

The SLP and the Unions

By Nathan Karp

During the month of February 1976, the *Weekly People* published serially a pamphlet entitled *The Mines to the Miners*. It had originally been published by the Socialist Labor Party as part of an intensive organizing campaign launched in the coal fields of Illinois in 1919.

The republication of the pamphlet raised a number of questions within the SLP. Those questions did not relate to the SLP's critique of the pro-capitalist, class-collaborationist nature of the present unions. Nor did they raise any issue with regard to the principle that the working class must organize Socialist Industrial Unions—unions that differ from the existing unions in structure, tactics and goal—if it is to advance its class interests and ultimately emancipate itself from wage slavery.

The issue raised involved tactical questions; namely, how can the labor lieutenants of the capitalist class be exposed and defeated and how can the workers in the United States today, both organized and unorganized, be won over to a socialist union position and united in a revolutionary class union?

These tactical questions have confronted the SLP at various stages of its existence, and while historical precedent and experience cannot provide complete and specific answers to questions raised by contemporary social conditions, there are lessons to be learned from that history. The following articles briefly trace that history.

I.

During the Party's early years, which coincided with the formative period of the American labor movement, SLP members were not only active in the existing unions, they also assisted in the creation of new unions. Describing this period, Justus Ebert, in his pamphlet on *American Industrial Evolution*,* wrote: "During all this time the Socialists, both of the radical and moderate type, were very active in the trade union world....Not only did they assist in the formation of unions regardless of their political or social principles, hoping later to indoctrinate them completely with socialism, but they also formed...unions possessing not only socialist declarations of principles, but active in the support of socialist propaganda and politics."

It was during the early part of this period that the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was formed (1881). The dominant labor organization in the field at the time was the Knights of Labor, in which members of the Socialistic Labor Party were active in the 1880s. In the early 1890s, Daniel De Leon and members of the "reorganized" SLP also were active in the Knights of Labor.

By 1895, undermined by corruption, wracked by internal struggles, adversely affected by economic and social changes that destroyed its foot-

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holds among the industrial workers in the cities, the Knights of Labor was definitely on the wane. It had lost the battle for dominance to the AFL, whose procapitalist leadership was now firmly established.

ST&LA FORMED

In view of these developments, the Socialist Labor Party concluded that the time had arrived to launch a new union, one based upon the interests of the workers as a class. Accordingly, it set on foot the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance (ST&LA) and formally endorsed it at the 1896 SLP National Convention. The ST&LA recognized that social revolution was still a long way off. It therefore aimed at fighting the workers' daily battles in order to wrest from the capitalist whatever it could in the way of higher wages and improved conditions—a fight that it believed it could conduct more effectively than the AFL and kindred unions.

At the same time, in its declaration of principles, the ST&LA pledged to “constantly keep in view its great object, namely: The summary ending of that barbarous [class] struggle at the earliest possible time by the abolition of classes, the restoration of the land and of all the means of production, transportation and distribution to the people as a collective body, and the substitution of the Cooperative Commonwealth for the present state of planless production, industrial war and social disorder; a commonwealth in which every worker shall have the free exercise and full benefit of his faculties, multiplied by all the modern factors of civilization.”

With the launching of the ST&LA, the tactic of “boring from within” the procapitalist unions was given different emphasis. In the effort to build the ST&LA, the tactical weaknesses of this strategy were frequently emphasized. But this policy was not so rigid that it rejected taking advantage of every opportunity to agitate for working-class union principles within the existing craft unions. For example, in his debate with Job Harriman of the Social Democratic Party on the subject on November 25, 1900, De Leon stated:

“‘Boring from within’ resolved itself, accordingly, into this: either you must bore to a purpose and then you land quickly on the outside; or you don’t land on the outside, but then you knuckle under, a silent supporter of the felonies committed by the labor lieutenants of capitalism. Such was the experience.”

A few minutes later, however, he declared, “It [the SLP] said these [existing] unions cannot be ignored, nor can they be bored from within exclusively. They must be battered to pieces from without....” Still later he spoke of efforts “to reform those unions, and bring them over.”

Another example of the Party’s twofold approach to tactics on the economic field is an editorial in the *Daily People* of January 22, 1904. There De Leon wrote in part:

“There are only these two strategic maneuvers open. The Socialist Labor Party maintains that both methods, and not one alone are needed. Accordingly, pursuant to the first method, which may be termed ‘boring from without,’ the Party set up the Socialist Trade and Labor

Alliance; and pursuant to the second method, it stirred every workingman whose trade conditions compelled him to be in a pure and simple union to 'bore from within.'"

