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EDITORIAL

THE CLASH FOR LIGHT.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE letter, which is the subject of this article, is a double sign of the times. It manifests the earnest seeking for light, and it manifests the proper spirit of inquiry. The letter was written to John Hossack, S.L.P. of New Jersey, by W.B. Killingbeck, S.P. of the same State. With the consent of the writer, the letter is published herein and commented upon.

62 William St., Orange, N.J.

January 7, 1906.

Dear Comrade Hossack:

Copy of THE PEOPLE received, which I presume came from you. I want to thank you for same.

I read very carefully your article "Theory and Practice,"¹ and fully agree with you that the most brilliant and eloquent theorists might preach until doomsday the beauties of the co-operative commonwealth, but, without economic evolution, would be doomed to failure. Owen, Bellamy and others demonstrated that very clearly.

In this we are all agreed. Without the material evolution of capitalism, Socialism remains a vague aspiration. Right here, however, it is well to keep in mind certain facts, without which the principle, though correct in itself, becomes self-destructive. The hint, that may be quite enough for one man, may pass unperceived by another; the crack over the head that this other may need to be aroused, and that alone will rouse him, may have upon a third the effect of snapping the springs of his energy and crushing him altogether. Without any material foundation furnished by capitalism, there is no groundwork for the structure of Socialist thought. Obviously such a foundation was needed and was used by Marx. But equally obvious is the fact that the "hint", which sufficed to

¹ [To be appended at a later date.—R.B.]

enlighten a Marx, passed unperceived of most other people, and that nothing short of downright “cracks over the head” are arousing others. It is at this stage that the principle under consideration may become self-destructive, if given too sweeping an interpretation. How many and harder “cracks over the head” is it supposed capitalism must still deal to the people before the now militant Socialists will consider that enough facts have been evolved upon which to proceed aggressively? The Socialist Labor Party holds that all the necessary material facts (“cracks over the head”) have been evolved by capitalism, not as regards capitalism proper merely, but as regards all the buttresses of capitalism, craft Unionism among the lot; that the time has come for aggressive destruction and construction; and that still to wait for some more “evolution” is nothing short of inviting such further “cracks over the head” as may crush the people and put off progress indefinitely. This will appear more clearly from a detailed consideration of Killingbeck’s views. He proceeds:

It seems to me that our comrades of the S.L.P. are putting up a bogieman which they dub a “pure and simple political Socialist,” and then proceed to knock him down. I have as yet not found the member of the S.P. who denied the necessity of an economic movement for the emancipation of the working class;

And yet such S.P. men are thick as black-birds in the spring. Only last week, on the 11th of this month, the *Daily People* contained a correspondence from Massachusetts, signed by M. Ruther, making mention of a number of such S.P. men.² Ruther reported a meeting of Socialists of the S.L.P. and the S.P. at Chicopee, held on January 7 at Fairview Turn Hall, and called by the Chicopee S.P. local to consider the position that a Socialist should take towards the Trades Union Movement. At that meeting, no less a personage than Wrenn of Springfield, the S.P. candidate for Governor in 1901, said “he had no faith in the economic movement and held it was only a side issue”; Ruther also quoted other S.P. members at the meeting as declaring that “it was a waste of energy to bother with economic issues”. Language like this is not rare in the S.P. camp, nor has its note failed to be heard in

² [To be appended at a later date.—R.B.]

New Jersey itself. On the afternoon of the 31st of last December, at an open meeting held in Newark, Harry Carless of the S.P. said in substance: "Anyway there are but 20 per cent. of the workers organized. They are in the trades in which a measure of skill still remains. The development of machinery will eliminate that skill, and eventually unionism will die out". The large organization of common laborers employed in the subway works of this city, and the powerful strike that they conducted two years ago, together with numerous instances of kindred nature, will occur to all in refutation of the theory that "No skill, no Union". But, apart from that, as irrelevant to the subject now under consideration, what do such views denote but the denial of "the necessity of an economic movement for the emancipation of the working class"?—Surely Wrenn and Carless, to mention none other, are not bogeymen.

