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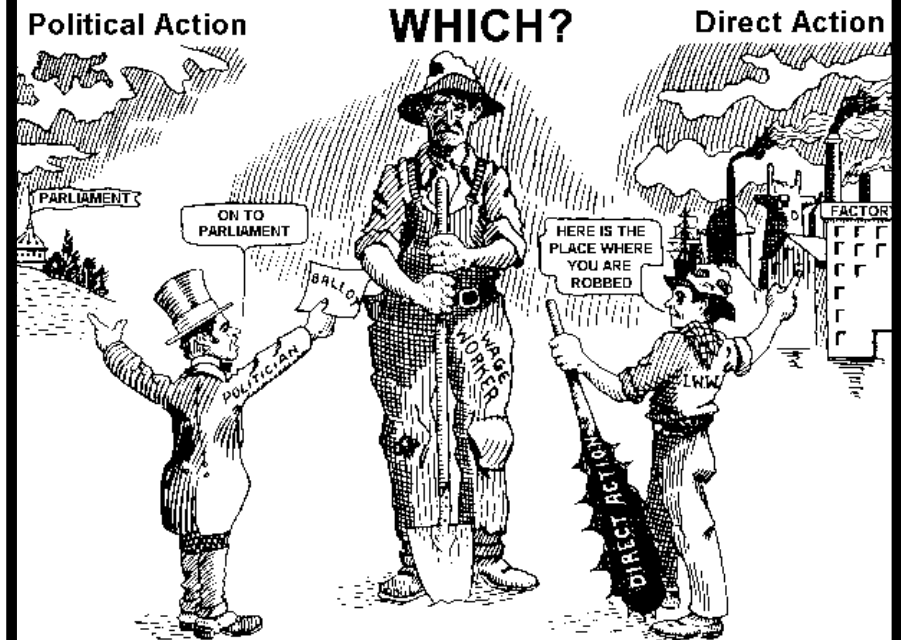


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POLITICS vs. SYNDICALISM:

A CASE STUDY OF THE IWW



ORGANISE ON THE JOB WHERE YOU ARE ROBBED

by Luther M. Gaylord

Seventy Years 1905-1975. (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1976), 39.

[12] Brissenden, 253.

[13] Ibid., 248.

[14] DeLeon, 8-9.

[15] Ibid., 25.

[16] Ibid., 51.

[17] Ibid., 58.

[18] Brissenden, 251.

[19] DeLeon, 45.

[20] Ibid., 69.

[21] Ibid., 67.

[22] Renshaw, 80.

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On June 27, 1905, William D. Haywood of the Western Federation of Miners called to order the founding convention of the Industrial Workers of the World. It was to be the "One Big Union," an economic movement of all workers in all industries to bring about their emancipation from wage slavery.

But the vision of One Big Union faded quickly amid bitter divisions following the founding convention, and by 1908 the organisation had split into two groups, both calling themselves the Industrial Workers of the World, one headquartered in Chicago, the other in Detroit.

The IWW with which most Americans are familiar is the Chicago, or "red" IWW. This is the union of the Lawrence and Paterson strikes, of Joe Hill and Frank Little, of free speech and direct action ~ the union that still exists today with branches across the United States, Canada, Australia and England.

The Detroit IWW was organised upon the departure (or expulsion, depending upon whose history one reads) of Socialist Labour Party leader Daniel DeLeon and his adherents from the union after the fourth convention. Also known as the "yellow" IWW, this doctrinaire faction rechristened itself "The Workers International Industrial Union" in 1915 and finally expired in 1925.

The Detroit group claimed to be the custodian of the original IWW idea, seeing itself as the keeper of the tradition of the founders as expressed in the first preamble to the IWW constitution. Likewise, the Chicago group maintained that it had restored the preamble to its originally intended form at the 1908 convention and was therefore the real IWW.

Fortunately, I am not faced with the task of proving which IWW is "the one and only true union." Since Detroit gave up the name (and ultimately the ghost), Chicago won by default. The importance of the schism for the purposes of this paper is as a case study of syndicalist vs. political approaches to confronting capitalism. We will first examine the division as it manifested itself within the union, then explore the larger philosophical debate.