This dual policy was not merely a theoretical formulation. It corresponded to the actual existence of two currents within the early labor movement. While the majority of workers were first being organized into the conservative AFL-type of unions, there was a real mass of workers who were prepared for organization on a classconscious basis. The socialist unions which arose in opposition to the AFL and kindred unions were not simply the artificial creations of "socialist agitators." They were concrete products of the class struggle.

While the labor fakers hurled charges of "dual unionism" and "splitters" at the workers trying to organize on a more advanced level, Socialists recognized this classconscious trend as one to be cultivated and expanded. As Ebert summed it up, "The evolution of socialism in the trades unions of this country proceeded on a two-fold basis, first, that of indoctrinating anti-socialist trades unions with socialism, thus making them socialist; a process more popularly known as 'boring from within'; and, second, that of organizing strictly socialist trades unions in opposition to those already established; a process known by way of contradistinction, as 'boring from without.'"

ORGANIZING THE IWW

The independent existence of the ST&LA, of course, ended with its absorption into the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905. Significantly, the overwhelming majority of those who joined forces to set the IWW on foot did not come from among the unorganized workers of the day. They came from already organized unions whose members wanted to break away from the class collaboration of the AFL hierarchy. In fact, the call for a convention to establish "an economic organization of the working class" emanated from a conference held in Chicago in January 1905, attended by representatives of such existing organizations as the United Brewery Workers, the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees, the American Labor Union, the United Metal Workers, the Western Federation of Miners** and, of course, the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance. These organizations were among 46 that were represented at the first convention of the IWW, which convened on June 27, 1905. At the time, at least 13 of the 46 were still affiliated with the AFL.

The ST&LA, too, had been organized almost 10 years earlier, not from among the unorganized, but from a merger of existing labor organizations. As Professor John R. Commons and his associates put it in the *History of Labor in the United States*, "The socialistic Central Labor Federation of New York, Brooklyn and Newark, the United Hebrew Trades and District Assembly 49, with an aggregate membership of about 15,000, merged into the new [ST&LA] organization."

Similarly, after the anarchists forced a split in the IWW in 1908, the SLP-endorsed Detroit IWW that was established consisted not of new elements recruited from the unorganized majority of workers but of ele-

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ments that had seceded from the original IWW as a result of the conflict over political action. (The Detroit IWW was renamed the Workers International Industrial Union in 1915 and was thereafter known as the WIIU.)

From 1910 to 1920, the decade during which De Leon died, the first world war was fought and the Russian Revolution took place. SLP activities with regard to economic organizations were not nearly as great as in the preceding decades. The one exception was the great silk strike of 1911–1912 led by the Detroit IWW. By the end of that decade, however, the influence and membership of the WIIU had dwindled almost to the point of extinction.

1916 SLP CONVENTION

With the obvious decline of this last independent socialist union organization, the SLP once again confronted the question of how to reach the working class and create a new movement toward organizing industrial unions. Inevitably it returned to the question of “boring from within.”

At the 1916 National Convention of the Party, the *Weekly People* editor’s report suggested “making greater efforts along the lines of ‘locking horns’ with the labor faker right upon his own domain—inside the union.” Socialist Labor Party members “inside the AFL unions,” it declared, “should not be ‘asleep at the switch’....They should be ‘boring from within’....”

In response to that report, the convention passed a motion concurring “with the general ideas expressed in the report of the editor of the *Weekly People*, wherein he urges the SLP members, who are compelled to belong to craft unions, make use of every possible opportunity to oppose not only outside of craft unions, but also inside of the same, the nefarious work of corrupt union leaders and their policies, and to agitate for constructive principles of socialism and industrial unionism.”

In another action the convention rejected a resolution proposed by the Party’s Hungarian Federation that would have prohibited Socialist Labor Party members from accepting salaried offices in the AFL. This despite the obvious fact that the prevailing sentiment was that “boring from within” was not to be a quest for union office. No one challenged the expressed view that it was not the office but “the men and the organization” that the SLP was after. Nevertheless, the convention saw no reason to put restrictions on those members engaged in union work within the AFL.

Another reflection of the Party’s twofold approach to the union question is the following quoted from the SLP’s “irreducible minimum of conditions for unity” with the Socialist Party set forth by the 1916 convention:

“C—As to Economic Action: ...it is the duty of the party of socialism to teach essential principles of industrial unionism in order to enable the membership to advocate these principles both inside of the existing craft unions—to the extent as it may still be possible—and outside of the same.”

