

How the Socialist Labor Party differs from the Industrial Workers of the World.

The Socialist Labor Party and its affiliate, the Socialist Trade & Labor Alliance, were instrumental in establishing the original Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. At first, the IWW was a sound socialist organization. It was based on the class struggle and it grasped the need for the workers to organize on the political as well as on the economic field. Its acceptance of political action was crucial. By accepting that principle the original IWW stated, in effect, that it would strive for a peaceful transition to socialism and would hold its economic power in reserve to enforce the revolutionary ballot.

From the beginning, however, the IWW was harassed from within by an element that rejected political action and espoused the theories and practices of anarchism. The ST&LA-SLP element fought off the anarchists for three years, until the 1908 convention, where the anarchists, using strong-arm methods, “captured” the IWW by physical force and promptly jettisoned the political clause from the IWW’s constitution.

By rejecting political action, the IWW’s only alternative automatically became that of physical force and violence, i.e., “direct action,” sabotage and “propaganda of the deed.” These methods have been identified with anarcho-syndicalism and the IWW ever since.

Anarcho-syndicalism not only rejects political action, which remains basic to the SLP’s Marxist-De Leonist program of Socialist Industrial Unionism (SIU), but also the necessity of a central directing authority as the highest administering organ of socialism. The goal of syndicalism is a society in which the individual plants (factories and hospitals, mills and mines, communications and transportation, etc.) are operated by independent groups of workers. That is, the workers in Plant A would form one independent union, those in Plant B a second, and those in Plant C a third, etc., even though Plants A, B and C might all be in the same industry, produce the same product or provide the same service. There would be no higher body to correlate and harmonize the operations of the three plants because, in the view of syndicalism, such a higher body would conflict with the syndicalist idea of “freedom.” Without a central government or, to use Daniel De Leon’s

term, a central directing authority, such a social organization would mean no government, hence anarchy.

The Marxist SLP rejects the antipolitical and “no government” theories of anarcho-syndicalism. It insists that a central government is needed to direct and coordinate social production and distribution in an industrial society as complex and interdependent as our own, and that political and economic organization and action by the working class are both necessary for a peaceful and civilized solution to the social or labor question. Accordingly, the immediate objective of the SIU will be to enforce the will of the Socialist majority as it is registered at the ballot box, and the ultimate goal is an administration based on an integral Socialist Industrial Union government.

The SIU program is a faithful reflection of the basic principles on which the original IWW was founded, and for that reason the SLP and the IWW organizations of today have nothing in common.

The best non-SLP sources of information on the early history of the IWW and what it stood for are the proceedings of its first three national conventions (1905, 1906, 1907), followed by Paul Brissenden’s *The IWW: A Study in American Syndicalism*. All, unfortunately, are out of print and difficult to come by. The best SLP sources on the early IWW are the SLP pamphlets *Socialist Reconstruction of Society, As to Politics* and *Industrial Unionism: Selected Editorials*, by Daniel De Leon.