The secret of Killingbeck's blindness in failing to see this particular species in the S.P. is, however, made clear in the immediately following sentence—and valuable is the secret. He says:

for years our efforts have been directed towards the pure and simple labor organizations, trying to show them the error of their ways;

Here we touch the very heart of the issue. The fact is that the S.P. has not been showing pure and simpledom the error of its ways.

Has the S.P. ever tried to show pure and simpledom the error of high initiation fees intended to keep the masses of a trade, or at least the surplus hands, outside of the pale of the Union, thereby challenging their fellow wage slaves to scab it upon them, or die?

Has it ever tried to show them the error of restriction of the number of apprentices and the near-sighted ignobleness, and ignoble near-sightedness of such a course?

Has it ever tried to show them the futility and disgracefulness of a system of organization under which machinists remain at work in a shop where the molders are on strike, where compositors remain at work on a newspaper against which the newsboys are on strike, where the bituminous branch of a miners' Union remains at work when the anthracite branch is on strike?—in short has the S.P. ever tried to

bring home to the pure and simple Unions that the cause of the failure of strikes, that the strike breakers, in fact, are, not the unorganized scabs, but the organized crafts, which by their conduct afford the employer time to fetch the hungry unemployed from the four quarters of the compass?

No need to extend the long catalogue of the errors of the pure and simplers' ways. Not only has the S.P. not tried to point out any of these, it has condoned them, aye, it has officially applauded them. At the Indianapolis S.P. convention of 1901, the Trades Union resolution there adopted praised the conduct of the craft Unions as "a nobly waging of the class struggle", and at the Chicago convention of 1904 the Ott Resolution—which aimed at condemning the fraternal relations existing between the A.F. of L. and the Civic Federation, relations that correctly reflect the caricature-of-capitalism essence of craft Unionism—were swept aside, and in their lieu was adopted a resolution affecting a non-committal posture on the field of Unionism.

Has, then, the S.P. tried to show the craft Unions no error whatever of their ways? The "error of their ways", which Killingbeck has in mind as the "error of their ways" shown to them, and as subsequent passages in his letter bring out clearly, is that "they should vote as they strike". This, to put it bluntly, in the frank spirit invited by the letter, is not to SHOW an error, but to AGGRAVATE it.

To tell craft Unions that they should vote as they strike is to concede that they are striking right; to concede that they are striking right is to concede that their form of organization and the aim thereof are sound. It is to cultivate the delusion that the craft Unions are organized against the Capitalist Class, whereas, in fact, they are organized against the bulk of the Working Class itself, and against one another. The fact will be made more clear in the course of this article when considering several other passages of the letter. Suffice it here to point out that "the error of the ways" of craft Unionism lies in its structure. Craft Unionism may declaim about the "Solidarity of Labor," it practices the disruption of Labor. The "immediate needs" to which it attends are not the immediate needs to which an army attends on the march to the storming of the hostile fortress, they are measures that lead away from the fortress, and that gradually disable the army for conquest. Ignorant of the goal and mission of Unionism—the "taking and holding"

the productive powers of the Nation and thus administering the industrial Government of the Socialist Republic—craft Unionism builds its structure in such wise that it is not, as it should be, the embryo of the constituencies of the future Republic of Labor, and can not possibly develop into such. Thus constructed, craft Unionism becomes a handmaid of capitalism. These are “the errors of the ways” of pure and simple organizations. The wrongful voting is but one of the several and inevitable external manifestations of the inherent defect. The “Labor Party” of Australia, the “Labor Representation Committee” of England, both of them the political reflexes of craft Unionism, vote as they strike—they strike as the “peers” of the Capitalist Class, as “brothers” who, due to the perverseness of human nature, occasionally fall out with “brothers,” and they vote accordingly to establish “harmonious relations between Capital and Labor.” For a Socialist to tell the craft Union to vote as it strikes, meaning thereby to vote a revolutionary ticket of Socialism, is to utter such a contradiction as can only confuse, not enlighten.

