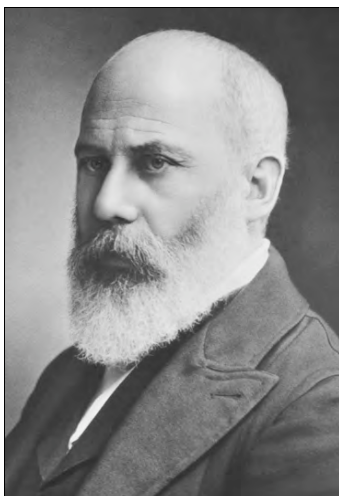


# ***The Burning Question Of Trades Unionism***

***By DANIEL DE LEON***



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# THE BURNING QUESTION OF TRADES UNIONISM

*An address delivered by Daniel De Leon in the New Auditorium Hall,  
Newark, N.J., April 21, 1904.*

Workingmen and Workingwomen of Newark:

That the trades union question is a burning one is obvious from the space it fills in the public mind, the acrimony of the discussion and the wide divergence of opinion on the subject. Obvious also is the conclusion that a subject that can draw upon itself so much attention, that can produce so much acrimony, and on which opinion takes so many shades—running from extreme and unqualified support through all manner of gradations across the gamut, to extreme and unqualified opposition—cannot choose but be a vital one, and certainly must have a latent something about it that will not down. Finally, it is obvious that such a question deserves attention—close, serious and sober—and that the solution be grappled with and found. Nor is the task impossible. Despite the widely conflicting views, the solution is not only possible but easy—but possible and easy only by either rising high enough above, or penetrating deep enough below the squabble to enable the inquirer to detect the fact that, despite their being seemingly irreconcilable, the conflicting views have important points of contact. In other words, the solution of the problem depends upon the perception of the fact that there is no real conflict; that what there is is a failure to harmonize views that are supplemental to one another; and that the failure proceeds from the blindness of each side to perceive the element of soundness in the others—a perception without which none can understand the bearings of his own position, and consequently stands stockfast, impotent—except for suicide.

Before entering upon the analysis of the subject, there is one thing I must request of my audience. It is this: To drop, for the present, all recollections of the corruption and dishonesty in the trades union movement that surely will obtrude themselves upon your minds. Need I say that dishonesty plays an important role in the issue? It does. I shall come to that. But for the present I shall eliminate that

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factor. It can only confuse if taken up now. Leave it out for the present. The actual and important lines of the question being first established, the corruption element will then fall of itself into natural grooves and help to elucidate the principles. Taken now it can only becloud them. Never forget this—dishonesty in argument is like a creeping plant that needs support; it would collapse and lie prone but for some solid truth around which to wind its tendrils for support. Let's first ascertain the truth.

Nothing so well illustrates the general situation on the fierce discussion that is going on on trades unionism as a certain choice poem of our genial New York poet, the late lamented John Godfrey Saxe. Many of you may have heard it, perhaps even learned it by heart on the school benches. All of you can hear it with profit once more.

### THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.  
The First approached the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
“God bless me! but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!”

The Second feeling of the tusk,  
Cried, “Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant

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Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out his eager hand,  
And felt about the knee.  
"What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain," quoth he;  
" 'Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny that fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,

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Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

Why? Why were they all in the wrong? Simply because none could see where the others were right, and, consequently, *was unable to understand even himself*.

Leaving general illustrations and stepping into the concrete, let us take two or three instances on the question itself.

Take this instance—President Eliot of Harvard says: “The scab is a hero!” President Gompers of the AF of L says: “The scab is a scamp!” [laughter and sneers]—It may need a superhuman effort, but, I pray you exercise it. Repress the thoughts of dishonesty that the mention of these two names must inevitably conjure up to your minds. Let us examine the two utterances, regardless of who made them. They are made. That is enough for our purpose. They seem wholly irreconcilable. Are they, in fact? Let us see:

Here is a shop. What with fines, the intensity of the work demanded and other impositions, the wages are inhumanly low. On top of that a further reduction is inflicted upon the men and they rebel. A strike is on. Presently men who are not starving, but who either occupy other positions in the employer’s service and wish to ingratiate themselves with their masters, or who despise labor, step into the shop and help him out. Such instances occurred in the telegraphers’ strike and a shoemakers’ strike in New York, and recently when Yale students took the places of striking car drivers in New Haven. Who will deny that the man who does such a thing is a scab and a scamp?

But now, look at this other picture. A number of breweries in this neighborhood and New York had a contract with their employees; the contract expired and the breweries wanted a new contract less favorable to the men. In order to accomplish that they needed the help of the officers of the union. They obtained it. A contract, that tied the men’s hands and left them at the employers’ mercy, is drawn up and jammed through the union partly under false pretenses and partly by brute force.

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Members of the rank and file rebel, and their spokesman, Valentine Wagner, demands an explanation from the officers. He is fined for “insubordination,” and fine is laid upon fine until the amount has risen to \$80; as he still remains “insubordinate,” and as the officers are in league with the brewery bosses, the man is expelled, thrown out of work as “not being a member of the union,” and left to starve. These facts have all been made public and proved. Thereupon, to the threat that if he dared work in any brewery he would be called a “scab,” Valentine Wagner announced that not only would he dare, but that he would deem it an honor to be called a “scab”! [Loud applause.] Who would deny that Valentine Wagner is a hero? [Prolonged applause.]