★ SOCIALIST/ANARCHIST DIFFICULTIES

Though personal antagonisms between delegates certainly weighed in as factors, the real cause of the IWW split in 1908 was a fundamental ideological dispute. On one side was Daniel DeLeon, arguing that political action was an essential component in the struggle of the working class against the capitalist system. On the other was a collection of delegates from the West popularly known as the "Overalls Brigade" who had tramped their way from Portland to Chicago on freight trains. Concerning these, Paul Brissenden writes:

"The western IWWs had not borrowed any theoretical criticism of the state from the French syndicalists, but the actual concrete experiences of the lower grades of workers in the western states had developed in their minds a conception of the political party very similar to that of the revolutionary syndicalists of France. Indeed, the Western American Wobblies looked upon the whole modern system of congressional or parliamentary government with considerable disdain. Parliaments, they say, are little more than clearing-houses for the exchange of "vague and sterile platitudes." In so far as they do more than this, they merely further the designs of the big business groups whom they serve as retainers." [1]

While such anarchist sentiment was probably strongest among western Wobblies, it was by no means exclusive to them, nor was it new to the IWW. According to Patrick Renshaw, almost all of the delegates who came together at the founding convention in 1905 could be described either as socialists, militant trade unionists or anarcho-syndicalists. [2] (Parliamentary reformers, making up the right and centre wings of the Socialist Party, wanted no part of the IWW, deciding instead to "bore from within" the AF of L.) Indeed, Sal Salerno devotes an entire chapter of his book, *Red November, Black November*, to the influence of anarchists at the founding convention, who included Thomas J. Hagerty, Lucy Parsons (widow of one of the Haymarket martyrs), and William Trautmann.

Of particular interest is Hagerty, a tall black-bearded Catholic priest who had at one time been a member of the Socialist Party, until he became disgusted with the "slowcialists," as he called them, and turned to revolutionary industrial unionism. In a speech to miners at Telluride, Colorado, in 1902, Hagerty had advised:

"That railroad is yours; those large business blocks and office buildings downtown that bring in big rent are yours; if you want them, go and take them." [3]

Father Hagerty's disdain for politics was made very clear in his speech at the convention, when he declared that "The ballot box is simply a capitalist concession. Dropping pieces of paper into a hole in a box never did achieve emancipation for the working class, and to my thinking it never will." [4]

It was Hagerty who composed the first draft of the IWW preamble, which, predictably, did not include a role for politics. Rather, it emphasised the importance of the union as the centre of revolutionary struggle, contending that the proletariat should "take and hold that which they produce through an economic organisation of the working class." [5]

This draft of the preamble found strong support among left wing socialists and militant trade unionists. It was altered before it reached the founding convention, however, after Daniel DeLeon declared that it would be unacceptable to his delegation unless the clause "and on the political field without affiliation with any political party," was inserted. Given the rivalries between the two socialist parties and the need for a basis of unification between anarcho-syndicalist and political socialist ver-

the ballot box." [22] By 1907, he no longer believed in reliance on the ballot alone, but still held that the economic organisation of workers needed a political organ as well. At the same time, he recognised that a socialist victory at the polls would have to be backed up by physical force when the capitalist class refused to honour the results of the election or resisted the peaceful transfer of power to the working class.

One wonders how DeLeon's theoretical perspective might have continued to evolve had he lived to see the 1920s and 1930s. Had he lived to see police and soldiers open fire on peaceful strikers time and time again, might his faith in the restraint of capitalists have faltered? Had he lived to see the election of a Democrat to the presidency during the Great Depression, and the efficacy of New Deal policies in doping the American public into accepting paltry reforms rather than real change, might he have abandoned his dedication to the "civilised plane" of electoral politics?

It is my contention, after all the reading I have done for this paper, that DeLeon was moving very slowly away from his rock-hard devotion to political action, and that at some point he might have found himself closer to the anarchists than he (or they) could have ever imagined possible.