Not a line has ever proceeded from the Editors of the Socialist or Social Democratic party press pointing out the actual, the fundamental “error of the ways” of craft Unionism; not a scrap of literature has issued from that party’s headquarters placing the finger upon these errors. On the contrary. Itself constructed upon the principle of “neutrality” with regard to Unions, and upon the consequent error that ignores the determining mission of the economic organization in effecting the Social Revolution, the Socialist party has not been in condition to show the pure and simple organizations the “error of their ways.” Itself was, and, as a body, continues to be at sea on the Burning Question of Unionism.

Killingbeck proceeds:

but at the same time we realize that those organizations are part of our class, misguided as they are, and they are fighting the capitalist with what they consider the best weapon at their disposal. Of course we know their arms are obsolete, and furthermore a large percentage of their membership realize that fact, and are doing their utmost to show their fellow unionists the folly of their ways; but it seems to me that you fail to make clear how, by organizing rival unions, and thus splitting into fragments the only available force against the capitalist class, on the economic field, we should be enabled to persuade them to adopt more sane methods.

It should need nothing more, in order to refute the opinion that craft Unionism, or the A.F. of L., is “the only available force against the Capitalist Class on the economic field,” than the indisputable fact referred to by Eugene V. Debs in the following passage from his article in this month’s *Industrial Worker*. He says: “The capitalist press of the land, with substantial unanimity, approves and supports the American Federation of Labor—and condemns and opposes the Industrial Workers,” a little further on, putting it strongly, yet not too strong, he refers to “The American Federation of Labor, greeted with the ‘God bless you’—and the Industrial Workers, spurned with the ‘God damn you’—of the capitalist press.” Nor is the love and affection of the capitalist class for the A.F. of L., emphasized by its hostility for the I.W.W., as exemplified by the language of the capitalist press, ungrounded. This point deserves probing.

Craft Unionism ruptures the Working Class; it keeps the Working Class divided between the “organized” and the “unorganized,” with the majority unorganized, and it further re-subdivides the organized themselves into warring crafts. Why, the very slogan of “The Closed Shop!” set up by the A.F. of L., is proof of the split-up state that craft Unionism has the Working Class in, and wishes to perpetuate. In whose face is the shop to be “closed”? In the face of the capitalist? Certainly not. It is to be closed in the face of other workingmen—of workingmen whom the crafts refuse to organize and otherwise bar out to keep the jobs to themselves, and of other organized crafts against whom contracts have been entered into with the employer. No workingman is anxious to work for low wages, long hours or improper conditions. Gladly would the majority of workingmen be within the Union and thus present a united front to the exploiter. They are not allowed. By whom? By the A.F. of L. or craft Unions. Why? Because if all were in the organization, the organization would be compelled to share with the unemployed the earnings of the employed, either by direct assessment or by some system of “shifts.” A nearsighted and narrow-minded policy, fostered by longheaded capitalist intrigue, leads the craft Unions to adopt the stupidly selfish course of seeking to “trustify” the jobs for themselves. The course is stupidly selfish because, in the long run, the craft Unionists are worse off than if they had adopted the more enlightened course,—the longheaded capitalist, however, triumphs: the narrow-minded policy on

the part of the craft Unions, of attempting to “trustify” the jobs for themselves, serves the purpose not only of keeping the workers divided, but of keeping them bitterly at war with one another—a capitalist desideratum.

Craft Unionism does not require to be split from the outside—it is split into hostile fragments by itself.

Craft Unionism is not “the only available force against the capitalist class on the economic field”—it is no force whatever against capitalism; it is a prop of capitalism. Why, if not, should the A.F. of L. have the “God bless you” of the capitalist press?

The I.W.W. is not a rival Labor Organization. It is the only economic Labor Organization in the land—there is none other for it to “rival.”