Are the two utterances, “The scab is a scamp,” and “The scab is a hero,” utterly irreconcilable? Evidently not. Evidently they harmonize perfectly. And in perceiving the common ground for both, we are enlightened on what the “scab” is. The “scab” is he who by his voluntary conduct helps to lower the standard of the worker. He who for the pleasure of it, or out of curriishness to the master, will help to break a strike for better conditions is a “scab” and “scamp,” and a “scamp” and “scab” is the union officer who conspires with the master against the interests of the men. They are both scabs because, by helping to down the worker, they sap the nation and introduce disease, death and the pestilence of a degraded people. That is the test of the “scab.” The scab may wear the union label as well as not.

Take this other instance—one set of people says: “The union must be a good thing because the capitalists hate it”; another set says: “The union is a bad thing because the capitalists love it.” These two utterances seem wholly irreconcilable. Are they, in fact? Let us see:

Look at what is going on in Colorado. The right of habeas corpus, the dignity of the courts, the right of free assemblage and free speech—in short, all the great civic conquests of the past are trampled on by the capitalist class in power in that state, and all for the purpose of smashing the Western Federation of Miners. If ever there was an instance of hatred this is one. The capitalists hate that union to the point of endangering even the privileges that their own class still stands in need of.

But now look at this other picture. Charles Corregan, a member of the Syracuse, N.Y., local of the International Typographical Union, speaking on the

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public stump for the Socialist Labor Party, gave facts and figures concerning an important factor in the labor movement, to wit, the manner in which the pure and simple trades union is run by its officers, and he illustrated the points with the officers of his own union. He is thereupon tried by these officers, convicted and fined in his absence without charges being presented to him; and as he refused to pay a fine imposed under such conditions, a strike was ordered in the shop against him and he was thrown out of work. The very fact that a strike could be called against him, that the employer virtually lined up with the officers, points to the point I am reaching. Corregan sued the union for reinstatement and damages, the court threw the case out and, mark you, the capitalist press, particularly of New York, *announced the decision with flaming and jubilating headlines as a union victory.*<sup>1</sup>

Are the two utterances, “The capitalists hate the union” and “The capitalists love the union,” as irreconcilable as they looked at first? [A voice: “No!”] What is it that discloses their reconcilability? Why, the facts, which, taken together, point to the common ground of the utterances, and thereby clarify both. That common ground tells us that capitalism justly sees in socialism, in the Socialist Labor Party, its unquestioned foe, while with equal accuracy it perceives in the union an organism of various possibilities—a possibility of injury to the capitalist class, and also a possibility of safety and protection; where the possibility of injury takes shape, as in Colorado, hatred is developed for the union; where the possibility of safety and protection takes shape, as in Corregan’s case, love is developed for the union.

We are making progress out of the woods. But, before proceeding further in our march, let us establish a collateral point hinted at by these facts.

The country has in recent years been twice convulsed by two economic-political issues that may be called great when we consider the millions of votes that they shared among them. And both these issues may yet spring up again. The one is the tariff, the other the silver issue. When the tariff was the issue, the Democratic free

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<sup>1</sup> Since this address was delivered a further incident occurred supplementary to the above. Corregan appealed to the higher courts; his appeal was sustained; and despite the decision’s reading the court below a severe lesson in elemental law, logic and justice, the metropolitan capitalist press that had taken such extensive notice of the union’s victory in the court below, remained silent as the tomb on the union’s discomfiture in the higher court.



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trader declared that protection was robbery; on the other hand, the Republican protectionist pronounced free trade unpatriotic. The free trader argued that the tariff was like an artificial mountain raised at the gates of the nation and, thereby, increasing the cost of goods. “Tear down these mountains,” said he, “and prices will decline.” That is all true, but we Socialists know that if the artificial mountains of the tariff are removed, prices will go down true enough, but seeing labor is a merchandise under the capitalist system of production, its own price, wages, must go down along with that of all other merchandise. The advantage, accordingly, of lower prices is lost to the working class. The Republican protectionist argued that it was the duty of government to promote by protecting and protect by promoting the interests of the people. “A tariff,” said the Republicans, “protects the country inasmuch as it enables it to differentiate its industries, unchecked by foreign competition.” This also is all true, but we Socialists know that if government is to be at all justified it is upon the ground of the protection it affords to the people; and we also know that, under the capitalist system, the “people” who count are not the workers, but the capitalist shirkers and, consequently, that the advantage to be derived from the theory of protection does not extend to the workers, to the majority of the people. They are left out in the cold. The tariffs protect the capitalists against foreign competition, but not the workers. The largest infloods of foreign labor have been instigated and taken place under Republican “protection” administrations.

Accordingly, while both “free trade” and protection have an element of truth in them, that element is in both cases lost to the people under capitalist rule. It takes socialism, the Socialist Republic, to harmonize the two opposites. Under the dome of the Socialist Republic the discord between the two principles vanishes, and only the truth remains. Under socialism the “mountains” of tariffs may be safely removed: the decline in prices will not then drag down labor’s earnings because labor will have ceased to be merchandise and become a human factor—what it now is only in the speeches of capitalist politicians at election time, and in the sermons of the political parsons between election and election. Likewise with regard to protection. The principle of organized mutual protection through government becomes truthful and effective only under socialism where, there being only one class, the working class, government is truly of, by, and for the people.

