

SOCIALIST STUDIES

On Goals and Methods

By Robert Bills

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The following is based on an address delivered by SLP National Secretary Robert Bills at the SLP Section Organizers' Conference Banquet, held February 15, 1986, in Mountain View, California. The reference at the beginning of the talk is to a passage from an address Karl Marx delivered on April 14, 1856. That passage follows:

“There is one great fact, characteristic of this our 19th century, a fact which no party dares deny. On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exists symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary.”



Our chairperson this evening has quoted from Marx on the contradictions of the capitalist system. He quoted Marx from over 100 years ago—130 years to be exact.

But, our chairperson did something more than quote from Marx. He said something about Marx's observation. He said Marx's statement is more relevant today than when written in 1856—and he was right.

No proof is needed to demonstrate the truth of it. The evidence is all around us; we couldn't escape it if we tried. Just like Marx said, it's “a fact which no party dares deny.”

But what of it? What real difference does it make? After all, Marx also said, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” And he said that 11 years earlier.

Thus far, we've established two things: first, the world's in a mess and no one denies it; second, seeing as the world is in a mess, something has to be done to change it.

That's so true it almost seems trivial to say it—almost trite, like saying the weather's bad, but no one seems able to do much about it. But it leads to some questions:

- Who can do something to change the world for the better?
- What should they change it to?
- How can it be done?

The world, after all, isn't quite like the weather. It's made up of people—thinking beings who can ask, and answer, questions about it. People can—and have—done more than that. They have changed the world—society—in the past. And, having done it before, they can do it again.

But we've raised three questions, all of which require the correct answers. Or else the world, like the weather, will whirl out of control, and the people in it will be tossed about like drops of rain.

Each one of the three questions we've raised is of critical importance. And the who, what, and how are every bit as important as a fourth question we could raise—the question of when.

Socialists offer answers to all four questions. And by “Socialists” I mean the Socialist Labor Party. If you know the least thing about the SLP, you won't be surprised by the answers we offer.

The “who” is the working class. By that we mean those millions who have no control over the productive forces—that vast majority who own nothing but the ability to perform productive labor but who are deprived of the opportunity to exercise that ability without first turning it into a merchandise to be sold.

The “what” is socialism. And what do we mean by socialism? What does the SLP mean? Daniel De Leon put it this way: “Socialism means but one thing, and that is the abolition of capital in private hands, and the turning over of the industries into the direct control of the [workers]...employed in them. Anything else is not socialism, and has no right to sail under that name.”

That's all of it. Socialism is nothing more—and it's nothing less. There is more to this statement of De Leon's. I want to return to it, but, first, there's our third question to answer—the “how” of achieving socialism.

Socialists also have an answer to offer to this question—and, again, by Socialists, I mean the SLP. The answer we offer is the De Leonist program of political and economic action by the working class. We call that program Socialist Industrial Unionism.

It can be briefly summed up. Because the destiny of humanity is tied up with its ability to produce; because the means of production are not controlled by the majority, the workers who must sell their ability to work; because those means of production are owned and controlled by the capitalist class—

because of those facts, the “who” of our equation must be organized to take control of the industries and bring them under their own “direct control.”

Because of these things, workers also need a political party of their own—one which will serve a two-fold purpose. First, to make the working class aware of its position in capitalist society, i.e., to educate the workers and stimulate their classconsciousness. Second, to challenge the ruling class’s control of the state—an institution which socialism will abolish, but which today exists to enforce class rule.

These are the answers the SLP offers in response to the questions posed at the outset.

Those questions were posed in reply to a common observation—that our society is riddled with contradictions; that they are dangerous and threaten our survival; and that the source of the contradictions, and the dangers they pose, is the system that gives rise to them.

The source of our questions is evident to all; the answers the SLP offers are less evident—at least to the vast majority whom we seek to reach. But I must assume that the answers are evident to most of us here this evening, to the members and supporters of the SLP, because as important as the three first questions are, it is the fourth one I wish to address.

That fourth question is, “When?” When will Socialists convince workers that capitalism is the source of the dangers that face us? That workers alone have the power to successfully contend with the problem? That the conscious exercise of their power implies socialism? And that, the conscious organization of their power implies the SLP program?

