
Fighting Big Capital:

Letter to the Editor of the *New York Call*, April 8, 1917

by S.J. Rutgers

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Editor of the Forum:

Comrade William E. Bohn agrees that “our fight must be directed against big capitalism of the present and future, rather than against the small capitalism of the past.” We are both aware that this means a herculean task, that to fight financial monopolistic capital, backed by the modern means of oppression and destruction and entrenched in the latest form of state capitalism, demands the full development of the organized power of the working class.

When my opponent suggests that the methods of the farmers and the AF of L have been more effective in getting results than the kind of mass action waged in Russia would secure when transplanted to the United States, or even than the IWW has accomplished against the steel trust, we feel that he does not appeal to the strength of the former, but rather to the weakness of the latter.

He will admit that, if the farmers were not imprisoned in their fight of last fall, it was not due to the invincible force of their solid organization, but greatly to the fact that they were considered not dangerous to the general capitalist class interests. As to the railroad strike, it cannot be denied that the workers did not get results, that they were fooled by their leaders, by the President, by Congress, and by the Socialist press, as was explained in the *International Socialist Review* of November 1916, and is emphasized by recent

events. In so far as the railroad workers developed power and might have had results, it was due to the fact that 4 different brotherhoods made an attempt toward a more industrial organization. The failure, however, was evidently due to the fact that all this power was put into the hands of 4 diplomatic leaders without sufficient control and initiative among the rank and file, and, furthermore, to the fact that the scope of the organization was still too narrow, leaving a number of workers outside of the war council, who necessarily will turn out to become scabs in a life or death struggle.

Now, it is always an easy task to dispose of certain illustrative examples, especially in a controversy on practical tactics, rather than on general principles.

But how about the mass action in Russia and in the United States? Is it not a strong set of arguments to point out that Russia is by no means a highly developed industrial country and that industrial unionism did not get, as yet, a foothold in the steel mills of the United States?

The Russian mass action never has been recommended for import to the United States in the forms it was practiced under quite different conditions, as described by Rosa Luxemburg, Roland Holst, and others. In an article in the *International Socialist Review* of January 1917, I specifically state: “Of course, it is essential to bear in mind that conditions in Russia at that time had their

own character and that we can never expect to imitate methods which were themselves the result of historic developments.” What made the Russian mass action so particularly interesting to us is the fact that it shows practically that forms of action can be used with success quite different from the rigid, centralized, boss-ruled unions of the AF of L. And what makes it still more interesting is the fact that this form of action originated under and had results during the rule of the Iron Heel of an unscrupulous autocracy. This means that results were possible under conditions which lately developed, and continue to develop, in the United States, ruled by the money kings of Wall Street. Furthermore, the best results by the Russian mass action were gained in those centers where industry was most developed.

As far as the American steel mills are concerned, it is too evident that the American Federation of Labor has not even attempted seriously to organize those industrial slaves. True the IWW, so far, has not succeeded either, but there have been some partly successful efforts, and unless we despair altogether it must be clear to any Socialist that industrial mass action is the only form that can give results. Even without any previous efforts in the way of organization or education, spontaneous mass actions continue to develop, but the Socialist Party simply ignores or denounces these actions, because of its own servility to the American Federation of Labor and its lack of vision and class-consciousness. To sneer at the IWW because they have but little success so far, although

they at least are willing to pay with their freedom and life, is a rather poor policy for a party whose criminal lack of action is directly responsible for the carelessness with which the rulers allow the massacres of our fellow workers.

And those who emphasize the shortcomings in the actions of the IWW should be double active in organizing and supporting those worst paid and worst treated of their fellow workers. But the old methods fail and the old labor bureaucrats fail to see the new methods. To see them would mean to see their own doom as a mighty and privileged group. So the new methods have to develop from the bottom up and against the stubborn resistance of the old “leaders.” And the very character of this mass action makes it impossible to outline concrete and narrow forms and rules. We can see tendencies and characteristics, we can give advice and examples, but details have to work out in practice. Only by close contact with the reality, only by participating in the fight, actually or at least mentally, can we hope to grasp the new situation and help to solve the big problems of the future. No artificial schemes, no skillfully planned strategy can help us out. What we need is life, is action of the masses in the light of historical developments, in the light of our Marxian theory adapted to the latest developments of modern imperialistic capital.

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