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It is similarly with the silver question. The free coinagists denounced the gold standard men as robbers; the gold standard men denounced the free coinagists as bandits—and each was right and both were wrong. As to the free coinagists: their theory was that money is a good thing and that the more there is of a good thing the larger is the per capita thereof for the people. We know that right as the premises are, under capitalism the conclusions become wrong. There are infinitely more hats, shoes, coats and other good things today than 30 years ago in the land; but everybody knows that the workingman's per capita of these good things has not increased. He has remained where he was if not even below, while the increase has gone to the Anna Goulds, the Consuelo Vanderbilts, the international capitalists in short. And we understand the reason why. Under capitalism, the workingman being a merchandise, his price (wages) does not depend upon the quantity of good things in existence, but upon the quantity of him in the labor market. The same as, regardless of the quantity of money there may be in the money market, pork chops will fetch a smaller price if the pork chop market is overstocked, so will the merchandise labor fetch a smaller price however much money there may be if the labor market is overstocked. And capitalism does that very thing. Privately owned improved machinery, and concentration of plants, ruthlessly displace labor and overstock the labor market. Thus, capitalism renders absurd the premises above mentioned of free coinagism. On the other hand, the gold standard men proceeded from the principle that money is a merchandise and must have value, from which they concluded that the workingman would be robbed unless he was paid with what they call a 100-cent dollar. Here again, right as the premises are, capitalism renders the conclusion false. As shown above, labor being a merchandise, it matters nothing what the counter is in which it is paid. Its price depends upon its market value; and it is all one to it whether it gets paid with one 100-cent gold dollar for its day's toil, or with two 50-cent silver dollars.

Accordingly, while both the free coinage and the gold standard principle have an element of truth in them, under capitalism the truth is lost to the workers. It takes socialism to harmonize the two. Under socialism, labor no longer being a merchandise, the more good things it produces the more it has, and the 100-cent dollar ceases to be its merchandise badge and, thereby, a fraud upon it.

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These two sets of illustrations will suffice. They throw light upon what otherwise is puzzling in modern society, to wit, that correct principles work evil. Free trade and protection are both accompanied with increasing masses of pauperism; gold standard and silver standard leave nothing to choose between them for the masses. The sense in each is turned into nonsense by capitalist rule; it is socialism that alone can redeem them.

And as the socialist key alone can unlock the secret of this conflict of thought, it is the socialist key alone that can unlock the secret of the conflict of thought with regard to the burning question of trades unionism. Equipped with this key, we shall be able to acquire a full grasp of the question at hand, and see the elephant in full with all his members coordinate, and not as a jumble of “rope,” “spear,” “snake,” “wall,” “tree” and what other things the blind men of the story took the animal to be.

### PRO- AND ANTI-UNIONIST ARGUMENTS

Let us take two types on the question—both honest—but one holding that the trades union pure and simple is all-sufficient and useful, while the other holds that the trades union is worthless; in other words, one holding the trunk of the elephant and claiming he is a snake, the other holding his tail and claiming he is a rope; bring the two together, and, both being honest, this dialog will take place between them:

ANTI-UNIONIST—“Drop your union, it is no good. Smash it!”

PRO-UNIONIST—“What! my union no good? I am a member of the Housesmiths’ and Bridgemen’s Union, I know what I am talking about. Before we had a union we could barely make two dollars a day. Now that we have a union I make four and sometimes five dollars. Don’t tell me the union is no good.”

ANTI-UNIONIST—“You are hasty in your judgment. You are judging all the unions by one, and your own union by only one epoch of its existence. I grant that through your union you are now getting two dollars more. But that is only a temporary affair. Exceptional circumstances aided Sam Parks in bringing up your wages. But how long will that last? Look at the other unions, take the census of the men. Without exception earnings are lower. The census itself admits that wages are

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now lower than they were 10 years ago. What happened to the older unions will happen to yours. They were not able to raise earnings of the working class. Already the day is at hand when your union will be in the same fix. No, it is not true that the union can raise wages, speaking of the union in general.”

PRO-UNIONIST—“Well, that’s so. Speaking with union men of other trades, they all say how hard it is for them to get along. Yes, the union cannot raise earnings. But it is a good thing all the same; it can keep wages from declining.”

ANTI-UNIONIST—“You are mistaken again. Look over the field. Look below the surface. You will find that, despite the union, earnings go down as a whole. Look at the savage reductions inflicted upon the steel and iron workers. A numerically strong union. Despite the union a savage reduction was made.”

PRO-UNIONIST—“W-e-l-l, I can’t deny that [after a pause], but you must admit that if we had no union the decline would be swifter. Will you deny that the union acts as a brake upon the decline? Would we not be down to the coolie stage today if it were not for the union?”

ANTI-UNIONIST—“You have admitted that the union cannot raise wages; you have admitted that it cannot keep wages where they are; and you have admitted that it cannot prevent their reduction. Your last ditch is that it keeps wages from going down *as fast* as they would otherwise go. I’ll now drive you out of that ditch. If your theory means anything it means that the union will last, at least, as a brake. Now you know that periodically men are laid off by the thousands, and hundreds of thousands. These laid-off men want to live; they will offer themselves for a lower price. If your union strikes it goes to smash, if it does not strike it melts to smash, so that even as a brake the day is at hand when your unions will exist no more.”

PRO-UNIONIST—“You have hit me hard. Perhaps you think you have knocked me out. But you have not. As sure as a man will raise his hand by mere instinct, to shield himself against a blow, so surely will workingmen, instinctively, periodically gather into unions. The union is the arm that labor instinctively throws up to screen its head.”

Unquestionably both the pure and simple pro-unionist and the anti-unionist are knocked out. They have knocked out each other. The pro-unionist’s last statement is a knockout blow to the man who imagines that the union is a

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smashable thing. On the other hand, the anti-unionist's argumentation, whereby he brings out the fact that the union's claims of potential triumph are false, and that, driven from defeat to defeat, the union can gather for the next defeat only, knocks out the pro-unionist. That is to say, the pure and simple pro-unionist. In their mutual trituration the materials are gathered with which socialism can build the four-jointed truth. Let us now take the "tail" and "trunk" and "legs" and "ears" and "body" of the elephant as furnished us by these two typical disputants and construct the animal. The disputants' positions will be found to be, not inherently irreconcilable, but fully reconcilable.