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ILLINOIS COAL FIELD DRIVE

Still another debate on union activity arose after World War I. As noted earlier, in 1919 the SLP launched an intensive agitational campaign in the Illinois coal fields. As the Party's official statement in the American Labor Year Book for 1919–1920 (Volume III) explained: "Since the signing of the armistice, the Party decided that besides the broad general agitation always carried on, the time had come to concentrate upon a given field so as to pull in shape, more rapidly, the industrial forces of the working class. The mining industry was selected and invaded and the propaganda of the SLP carried to the workers in the mines."

At the time, the coal miners were 100 percent organized in the United Mine Workers (UMW). To that limited extent the UMW was industrial "in form" in contrast to the craft-ridden AFL. It also meant that coal miners in the SLP had to work within the UMW and abstain from outside union activity, or leave the mines completely. In *The Mines to the Miners*, the SLP urged the miners not to seek to organize a new and correct organization. "The miners," the SLP pamphlet declared, "cannot *and should not* start another organization. *They must take possession of the one they have.*" (Emphasis in the original.) It called for a "fight against faker control" of the UMW—"a fight without let up and without intermission until the day is won."

The SLP made this appeal to the miners and sent forth its agitators and speakers to urge it upon them, though the Party openly and frankly recognized that the UMW was a union "pure and simple in theory, fakery and utterly corrupt." Needless to say, this called forth a reaction not only from the dwindling membership of the WIU, but also from some among the SLP membership. They held that the Party was advocating and practicing a discredited, outmoded and officially rejected policy of "boring from within."

With the issue of July 10, 1920, the Party launched a defense of its agitational efforts in the Illinois coal fields in the columns of the *Weekly People* entitled, "The Revolutionary Movement—Economic and Political Organization." It explained that "there are arguments going on here and there, which would tend to show that the Party's position is not clear in all quarters and upon all points, that there are matters which are woefully misconstrued, if not willfully misinterpreted. For these reasons this set of articles is undertaken." (July 10, 1920.)

In the July 24, 1920, issue, the *Weekly People* bluntly declared that "what the Socialist Labor Party demands from its members and adherents, both in the line of policy and tactics, is continuous hammering on that bulwark of capitalism known as the AFL—smashing and hammering from without at all times, and smashing and hammering from within whenever possible in cases where SLP men and women are compelled to belong to the union in order to live."

It noted (1) that the SLP members in the coal industry were miners; (2) that as miners, they were "perforce" members of the UMW; and (3) that accordingly these members should conduct their agitation within

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the UMW in keeping with the “sound SLP policy” that demanded “that the hammering and smashing be done within as well as without....”

It noted further that the situation in Illinois afforded the opportunity to reach the miners “as a solid unit,” and that there was no chance for the organization of industrial unions unless and until faker domination of the union had been broken. “To break the hold of the faker, to smash United Mine Worker fakerism in Illinois, is plainly the duty of the SLP,” the *Weekly People* declared.

Two weeks later another article in the *Weekly People* declared: “Its [the SLP’s] plain duty is to make a double drive—to clarify the rank and file and to drive the faker from the field. In doing so it deals with facts and conditions as it finds them. The outstanding fact is that the miners in Illinois have a one hundred percent organization and cannot belong to another economic organization and make a living in the mines. So we say, drive out the faker and capture your organization.” (August 7, 1920.)

EMPHASIS ON BUILDING SLP

The post-World War I effort among the Illinois miners was the last organized effort by the SLP directly on the economic field. After some initial success, it tapered off and for want of financial resources was halted sometime in 1921. About the same time, relations between the Party and the WIU were approaching the breaking point. The size of the WIU had dwindled sharply since its membership had reached a reported peak of about 12,000 members in the early teens. By the end of 1922, its membership was estimated to be “300 to 400” many of whom were also members of the SLP.

The Party, too, was having problems. At its 1923 session, the National Executive Committee of the Party adopted a Resolution on Concentration of Effort. Noting the “low state and steady decline of finances, membership, activity, etc.,” it urged upon the membership of the SLP “that it concentrate all efforts, to the exclusion of everything else and all other activities, upon the Party for the purpose of building a strong and effective educational and propaganda organization, until such time as the working class of this country has become sufficiently revolutionary and has absorbed the idea of industrial unionism sufficiently to precipitate a real industrial union.”

The resolution engendered a heated debate between the WIU and some Party members and subdivisions on the one hand and the Party’s National Office and executive bodies on the other. The matter finally came before the 1924 National Convention where the resolution of the NEC was endorsed. As a consequence, without the official support of the SLP, the WIU soon disappeared.

The final disappearance of this last independent socialist union organization, plus the continuing problems confronting the Party in its struggle for survival inevitably had an effect upon its daily activities, particularly with regard to the tactics and strategy it applied on the economic field. Its union activity generally was reduced to a minimum as the Party administration and membership concentrated on Party organizational and internal problems.

