object to a little help from the outside.

In time the two progressive forces will meet and the work of redemption will have been accomplished.

Until then, as in the past, I shall support every boycott and every strike of the American Federation of Labor, and every organization affiliated with it, to the best of my ability, and when they lose in any of these struggles, no disheartening word from my lips shall darken their counsels or add to the bitterness of their defeat.

I have been plain and unreserved in my criticism as I have a right to be. For many years I have been an unofficial organizer for the Federation of Labor, and for all the trade unions connected with it,

and in my travels, especially the past 7 years in which I have been almost continuously traversing the country, I have organized and been the means of organizing hundreds of unions of all kinds. In the Southern states I held the first great labor meetings when there was little or no trace of organization, in many places not even a single member, and I at once set to work organizing each point with the result that when I covered the same territory shortly after, there were unions everywhere and the movement spread rapidly over that section of the country. In view of these facts I think I can consistently assert the right of candid criticism.

The attitude of the Socialist Party toward the trade union movement broadly endorsing and commending it, but stopping there, and allowing it to manage its own internal affairs is, without doubt, the correct one, as any intermeddling must result in harm with no possible hope of good. The party, as such, must continue to occupy this friendly yet non-interfering position, but the members may, of course, and in my judgment should join the trade unions East and West and North and South and put forth their best efforts to bring the American labor movement to its rightful position in the struggle for emancipation.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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