Starting from the principle, an undeniable one, that the spirit of union formation is an instinctive one, the question immediately presents itself: Is there no way by which the instinctive motion of self-defense can be rendered effective? Does it follow that because the man who raises his hand to protect his head from the threatened blow with a crowbar, has both his arm and his skull crushed, that therefore the instinctive motion of self-defense might as well be given up? The question suggests the immediate answer. The answer is no, it does not follow. And the question, furthermore, indicates what does follow. It follows that the arm which periodically is thrown up in self-defense, must arm itself with a weapon strong enough to resist—at least to break the blow. Naval warfare did not end when guns of stronger power were contrived. What followed was that stronger armor plate was contrived for the battleships; nor did naval warfare end there; when battleships became so impregnable, contact mines were invented which sink these as if by magic. And so it can be done here. Pro-unionists always talk about the union being a "natural condition." But they forget that so are hair and nails. No sensible man will pull hairs and nails out by the root; but neither would any sensible man say that because hair and nails are natural they must be allowed to grow untrimmed and untended. Pro-unionists always talk about the condition under which the union was born. So are babes born under puny condition. No sensible man would kill the babe because so born; but neither will any sensible man propose to keep the babe forever in the condition under which it was born. That it is a natural growth is an important fact to recognize, but how to improve it is equally important, and that can be done by bringing the above pro- and anti-unionist arguments together.

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The last anti-unionist argument condenses in itself all the previous ones. It correctly points out that the large displacements of labor render the union futile. It implies unionism in general, but that is a mistake. It is true if applied to unionism as it is today, that is to say, in the babe form under which it was born. My point will be made clear if we suggest to both the pro-unionist and the anti-unionist that all the members of a trade be enlisted in the union—those at work, those temporarily displaced, and those that may be considered permanently displaced. At the bare thought of such a proposition both the pro-unionist and the anti-unionist will throw up their hands; and both their gestures of hand and face indicate that neither of the two has of the union any but a babe condition notion.

Why will the pro-unionist look dismayed at the proposition? He will because he knows that his union is there to give jobs to its members; that none join it but for jobs; and, consequently, that if the applicants exceed the jobs the union would immediately go to pieces, if they are all inside. The notion of the anti-unionist is the exact reverse of the pro-unionist's notion. And both are right from their standpoint, but their standpoint is wrong; it is as wrong as that of the blind men at the several limbs of the elephant. The thought suggested by the pro-unionist's last argument, that the union is like the instinctive motion of the man who raises his arm to protect his head when assailed, gives us in hand the method to proceed by.

Instructed upon the nature of the weapon of assault, man will strengthen the arm that he throws up in defense of his head. But the effectiveness of that strengthening depends entirely upon the correctness of his idea on the nature of the instrument of assault. In the babe condition under which the union is born naturally, it has no conception of the nature of the weapon that it instinctively raises up its arm in self-defense against. In that natural and original babe condition the union does not realize that its members are merchandise in the present state of society; it does not realize the law that governs the value and price of merchandise; consequently, it does not realize the law that underlies its own value and price, that is, its wages; it does not realize the cause of its degraded merchandise status; it does not realize that its lack of the natural (land) and social (capital) opportunities keep it down; accordingly, it does not realize there is no improvement, let alone salvation, for it so long as it labors under the status of merchandise; finally and most

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important of all, and as a result of all, it does not understand that it cannot improve faster than the rest of the working class. In other words, it does not understand the import of the “solidarity of labor.” It matters not what phrases the pure and simple trades union may use, the fact that none of them would like today to see all the members of the trade in the union, the fact that the trades not directly concerned, aye, even those directly concerned, do not rise in indignation when such other trades as the railroaders are found willing to transport militias from one end of the country to the other in order to break a strike—these facts demonstrate that the meaning of the word solidarity is a closed book to the pro-unionist. On the other hand, the anti-unionist is utterly mistaken when he proceeds from the theory that this closed book is to remain closed; in other words, that the union can never rise above its babe state of natural birth; in other words, that the union is useless. Leaving for later on the feature of the remoter utility of the union, in fact its real revolutionary and historic mission, let us be first clear upon the fundamental error that, odd enough to say, both the pure and simple pro-unionist and the anti-unionist stand.

The honest pro-unionist frankly admits that the best he can expect of his union is to act as a brake on the decline. In other words, he admits that the union only serves as a rear guard to a retreating army. Obviously, from that standpoint the anti-unionist’s position is impregnable when he holds that the rear guard of a retreating army which can do nothing but retreat is a futile thing. But equally obvious is the fact that the whole strength of the anti-unionist position lies in the babe original condition that the union has remained in. The point need but be made and it will be accepted by every thinking man that all the reasons which the anti-unionist advances why the union is bound to go to smash through the displacement of labor will fall flat the moment the union gets out of its natural, original babe condition, realizes that it not only endangers the future but that it also loses the present by turning itself into a jobs-providing machine. Even if the union cannot grasp its great historic and revolutionary mission, it certainly must, for the sake of the immediate present, be supposed to be willing to adapt its methods, not to the babe, but the adult conditions of capitalism. Capitalism displaces labor; capitalism needs a large army of idle and reserve labor for the periods of industrial expansion.