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In addition, the absence of any independent socialist union to which workers could be directed or which could be held up as an example limited the field for union activity. In the circumstances prevailing in the Party, no official effort was made to stimulate activity by Party members who belonged to the existing procapitalist unions.

There were, of course, individual Party members in those unions who did seek to exploit opportunities for socialist agitation, but they were limited individual efforts. For the most part, the Party's efforts with regard to the economic field were limited to attacking and exposing the existing unions and their labor faker hierarchies and making generalized appeals to the workers to reject both in favor of Socialist Industrial Unions which did not exist and which the Party lacked the physical and material resources to set on foot.

Still another development affected the course of the Party's work. The Russian Revolution and the events flowing from it rendered a profound change in the Socialist Movement throughout the world. Gradually the focus of the Socialist Movement grew beyond a fight for working-class organization on the union field, beyond the labor movement itself. It became a political struggle between various groups claiming to speak for Marxism and socialism.

In addition to the Communist Party, a host of "socialist" and "communist" groupings emerged, all vying for the attention of the working class. It became clear to the SLP that the fight against many of these groups, who distorted the meaning of socialism or upheld the Bolshevik revolution as the one universal path to socialism, was as crucial as the fight against the labor fakers in the unions. The Party poured considerable resources into this area, which was fought out in the political arena essentially removed from union activity.

In short, the reduced resources and strength of the Party, the collapse of the independent socialist union movement, the increased tasks confronting the SLP on the political field, all contributed to a restriction of organized Party efforts within the unions. While it continued to keep alive the concept of Socialist Industrial Unionism, and while individual members remained active within the unions, the SLP pursued no formal, concerted union strategy.

To this day, the SLP has concentrated on building the political party of socialism, attracting as many workers as possible to the Socialist Industrial Union program. But with the latest profound crisis of capitalism, the stagnation and exposure of the labor faker bureaucracies, and the growing militancy of workers both in and out of the capitalist unions, the SLP may once again confront new organizing tasks on the economic field.

Weekly People, April 24, 1976

II.

The Socialist Labor Party's break with the Workers International Industrial Union (WIIU) in the early twenties marked a distinct turning point in the SLP's strategy and activity.

During the 1890s and early 1900s, the SLP had been continuously,

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directly and deeply involved in activity on the economic field. It was an active force in building and shaping the union movement. And it did so despite its early and strong commitment to independent socialist politics and the conduct of electoral campaigns on the local, state and national levels.

Daniel De Leon and the SLP considered union activity and political action essential and complementary elements of the proper tactical approach to building a Marxian Socialist Movement in America. Accordingly, SLP members, with De Leon setting both the example and the pace, took part in the movement on the economic field as full-fledged trade unionists during the first quarter century of the Party's existence.

The adoption of the Resolution on Concentration of Effort by the Party's National Executive Committee in 1923 signaled a major change in the Party's overall strategy and day-to-day activities. Specifically, the resolution was aimed at ending the WIIU's drain on the SLP's limited physical and financial resources. Inevitably, however, the call for the membership to "concentrate all efforts, to the exclusion of everything else and all other activities" on building the Party was bound to deter SLP members from union activity generally.

SLP UNION ACTIVITY DECLINES

That, of course, did not happen precipitately. Though the break with the WIIU was immediate and final, SLP members were involved to varying degrees in other unions. And they continued to be so for a period of time. For example, at the convention of the Commercial Telegraphers Union (CTU) in Chicago in December 1925, its International president, Roscoe Johnson, delivered a vicious attack on the SLP. He accused it of "boring from within" and trying to undermine the American Federation of Labor and its affiliates by advocating "dual unionism."

Incidentally, at the time, an SLP member, Paul F. Schnur, was International vice president of the CTU. Some of the convention delegates also were members of the SLP. That Party interest and concern in such union matters was still great is evidenced by the fact that practically the entire December 5, 1925, issue of the *Weekly People* was devoted to items related to the CTU convention. Included were reprints of the speeches of the major CTU officers, Johnson's and Schnur's among them.

Another example is the Paterson silk strike in the fall and winter of 1928. It involved many shops and several thousand workers, members of the Associated Silk Workers Union. The strike lasted for weeks and was given consistent and detailed coverage in the *Weekly People*. SLP speakers, including the Party's candidate for vice president, J.D. Crowley, addressed various strike meetings. Several SLP members served on the strike committee.