The fourth question cannot be answered with the same precision as the three that preceded it. It cannot be answered by setting a date—urgent though the need for socialism is. Yet it requires an answer—and not a vague one.

The answer lies buried in two facts. The first fact is the commonplace observation made at the start: the world is not only in a mess, there is grave danger—and it threatens our very survival. As a result, there is an imprecise, but no less certain, desire for change.

It is this certainty about the danger of leaving things unchanged combined with the imprecise, but no less certain, desire for change that provides a partial answer to the fourth question, i.e., “When will the working class come to understand the need for socialism?” “When will it come to understand its decisive role in effecting that change.” “When will it act on that necessary understanding, organize itself politically and economically, and consummate the change?”

But that imprecise, but no less certain, desire for change is only a partial answer. There is another part needed to make it a complete answer, and a large part of that other part to the complete answer is right here in this room! It's you, and what you do with the knowledge that you have or which is at your fingertips. It's you who have it within your power to determine if and when the fourth question can be answered—and answered with precision.

That answer to the question “when” may surprise you. But it shouldn't—and it shouldn't for one good and simple reason. What is that reason? It is that you are the classconscious element of your class! And it is your awareness of that fact—your willingness, or readiness, to act on it—that may well make the difference.

Let me shift gears for a few minutes. Let me pose one more question—one which has occurred to all of us at one time or another, but more often to workers skeptical about socialism. My question is this: “Why does socialism take so long to come?” Or to put it another way, “Aren't Socialists chasing moonbeams?” or “Isn't the working class hopeless?”

They are not unreasonable questions to ask. After all, didn't our chairperson quote Marx from 130 years ago? Didn't I quote Marx from 140 years ago?

The questions are not unreasonable. Yet, they stem from a lack of knowledge—knowledge of history, but especially knowledge of working-class history.

There is a widespread, but false, impression that the working class has been inanimate; that it does not respond to the logic of the situation, much less to the urgings of classconscious Socialists—and to the SLP; or, at most, that it may have responded to a degree in the past, but no more—and that this is especially true in the United States.

The impression is false. It is also dangerous—because it can lead to unnecessary demoralization among those who are classconscious. For example, there is the idea that workers have rejected the idea of unions, or worse, that they have rejected the principle of unionism and, with it, the very ground on which the SLP stands.

But this idea is based on superficial evidence, evidence such as:

- The decline in the strength of the present unions—the AFL-CIO and so forth.
- An apparent lack of confidence in today's unions—a lack of confidence Socialists would agree is wholly justified.
- Workers' susceptibility to lures and deceptions—both by their unions and by antiunion elements of the ruling class.

All of this is true. No Socialist would deny it. Yet Socialists would deny that

workers have rejected the principle of unionism or the instinct of working-class solidarity—and latent classconsciousness—that underlies it.

Why? Because the facts are the reverse of what they appear. It is not the workers who have rejected the principle of unionism and all that hangs thereby. It is actually the reverse, the other way around. It is the unions that have rejected the vast majority of the working class. For they have refused even to attempt the organization of the whole working class. Instead, they have organized jobs; they have controlled the filling of jobs in certain industries.

But most workers are not aware of this. They raise other questions about the unions, questions like: “Why can’t the unions protect their members against wage cuts? Benefit losses? Dangerous working conditions? Factory closings?”

Every classconscious Socialist and worker knows the answers to these questions. It’s because the unions are not organized for that purpose. They are organized instead to discipline workers—not as Socialists understand the term, but as understood by a class that needs and cannot survive without a docile work force.

The AFL-CIO and the like are organized against the working class. This is a key point in understanding why socialism seems “slow to come.” And it is evidence of another fact that must always be kept clear in mind—the fact of what De Leon called “the in-class struggle.”

“The in-class struggle,” De Leon observed, “is the struggle within the proletariat.” And what did he mean by that?

He meant, first, that capitalism itself had drawn the line between its own interests and the interests of the working class. He meant, second, that there are differences of opinion within the working class over how to resolve labor’s problems and, hence, the problems of society as a whole.

That difference of opinion resolves itself into the difference between reform and revolution—between the conviction, which was once a legitimate one, that efforts to strive for improvements within the system are preferable to efforts to overthrow and replace it.