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By constituting itself a jobs-furnishing institution, the union turns itself into a pint measure into which it is impossible for the gallon measure of labor to be received. And thus it is not only the capitalist, from in front, but labor, from behind, that triturates the union. In order to be able to contain the gallon measure of labor the union must expand to gallon size; in order to expand to gallon size it must drop its idle aspirations as a jobs-furnishing monopoly. And this can be done only if it rises to the elevation of its political mission. Then will it understand the solidarity of its class generally and of the members of its trade in particular. Even if as many as 50,000 out of a trade of 100,000 members cannot be provided for with jobs, the union could do better by taking them all in. But this sounds like a purely chimerical idea under the general babe condition notions that exist. The chimera, however, becomes possible if the members are all tutored to understand that the best the union can do for them today is to check the decline and prevent it from going as fast as it otherwise would. Not only in the long run, but all along, in a condition to actually fulfill its great revolutionary historic mission that I have all along been alluding to.

### HISTORIC MISSION OF UNIONISM

What is that great historic revolutionary mission? It must be admitted that however philosophic, possibly even socialist, the anti-unionist may pronounce himself, he is on this subject not a bit more enlightened than the pro-unionist. It is to me surprising to find men who call themselves Socialists, and who reason socialistically up to a certain point, suddenly go to pieces when they touch the union question. They take certain facts into consideration, these facts correctly point to the eventual destruction of the union, and from these they conclude that the union might as well be smashed now as later. They fail to consider all the facts in the case. They are the real utopians of today who imagine the Socialist Commonwealth can be established like spring establishes itself through its balmy atmosphere, and without effort melts away the winter snows. These anti-union utopians only see the political feature of the labor movement. According to them, all that a lance would need is its iron head; on the other hand, the pro-unionists have their noses so close



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to the ground that they fail to see the political aspect of the trades union movement, and can only see what they call its industrial aspect. In other words, they virtually hold that all that a lance would need is its shaft. It goes without saying that neither he who thinks a lance is all iron head, nor he who thinks that it is all shaft has a correct idea of what a lance is, or what its uses are: Each may have a technical, theoretic, more or less practical knowledge of each particular part of a lance, but a lance neither of them will have, nor can wield. I shall show you that unless the political aspect of the labor movement is grasped, socialism will never triumph; and that unless its trades union aspect is grasped the day of its triumph will be the day of its defeat.

Who of you has not heard some workingman when told that some fellow workingman of his was nominated for mayor, or for governor, or for Congress, sneeringly say: "What's he? What could he do in Congress? What does he know about law? Why, he wouldn't know how to move!" [Laughter.] The matter is serious; it is no laughing matter. The workingman who utters himself in that way is right and he is wrong. He is absolutely right when he considers that the workingman is not a fit man to handle the laws of the land; but he is wrong when he considers that that is a disqualification. In other words, he is wrong in supposing that the political mission of labor is to dabble with or tinker upon capitalist laws. And mark you, his blunder proceeds direct, both from the pro-unionist industrial mental attitude and from the anti-unionist's political mental attitude. In this respect is realized into what errors the political anti-unionist drops in his own domain of politics, and into what error the industrial pro-unionist drops in his own industrial domain—due to the circumstance that both fail to realize that their various domains dovetail into each other.

Open any law book, whatever the subject be—contract, real estate, aye, even marital relations, husband and wife, father and son, guardian and ward—you will find that the picture they throw upon the mind's canvas is that of everyone's hands at everyone's throat. Capitalist law reflects the material substructure of capitalism. The theory of that substructure is war, conflict, struggle. It can be no otherwise. Given the private ownership of natural and social opportunities, society is turned into a jungle of wild beasts, in which the "fittest" wild beast terrorizes the less "fit,"

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and these in turn imitate among themselves the “fit” qualities of the biggest brute. No nuptial veils of lace or silk can conceal this state of things on the matrimonial field; no rhetoric can hide it on any other field. The rawboned struggle is there. It is inevitable. It is a shadow cast by the angles of fact of the capitalist system. Now then, is it the mission of the labor or Socialist Movement to continue or to uproot the material conditions that cast the shadow? Its mission is to uproot it. Consequently its mission cannot be to tinker at the laws that capitalism finds it necessary to enact. As well say that a housekeeper is unfit to clean a neglected house because she has no technical knowledge of the construction of the vermin that has been rioting in it, as to say that, because labor has no knowledge of the technique of the vermin of capitalist laws, it is unfit to take the broom handle and sweep the vermin into the ash barrel of oblivion. [Applause.] Accordingly, the political aspect of the labor movement spells *revolution*. It points out exactly the duty of the Socialist or classconscious workingmen elected to office—no tinkering, no compromise, unqualified overthrow of existing laws. That means the dethronement of the capitalist class. And what does that, in turn, mean with regard to the subject in hand?

Did you notice and did you realize all that there was in the capitalist threat of closing down the shops and stopping production if Bryan was elected in 1896? We know that Bryan was a reactionary capitalist; nevertheless, the fact was brought out in his campaign by that upper-capitalist threat that the ruling capitalists have it in their power to create a panic any time the government slips from their hands. What places that power in their hands? Now watch close, think close—*What places that power in their hands is the pure and simple trades union*: it is the fact that the *working class* is not organized. And I have shown you that the pure and simple trades union is unable to organize the working class; that it keeps the working class hopelessly divided. The majority of the voters are workingmen. But even if this majority were to sweep the political field on a classconscious, that is, a bona fide labor or socialist ticket, they would find the capitalist able to throw the country into the chaos of a panic and to famine unless they, *the workingmen, were so well organized in the shops that they could laugh at all shutdown orders, and carry on production*. Such a complete organization is impossible under pure and simple