You charge the political Socialist with being utopian and unscientific in maintaining that it is possible to emancipate ourselves through a political organization. Well, it seems to me that if a workingman hasn't brains enough to vote for his own emancipation, he certainly won't strike for liberty;

Very true. But this is one of those unhappy truths that Marx condemns as worse than barren. They are so worded that they turn awry the logic of events and thereby lead to false conclusions. No doubt, he who has not brains enough to vote for his own emancipation “certainly won't strike for liberty”. But to say that, and to stop there, is to imply that right voting is the cause, right striking the result. That, indeed, is the implication throughout this letter. Such a concept is strangely out of place in a Socialist's mouth.

The broad difference between the Socialist and the non-Socialist is that the non-Socialist imagines ideas produce material conditions, while the Socialist knows that it is material conditions that produce ideas. Political action is the idea, economic organization is the material condition. No doubt he who votes wrong will also be found to strike wrong. The reason of his wrong voting is his wrong striking. The material fact of wrong economic organization will reflect itself in the idea of wrong political action. The material fact concerning the structure of organization for immediate material existence, the Union, reflects itself in the idea to reach the more distant consummation, political triumph. The structure of craft Unionism, the

organization for immediate material existence, cuts up the working class into warring fragments. Disunited in the immediate struggle for life, each trained to pursue his immediate material ends along the bourgeois plane of the wheel-barrow racing system, the angle of vision of each turned to a different objective, impossible, under such conditions, is the result of Working Class united revolutionary political action. As well expect the sun rays, that are scattered by the prism, to unite in one focus, as to imagine possible the focussing into united revolutionary political action the workers who are scattered by the prism of craft Unionism. It is not because the workers in America vote wrongly that they do not strike right, it is because they do not strike right that they are voting wrong. Socialist science, that established the material foundation for ideas, places this conclusion upon as solid ground as natural science places the conclusion regarding the effect of the prism upon the sun rays.

Grounded upon the material facts and the reasoning that flows therefrom, the S.L.P. rejects the idea that the workers' revolutionary political unity is possible before they are planted upon the material fact of economic unity. The S.L.P., consequently, strives for the Socialist political unity of the Working Class via the only route by which the thing is possible—the economic unity, Industrial Unionism.

There is no result but it reacts back upon its cause and gives the cause new stimulus. So with the sound political and the sound economic movement. The cause of sound economic organization results in sound political action; the result then reacts back upon its cause; thus acting and reacting upon each other, both the economic and the political movements are invigorated. This play of action and reaction may, at times, confuse the observer. He may be misled thereby to impute pre-eminent causal force to what is in fact but result, and vice versa. Thus he may slip into the error of imputing causal force to sound political action, when, in fact, it is but result, and vice versa consider sound economic organization a result, when, in fact, it is cause. The confusion is fatal. Sooner or later, often sooner than later, the error is discovered by its bitter fruit. There is no protection against the error except firmly to hold to the Marxian fundamental principle as to the relation in which ideas stand to material facts.

to me it is inconceivable that when the time arrives that we have a majority of the working class sufficiently intelligent to vote for the

ownership of the means of production that they will be unable to find means and ways of making effective that demand.

So is such a thing inconceivable to the S.L.P. man also—and for the reasons just set forth in full. The day the Working Class shall be sufficiently intelligent to carry the polls for the abolition of wage slavery, that day they will be fully able to find the means and ways for making effective their political triumph. And they will not have to look for such ways and means before they find them; they will not have to cudgel their brains to gather such ways and means—THEY WILL BE IN POSSESSION OF THEM. The very fact of their political triumph will be the evidence of their having ready at hand the needed ways and means—possession of the Nation's machinery of production, the organized capacity to take over and immediately administer the Nation's Government, that is, its productive powers.

No Industrial Organization to encompass the possession of the needed ways and means, no political triumph. Hence when the political triumph of Labor comes, the “ways and means” must have preceded.

I know that men in the mass are moved by their immediate necessities, and it looks far more utopian to me to expect that, for instance, the “Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers” would go out on strike in favor of the trackmen, than it would be for those same men to vote for the same object, knowing that in doing so they would help themselves equally.