But, if there was once room to allow for the possibility of improving society through reform, that day is gone. And the nature of the problems that the contradictions of capitalism have led to are proof positive of that fact. Further, they prove another fact—and a third fact, which I will get to in a moment.

First, the other, or second, fact is this: Capitalism cannot be reformed or improved for the benefit of the vast majority. And, even if it could with direct regard to such problems as unemployment, poverty and the like, it cannot be reformed in

regard to the threat it poses to the survival of the human race. It is this latter threat that it poses that underscores the socialist—the SLP—contention that every effort to deal with the effects of capitalism at this late date is pure folly.

Second, that third fact is this: While we as Socialists are sensitive to the crimes and outrages capitalism commits in its own interests; while we are conscious of, and deeply affected by, what capitalism does not only to our class brothers and sisters here in the United States, but elsewhere as well, in pursuit of its own selfish interests—while we are conscious of and deeply affected by all that, we have a duty and a responsibility, a duty and responsibility born of our understanding of capitalism, born of our classconsciousness, to place all those evil effects of capitalist-class rule into perspective and never to lose sight of that perspective and of the obligation it imposes upon us to do our utmost to make this clear to our fellow workers.

It is our obligation—borne of our awareness of what capitalism is and how it *must* operate to the detriment of all humankind, whether it is here or in some other place.

Earlier I said I would return to De Leon’s definition of socialism. This is the place to do it, but not simply as a description of what socialism is, but also as a description of how to achieve it—of how we, as classconscious Socialists, must never fail to keep our priorities in order.

In reading that definition to you, I would ask that you keep in mind that it was written in 1908—keep it in mind, not because of its age so much as because of the examples he cites.

“It cannot be too strongly insisted that socialism means but one thing, and that is the abolition of capital in private hands, and the turning over of the industries into the direct control of the [workers]...employed in them. Anything else is not socialism, and has no right to sail under that name.”

And here we pick up the thread and continue:

“Socialism is not the establishment of an eight-hour day, not the abolition of child labor, not the enforcement of pure food laws, not the putting down of the Night Riders. . . . None of these, nor all of them together, are socialism. They might all be done by the government tomorrow and still we would not have socialism. They are merely reforms of the present system . . . and not more socialism than the steam from a locomotive is the locomotive. Socialism is the

collective ownership of the mechanical equipment of production which would bring in its wake all the other improvements in conditions. . . . But they are only the wake—socialism is the vessel which must cast that wake, socialism is the locomotive, from which these betterments are the trail of steam.”

There is a lesson in this definition of socialism. The lesson is in what it suggests about what socialism is not—and the strong hint of suggestion it contains regarding methods. It goes back and touches on what we called the “in-class struggle”—which is what? Why, nothing more than the conflict between reform and revolution.

Socialism entails more than its goal. It entails the means to achieve it. As De Leon said on another occasion, “Goals are reflected in the means adopted to reach them.” And you can learn a lot about what a movement wants by how it aims to get it.

The socialist movement is a revolutionary movement. As such, it must adopt certain fighting methods of its own. It can’t borrow the methods of any other movement. For no other movement has goals similar to its own.

Our strategy as a revolutionary movement is nothing more than the application of those methods—of the tactics—that will carry us to our goal. The SLP has always stressed the importance of correct strategy and tactics. For the success of our movement depends on it.

Other movements utilize other tactics—tactics which reflect their goals. But we must never confuse our methods with theirs, anymore than we would confuse our aim with their reform aims.

We are not organized to “improve” capitalism, but to abolish it. The SLP’s tactics, as a political party, are uncompromising revolutionary socialist action. We do not advocate reforms—methods to improve capitalism—because we know that it cannot be improved, that its contradictions and horrors run too deep for that.

Is that a wise course of action to take? We think history proves it is—because, whenever the working class has shown signs of deep discontent, capitalist social reform activities abound.

When will socialism come? We don’t know—not the day, month, or year. But we know this much: it’s no later in coming than capitalism is in resolving its contradictions and the horrors it creates. And we know something else: We dare not fail to be prepared for it—the penalty will be too great.

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We dare not lose sight of our goal, to keep it crystal clear, or to be crystal clear on the methods to gain it, because the answer to the question of when will socialism come depends very much on our clarity on goals and methods.

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