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trades union methods; being impossible on the industrial field, the seeming unity that swept the political field would be a flash in the pan. Political organization must necessarily partake today of capitalist conditions; accordingly, the votes cast for a congressman, for instance, are not yet the votes of any one trade, but of a mixture of scores of trades. Civilized society will know no such ridiculous thing as geographic constituencies. It will only know industrial constituencies. The parliament of civilization in America will consist, not of congressmen from geographic districts, but of representatives of trades throughout the land, and their legislative work will not be the complicated one which a society of conflicting interests, such as capitalism, requires but the easy one which can be summed up in the statistics of the wealth needed, the wealth producible, and the work required—and that any average set of workingmen's representatives are fully able to ascertain, infinitely better than our modern rhetoricians in Congress. But we are not there yet, nor will we be there the day we shall have swept the political field. We shall not be there for the simple reason that in order to get there through that first political victory we shall have been compelled to travel along the lines of capitalist political demarcations; and these I have shown you are essentially non-unionist; that is to say, they ignore industrial bonds and recognize only geographic ones. It follows that, today, the very best of political organization is wholly exclusive of industrial organization, and will have to continue so until the political victory has been won, and the trades organizations have been able to continue production in the teeth of capitalist revolt; until the nation shall have had time to reconstruct itself upon the labor—that is, the socialist basis.

Thus we see that the head of the lance of the Socialist Movement is worthless without the shaft. We see that they are not even parallel, but closely connected affairs; we see that the one needs the other, that while the head—the political movement—is essential in its way, the shaft of the lance—the industrial movement—is requisite to give it steadiness. The labor movement that has not a well-pointed political lance head can never rise above the babe condition in which the union is originally born; on the other hand, unhappy the political movement of labor that has not the shaft of the trades union organization to steady it. It will inevitably become a freak affair. The head of the lance may “get there,” but unless it

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drags in its wake the strong shaft of the trades union it will have “got there” to no purpose.

Accordingly, the trades union question is indeed a burning one. On it is pivoted the success of the Socialist Movement. And for the reason I have indicated, the confusion on the subject is inevitable. Seeing that a thing called a union may act as a drag upon the Socialist Movement, the temptation is strong upon the part of anti-unionists to drop it. I have shown you how fatal such dropping would be. The political and the industrial movement are one; he who separates them dislocates the Socialist Movement.

I should not close without some concrete advice. Should we join unions? Should we not join them? It seems to me these concrete questions stand answered by what I have said before. Nevertheless, he in whose mind such a question still arises is led thereto by the thought of the corrupt practices that exist in unions. I shall take up that point summarily. It now can be handled without giving it undue proportions. It now may even be handled to advantage and help to clinch previous points.

There is no difference between what is called the corruption in the unions and what is noticed in shipwrecks when men become cannibals. I cannot now think of any of the numerous corrupt labor leaders, whom we all know of, who did not start honest enough. But coupled to his honesty was *ignorance*. He knew not the kind of a weapon that labor instinctively raises its arm to ward off when it shapes itself into unions. He failed, of course. He then imputed the failure to inevitableness. The capitalist helped him along. He lost all hope in the working class. He then decided to feather his own nest. Friendly relations between him and capitalist thought followed inevitably, and he became what Mark Hanna so well called him—the labor lieutenant of the capitalist class. In that capacity we have seen him engineer strikes in favor of one competing capitalist against another. In that capacity we have seen him act as an agent of the stock exchange, starting strikes to lower stock or keeping up strikes to favor competing concerns. Of course, he could not do this if the rank and file of the union were enlightened. For this reason it was in his interest and in the interest of the class whose lieutenant he is, to keep enlightenment from the masses. Frequently, also, his position enables him to compel the workingmen of his trade to accept his yoke before they can get work. He who says remedy this evil by

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any one means holds silly language. The evil must be attacked by as many means as seem available. Shall we then “join unions”? The Socialist Labor Party has answered the question by endorsing the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance, and by waging unflagging war against the Gompers pack; and the answer that the party gave is justified by the light of the analysis that I have submitted to you. That analysis shows you that trades organizations are essential; they are essential to break the force of the onslaught of the capitalist, but this advantage is fruitful of good only in the measure that the organization prepares itself for the day of final victory. Accordingly, it must be every Socialist’s endeavor to organize his trade. If there is an organization of his trade in existence that is not in the hand of a labor lieutenant of capital, he should join it and wheel it into line with the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance. If, however, the organization is entirely in the hands of such a labor lieutenant of capital; if its membership is grown so fast to him and he to them, that the one cannot be shaken from the other; if, accordingly, the organization, obedient to the spirit of capitalism, insists upon dividing the working class by barriers more or less high and chicanery against the admission of all the members of the trade who apply for admission; if his grip of mental corruption upon it is such as to cause a majority of its members to applaud and second his endeavors to keep that majority at work at the sacrifice of the minority within and of the large majority of the trade without—in that and in all such cases, such an organization is not a limb of the labor movement, it is a limb of capitalism [applause]; it is a guild; it is a degeneration back to the old starting point of the bourgeois or capitalist class; and though it decks itself with the name of “labor” it is but a caricature, because a belated reproduction, of the old guild system! Such a bizarre resuscitation of pristine bourgeois organizations may mask itself all it likes with the mask of “labor,” but it does so only to the injury of the working class, of the proletariat, and it deserves no quarter at the Socialist’s hands. [Loud applause.] Such an organization is no more a labor organization than is the army of the czar of Russia, which though composed wholly of workingmen, is officered by the exploiting class. In such a case the Socialist must endeavor to set up a bona fide labor trades union and to do what he can to smash the fraud. The labor cannon that one day will surely decimate the czar’s army, and defeat it, will bring redemption even to the

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workingmen in that army, although many of them may be killed by it. [Prolonged applause.]