If it is Utopian to expect that a Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers man would go out on strike in support of a trackman—if it is Utopian to expect the locomotive engineer could be made to realize that, if the trackman is beaten to-day, he himself will be beaten the next day and have his wages immediately reduced below his immediate necessities—if to expect such a thing is Utopian, then doubly Utopian must be the expectation of ever seeing the workingman spurn the cash bribe of the capitalist for his vote, or to disregard the capitalist's threat of shutting down in case the party which he opposes wins—if that is Utopian, then, doubly Utopian must be the expectation that the workingman will remain cold to the demands upon his immediate necessities, and yet warm up in favor of the remoter advantage to come from “voting right.”

The fact that “men in masses are moved by their immediate necessities” is a

monumental signpost that points to the Socialist the route he must strike—the building of the sound economic organization that will safeguard the immediate necessities of the Working Class, and that, as such, will be reflected in a sound ballot, and will keep in readiness the might to enforce, if need be, the fiat of that ballot.

As Bebel says the mass strike can only become effective when the workers are sufficiently educated and organized to realize its political significance;

Bebel is too busy a man to waste his time shouting the obvious. It is not like him to waste his time even in asserting that the education of the workers must precede intelligent action on their part—whether political, economic, or otherwise. We all know that, and knowing it, however much S.L.P. and S.P. men may differ, both endeavor to educate the workers. Accordingly, the citing of Bebel at this point can be accounted for only upon the theory that Killingbeck missed the trend and connection of Bebel's speech, pronounced at last year's national convention of the German Social Democracy.

That speech of Bebel's, as he pronounced it, has no bearing upon the question now on the tapis in this country. At last year's German Trades Union convention, held at Cologne, and immediately preceding the convention of the party, a resolution on strikes was adopted, the extreme conservatism of which is accounted for upon the theory that the Unionists meant thereby to make a demonstration against Anarchy. The resolution overreached itself. It was so excessive a repudiation of the idea of the general strike that Bebel assailed it at the party convention. The purpose of that speech began and ended with the endeavor to show that despicable would that workingman be who, even if his political rights were trespassed upon by the Capitalist Class, would tamely submit, instead of rising in revolt. There was no question of the economic strike for economic redress. The only question was with regard to the strike, not as a weapon of revolution, but as a weapon of resistance for political ends. In so far as any analogy can be drawn between Bebel's speech and the purposes of the I.W.W., the speech gives cold comfort to the pure and simple political Socialists. Bebel recognized the importance

of Unionism; he admitted the eventual necessity of physical force; above all, he looked to the economic organization when the necessity should arise.

and how are we going to reach the workers to impart this education, if we antagonize their present form of organization, by organizing “rival unions,” and thus becoming in their eyes virtually “scabs”?

If this reasoning means any thing it means: first, that the Working Class of the land is organized in the craft Unions, secondly that the craft Unions are a “happy family.” Both views are mistaken.

As to the first, it has partly been disposed of in a previous answer. Even admitting the wildest pipe dreams of Gompers, and the obviously padded figures that local “labor leaders” in search for political pap are in the habit of trotting before the politicians as the membership of their Unions, even then the overwhelming majority of the Working Class is unorganized. This is no secret known to this office alone. We know of pure and simple political Socialists who are well aware of the fact. Aye, they argue from it in support of their pure and simple political doctrine. “Barely 20 per cent of the Working Class are organized,” thus runs their reasoning, “therefore, the Union Question is a vanishing one.” The conclusion is false: just because only a trifling minority of the workers are organized the Union Question is all the more urgent. Nevertheless, the premises are correct. The overwhelming majority of the workers are unorganized. It can not be otherwise under the rule of craft Unionism. Pure and simpledom seeks to squeeze the hogshead measure of the Labor Movement into the pint measure of craft Unionism. There are within a radius of twenty-five miles of the City Hall of New York more unorganized workingmen than Gompers ever claimed membership for his Civic Federation annex—the A.F. of L. Surely the way to reach the workers can not be by ignoring the many and considering only the trifling few.