THE "INDUSTRIAL UNION" DEBATE

But such direct involvement and participation by SLP members in the union struggles of the day became less and less frequent. It all but disappeared by the time the AFL and the labor movement generally were

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convulsed by the debate between the advocates of “industrial unionism” and the die-hard protagonists of “craft unionism.”

This is not the place for a detailed analytical account of the events and social forces that led to the split in the AFL and the establishment of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Hence we limit ourselves here to the following brief facts.

The first round of the “industrial union” versus “craft union” debate took place at the AFL’s convention in Washington in October 1933. It was essentially a debate over union structure. It had no revolutionary implications in the social sense. It did not raise any challenge to the wage system; nor did it involve any proposal for fundamental change in capitalism’s class relations. The basic contention of the “industrial unionists” was that mass production techniques were rapidly wiping out the lines of demarcation that had clearly defined the crafts in the past. Accordingly, they urged the adoption of the “industrial” or “vertical” form of organization. The debate was to continue for several years.

INTENSIFIED CLASS STRUGGLE

The mid-thirties were also marked by a number of major strikes that reflected an intensification of the class struggle that rivaled that of the late 1880s and early 1900s.

In the spring of 1934, the Toledo Auto-Lite Strike saw 10,000 workers on the picket lines. When the National Guard was called out, it led to a pitched battle between the strikers and the militia that lasted several days. At least two strikers were killed and scores were injured on both sides. The strike lasted almost two months.

In mid-July of 1934, Minneapolis truck drivers struck for the second time that year. On July 20 (remembered as “Bloody Friday”), the police attacked the strikers. Two were killed, 55 wounded. Here, too, the National Guard was called out. Some 40,000 workers turned out for the funeral of one of the murdered workers. Shortly thereafter martial law was declared. The strike lasted almost six weeks.

On May 9, 1934, the longshoremen struck on the West Coast. On July 5, the San Francisco police attacked the strikers, precipitating the “Battle of Rincon Hill.” Two were killed, 109 wounded. The workers’ response was the famous San Francisco general strike that literally brought the city to a standstill for four days. The longshoremen’s strike lasted over three months.

These strikes were only the beginning. A virtual epidemic of strikes followed, including the national textile strike (September 1934), the Akron rubber strike (March 1936), the seamen’s strike (October 1936), the Flint (General Motors) sit-down strike (winter, 1936–37), the steel strike (spring, 1937) that led to the Memorial Day Massacre at the Republic Steel plant in Chicago in which 10 workers were killed, eight of them being shot in the back.

DRAWING THE LESSONS

These strikes were largely the result of initiating action by militant

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workers. They attracted widespread attention, particularly from the new advocates of “industrial (i.e., ‘vertical’) unionism.” As far as SLP involvement was concerned, however, there was a marked difference from earlier periods of widespread labor unrest. There were no SLP speakers on the podium during strike meetings. There were no SLP members on the strike or negotiating committees.

Of course, the strikes were given coverage in the *Weekly People*, but that coverage did not include the first-hand details and experiences that marked reports of earlier strikes in which Party members had been actively involved.

This is not to say that the Party did not make a genuine effort to bring its socialist message to the workers and influence the direction of their militant actions. It published and distributed millions of leaflets supporting the strikes, attacking the concepts of “vertical” unionism, explaining the principles of Socialist Industrial Unionism, etc. It conducted hundreds of meetings, organized study classes, and toured organizers through the areas where strikes were in progress. But the SLP was working on the fringe. The decade of concentration of effort on the political movement had isolated it from the mainstream of activity in the industrial field. It no longer had a “base” within the unions.

Consequently, it failed to command the attention it had been able to command during the pre-1930 days. Moreover, the tasks and problems confronting the SLP led it to continue to concentrate its efforts on the political field.

In recent years, however, the Party reviewed its union policy in the light of prevailing social conditions and ongoing developments. It concluded that the opportunities on the economic field for reaching workers with the Socialist Industrial Union program dictated a change in that policy. Accordingly, it altered its tactical position to allow for greater activity by Party members on the industrial field. In 1976, it removed from the Party’s Constitution several provisions that had restricted such activities. It has since then adopted a series of guidelines on trade union work that have as their objective the advancement of socialism within the labor movement.

The People, September 5, 1981

Footnotes

*New York Labor News, February 1907. The pamphlet is out of print.

**The Western Federation of Miners had been organized in 1893. During the early years of its existence it was affiliated with the AFL, an affiliation that it ended in 1897.

The WFM is reputed to have been the first union to espouse industrial unionism. In 1903, it took the leading role in forming the American Labor Union. The ALU, in turn, is credited with having taken the initiative in calling the January conference that led to the organization of the IWW.