### SUMMING UP

Let me sum up, starting with where I closed.

In the first place, the trades union has a supreme mission. That mission is nothing short of organizing by uniting, and uniting by organizing, the whole working class industrially—not merely those for whom there are jobs, accordingly, not only those who can pay dues. This unification or organization is essential in order to save the eventual and possible victory from bankruptcy, by enabling the working class to assume and conduct production the moment the guns of the public powers fall into its hands—or before, if need be, if capitalist political chicanery pollutes the ballot box. The mission is important also in that the industrial organization forecasts the future constituencies of the parliaments of the Socialist Republic.

In the second place, the trades union has an immediate mission. The supreme mission of trades unionism is ultimate. That day is not yet. The road thither may be long or short, but it is arduous. At any rate, we are not yet there. Steps in the right direction, so-called “immediate demands,” are among the most precarious. They are precarious because they are subject and prone to the lure of the “sop” or the “palliative” that the foes of labor’s redemption are ever ready to dangle before the eyes of the working class, and at which, aided by the labor lieutenants of the capitalist class, the unwary are apt to snap—and be hooked. But there is a test by which the bait can be distinguished from the sound step, by which the trap can be detected and avoided, and yet the right step forward taken. That test is this: *Does the contemplated step square with the ultimate aim?* If it does, then the step is sound and safe; if it does not, then the step is a trap and disastrous. The “immediate step” that acts like a brake on the decline of wages belongs to the former category, provided only the nature of the brake is not such that it inevitably invites a future decline, that requires a further brake and which brake only invites some later decline, and so on, towards a catastrophe or towards final cooliedom. We have seen

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that the pure and simple trades union belongs to the latter category, the category of “traps,” and we have seen the reason why—it is merely a jobs-securing machine; consequently, it inevitably rends the working class in twain and, on the whole, has the love and affection of the capitalist exploiter.

In the third place, and finally, the union formation, with its possibility for good, being a natural, an instinctive move, is bound to appear, and reappear, and keep on reappearing, forever offering to the intelligent, serious and honest men in the labor or Socialist Movement the opportunity to utilize that instinctive move by equipping it with the proper knowledge, the proper weapon, that shall save it from switching off into the pure and simple quagmire so beloved, and develop into the new trades union so hated of capitalism.

This is the theoretical part of the burning question of trades unionism. Its practical part implies struggle, dauntless struggle against, and war to the knife with that combination of ignoramuses, ripened into reprobates—the labor faker who seeks to coin the helplessness of the proletariat into cash for himself, and the “intellectual” (God save the mark!) who has so superficial a knowledge of things that the mission of unionism is a closed book to him; who believes the union will “fritter out of existence”; who, consequently, is actually against the union, all his pretenses of love for it notwithstanding; and who meantime imagines he can promote socialism by howling with pure and simple wolves that keep the working class divided and, consequently, bar the path for the triumph of socialism, or, as the capitalist *Wall Street Journal* well expressed it, “constitute the bulwark of modern society against socialism.”

The question of trades union is, accordingly, not only a burning one, it presents the most trying aspect of the Socialist Movement. It brings home to us the fact that not theory only is needed but manly fortitude—that fortitude which the Socialist Labor Party gathers, builds and tests, and without which the socialist or labor movement becomes ridiculous or infamous. [Prolonged applause.]

### *Questions*

BY WILLIAM WALKER—I desire to ask the speaker whether he considers it wise for a political party to identify itself with a trades union organization if such



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identification causes the political party to be kept back?

ANSWER—This question is a begging of the question. It proceeds from assuming as settled the very premises that are under discussion. It proceeds from the assumption which I denied, that a party of socialism can ignore the trades union. I shall nevertheless answer it. It enables me to take up the question by entering through another gate.

Some eight months ago, when I last delivered an address here in Newark, a gentleman who is now associated with the questioner in setting up here in Newark a so-called Essex County Independent Socialist Club, Mr. Harry Carless, spoke after me and said in substance—the gentleman who just asked the question was present, he will admit that I quote my critic of that day correctly. My critic said: “The Socialist Labor Party should have nothing to do with the trades unions. Affiliation with trades unions keeps the party back. A political party wants to take in as many people as possible. It wants to be as large as possible. A union does not. I am a member of a union, the Silver Polishers,” and I am also a Socialist. My union had a meeting this afternoon; all that they want is to get higher wages and to keep all others of the trade out. They adopted a resolution along this line, and I voted with them in the interest of the organization. Now, their position, like that of all unions, is purely selfish. What has the Socialist Labor Party to do with such things? It should keep its hands off. If it does not it will suffer.”

My answer was this: “The gentleman furnishes me with the very facts that overthrow him. He is a member of a trades union that wishes to keep out applicants. What would be his fix in a socialist party? Say his socialist organization is in session in the evening and the men whom he, along with the other members of his trades union, refused admission in the afternoon, knock at the door applying for membership. What will he do? He correctly stated that a political party needs numbers. He will have to admit them into his socialist party organization. And what will happen when those men come in and hear him making a grandiloquent speech on the—‘solidarity of labor,’ on the—‘necessity of workingmen to unite,’ on the—‘brotherhood of the wage slave,’ and on all those things that a Socialist, a good Socialist, as the gentleman says he is, is bound to emphasize? What do you think will happen, when the men whom he has just voted to keep out of his union hear



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him thus glibly declaiming? [Uproarious laughter.] Why, they'll say he is a hypocrite; they'll denounce him roundly for preaching one thing and practicing another. They will even bring charges against him. And if his organization is really a socialist organization he will be expelled and justly so. But even if it does not come so far, he will have discovered that a socialist party cannot play ostrich on the economic or trades union question. If it is a party of socialism, it is a party of labor. In a party of socialism the trades union is latent. It cannot be ignored. It will not ignore you. [Loud applause.]