As to the second view, the danger of being called “scabs” by the craft Unions, that is a danger before which, of all men, the Socialist should be the last to recoil. For one thing, the Socialist knows that there is no more poisonous rattlesnake than “threatened private interests.” If hard names are to be run away from, the Socialist had better leave the buccaneer Capitalist Class alone. For another, if any one

epithet is more common than any other in the camp of craft Unionism, as an epithet bandied among themselves, it is “scab.” There is not a craft Union in existence that has not at some time or other yelled “scab!” at another. The recent A.F. of L. Convention was luminous upon that. Hard words break no bones; even if they did they should have no terror for the Socialist. His mission is to spread light and clear the way for light by cutting through the thick underbrush and tangle of accumulated superstitions. The only way to seize the nettle is to seize it with a firm, resolute hand, and tear it up—with all the gentleness that is possible, and all the severity that may be needed. The next passage will help to illustrate the point:

To-day we have entrance to a large and increasing number of their unions—for instance, I spoke to a machinists’ union last night, and met with a very cordial reception; but by taking a partisan stand in their factional quarrels, we immediately raise such a wall of prejudice that it becomes almost impossible to surmount it.

Somewhere in Prof. Ely’s works he tells of an experience that he made one evening lecturing in a Boston Beacon street salon to a select gathering of ladies and gentlemen. After the lecture, which was received coldly, he approached a prepossessing young lady, seated at a table. The conversation turned upon the subject of the lecture. The only comment that the young lady made, as she sipped her tea, was the significant one: “The Rev. So and So lectured to us last time; but he made us feel so comfortable”—!

Of what practical benefit to the Cause of the Emancipation of the Working Class is “entrance to a large and increasing number of Unions” if the Socialist makes the craft Unionists “feel so comfortable”?

Useless harshness is wrong. No Socialist will resort to it. But Truth and Facts are stinging weapons with which the Socialist may not compromise, and which it is his bounden duty to wield regardless of the incidental pain that they may cause. For that the Socialist has the maxim of no less wise and benevolent an educator than Wendell Philips. When rated for the “violence” of the language of the Abolitionists towards chattel slavery, he said:

“We have facts for those who think, arguments for those who reason; but he who cannot be reasoned out of his prejudices must be laughed out of

them; he who cannot be argued out of his selfishness must be shamed out of it by the mirror of his hateful self held up relentlessly before his eyes. * * * Prove to me that harsh rebuke, indignant denunciation, scathing sarcasm, and pitiless ridicule are wholly and always unjustifiable; else we dare not in so desperate a case throw away any weapon which ever broke up the crust of an ignorant prejudice, roused a slumbering conscience, shamed a proud sinner, or changed, in any way the conduct of a human being.”

Prejudice is never to be overcome by making it feel comfortable.

I have written this with no controversial intent, but simply to discuss the matter in a spirit of comradeship, and find the light, if possible, and I trust it will be accepted in the same spirit.

I remain, yours for the revolution,

W.B. KILLINGBECK.

The S.L.P. hails the spirit in which Killingbeck of the S.P. has broached with Hossack of the S.L.P. this Burning Question of Trades Unionism, which, here in America, has naturally developed into the Burning Question of Socialist Unity; above all, the S.L.P. hails the New Era that has burst upon the Socialist Movement of the land—the New Era that rolls back into the past and discards the methods of personal vilification, with which alone and uniformly the privately owned press of the Socialist or Social Democratic party has sought and still seeks to becloud the issue, and thereby avoid dispassionate discussion. All hail to this New Era! The Socialist has no hobby: he has only a Great Cause to serve. Let the facts be drawn up; let the opposing reasoning clash. Blows, dealt for Truth, are dealt in good faith; the blows received by the truth-seeker leave no smart behind. No greater favor can be done to the S.L.P. than, if it errs in aught, to have its error laid bare. No doubt Killingbeck is animated by the same spirit. This search and clash for light is bound to dispel darkness.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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