“But suppose,” I went on to say, “that, feeling a presentiment of what is in store for him if he votes to admit them into his party organization, he votes to keep them out. What will he have done then? He will have impressed upon his political organization, which wants large numbers, the characteristics of the backward pure and simple union with which he blandly floats along—another evidence that the trades union question is bound to assert itself.” Was not that the answer I gave your friend? With what face can you, then, come here tonight and ask the question that you did?

There is no such thing as a political party of labor “having nothing to do with the unions.” It has. It must either inspire the union with the broad, political purpose, and thus dominate it by warring on the labor faker and on the old guild notions that hamstring the labor movement, or it is itself dragged down to the selfish trade interests of the economic movement, and finally drawn down into the latter's subservience to the capitalist interests that ever fasten themselves to the selfish trade interests on which the labor faker, or labor lieutenant of the capitalist class, thrives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 2At the Chicago convention of the so-called Socialist, alias Social Democratic Party, held on May 1, 1904, Mr. Ott, the delegate from Wyoming, introduced the following resolution:

“The Socialist Party also wishes to denounce before the workers of this land the treacherous, deceitful work of the conglomeration between several labor leaders, so-called, and the captains of industry, such as the National Civic Federation, and other like institutions, and brand these combinations as instruments of the capitalist class to perpetuate the system of today, and to use organized labor as tools for that purpose.”

This was sound. But the resolution was unceremoniously brushed aside. The speeches made against it plainly indicated that the said so-called Socialist Party could live only on condition that it bowed before the labor lieutenants of the capitalist class and, significant enough, the speaker who was most pointed in these remarks of respect for the labor lieutenants of capitalism, Mr. Ben Hanford, a beneficiary through union jobs of the guild form of pure and simple unionism, became the party's nominee for vice president. The Ott resolution was cast off, and in its stead another

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The notion implied in the words of our friend who asked the question, the notion that numbers is the important thing and not *soundness*, often leads to bizarre results. A recent instance is striking. At the late annual convention of Gompers' AF of L, Max Hayes, of the said so-called Socialist Party, introduced a socialist resolution. The resolution was snowed under by a veritable avalanche of something like 11,000 votes. About a month later, the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance held its annual convention. The ST&LA is a trades union built strictly upon the socialist lines of the resolution which Max Hayes introduced in Boston. But the ST&LA is a very much smaller body. At its annual convention it numbered barely 20 delegates. Now, then, what do we find Mr. Max Hayes saying about the ST&LA convention? He ridiculed it on account of its numbers! He, who had just been flattened out like a pancake by a huge antisocialist convention, seemed proud of having been in a big crowd; and peeping from under the numerous heels that trampled upon him, he had jeers only for the smallness of the body that nevertheless upheld the principles which, in his hand, lay flattened out beside him, flattened out by a numerous body! Such are the fruits, the mental somersaults, of a chase after numbers.

It is nothing short of idiocy! The head of the lance that rushes forward shaftless, rushes forward uselessly. It should move no faster than its shaft. The "Socialist" Party that dances to the fiddle of labor-dividing pure and simpledom, may for a while get more votes than the Socialist Labor Party; but it never will "get there"; a miss is as good as a mile on the "get there" run. Moreover, the slower going SLP, that is not a flypaper concern, and never sacrifices sense for votes, is a

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resolution was adopted in exactly the contrary sense. What the adoption of this other resolution meant may be gathered from the utterance of the minority that was thus jumped upon. The Butte, Mont., American Labor Union Journal (an SP paper) of May 26, 1904, commenting upon the victorious resolution that substituted its Ott resolution, and after enumerating the powerful arguments made against the substitute, proceeds to say:

"The men who spoke in support of the resolution [the substitute] from Ben Hanford to Hillquit did not attempt to reply to these arguments. They kept up a constant reiteration of the charges that those who opposed the resolution are opposed to trade unions, which was a thousand miles from the truth, the facts being that the opposition was not to trades union indorsement, but to the kind of trades unionism it was sought to indorse. As it stands the Socialist Party is committed to scab herding, organization of dual unions, misleading of the working class, the expenditure of union funds to defeat Socialist candidates, the segregation of the working class into craft units which are powerless to accomplish anything and it has been committed to this because a few ambitious Eastern comrades were anxious to make things pleasant for themselves in the pure and simple unions."

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real educator. When the time for votes shall have ripened that party will have them—will have the votes, plus the requisite knowledge—while the SP will have melted away, seeing it only had votes, and could not possibly, in view of its contradictory and flypaper conduct, have *men* back of its vote. [Loud and prolonged applause.]

BY JOHN J. KINNEALLY—We see what is going on in Colorado today. Pure and simple unionism is said to have over 2 million members. I wish to ask the speaker if he thinks such outrages would be possible if those 2 million were in the ST&LA?

ANSWER—Two millions of ST&LA men would mean 2 million men swayed by SLP sense, vigor, manliness and determination. It would mean 2 million men moving, because they felt as one man and, consequently, feeling and moving right. Large masses cannot feel and move as one if they are in error. Error is manifold; it scatters. Truth only is onefold, it alone unites. Such a number as 2 million SLP men in the land would produce such a sentiment and resulting actions that capitalism would melt like wax. [Prolonged applause.] The thing, then, is to build up *SLP men*. Let that be all serious men's endeavor. [Applause.]

(THE END)