NOTES

- [1] Brissenden, Paul F. *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957), 232-233.
- [2] Renshaw, Patrick. *The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967), 76.
- [3] Dubofsky, Melvyn. *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 92.
- [4] *Industrial Workers of the World. Proceedings of the Founding Convention of the IWW*. 1905. Reprint. (New York: Merit Publishers, 1969), 152.
- [5] Salerno, Salvatore. *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 76.
- [6] Renshaw, 102.
- [7] *Proceedings*, 229.
- [8] DeLeon, Daniel. *As To Politics: A Discussion Upon the Relative Importance of Political Action and of Class-conscious Economic Action, and the Urgent Necessity of Both*. 1907. Reprint. (New York: New York Labor News, 1956), 2.
- [9] Renshaw, 102.
- [10] Brissenden, 234.
- [11] Thompson, Fred W. and Patrick Murfin, *The IWW: Its First*

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however:

"...if we have the majority, and the capitalists [and] officials who count the ballots, refuse to count us in, well, then there will be a scrap. But we are going to test the peaceful method first." [18]

In response to the naive trust DeLeon put in capitalists - that having been fairly defeated at the polls they will peacefully hand over the reigns of power, Arturo Giovannitti asked:

"How can we believe that even with the most rigid logic and with the fear of a strong revolutionary organisation we could convince the master class to give itself up into the hands of the rival class that knows no Christian charity and will not commute the death sentence of capitalism? Are we to understand that capitalism will commit suicide rather than face the IWW executioner. Is there an example in history that can justify such a sweet dream of peace and love?" [19]

John Sandgren continues:

"The capitalist class has already chosen war. Our blood has run in torrents, as in the Paris Commune, or bespattered the road to Hazelton and Cripple Creek; the rope has strangled some of our early champions and is in preparation for others. To speak of the possibility of peaceable settlement between us and the master class is the same as the mutual agreement between the man flat on his back and him who holds the dagger to his throat. The war has been going on these many years and is raging fiercely now. How can anybody suggest a peaceable settlement, especially as we demand complete surrender?" [20]

Ultimately, then, the message of the anarchists can be summed up as follows:

"Politics is the game of capitalism; it is a flimsy shell game in which your very lives are the stakes played for. As long as you workingmen are allowing yourselves to be bamboozled into pinning your faith to the ballot, the capitalist class does not want any better snap. For no matter how you vote, capitalism is perfectly safe. "Praise be to God," the capitalist class whispers, "the blamed fools are still voting!" Therefore, throw away that old weapon of times bygone, the boomerang vote, and spring into the ranks of the militant industrial army, where shoulder to shoulder with our fellows we shall gain victory through organised strength." [21]

In light of the tremendous battle between the anarcho-syndicalists and the revolutionary socialists within the IWW, it is indeed interesting to note the extent to which Daniel DeLeon's own political philosophy evolved during the first years of this century. In 1892, for example, DeLeon had been convinced that the "ultimate socialist revolution" would be won at the polls, when he wrote: "Thanks to universal suffrage, the revolution will be achieved peacefully, in our day, by a mere expression of will at

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sions of industrial unionism, the clause was accepted. Renshaw argues that DeLeon's overriding aim at Chicago in 1905 was to prevent any close political identification of the IWW with the Socialist Party. Thus, by insisting on the "political clause" in the preamble, he could keep the union unaffiliated and more easily dominate it himself on behalf of his own SLP, all under the pretence of excluding political influence. [6] Whether or not this is an accurate assessment of DeLeon's motives is an open question. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the political clause was cause for much heated debate:

"It seems to me that this paragraph of the Preamble particularly is intended, not to represent the principles of industrialism, but represents a toadyism to three different factions of this convention, and I am opposed to this organisation toadying to any man or any faction of men - It seems to me that this paragraph could not have been more confusing if it had been written by the platform committee of the Republican or Democratic party." [7]

The clause was ultimately ratified by the convention, but it did not put an end to the controversy surrounding political action in the industrial union movement. In fact, the reference to politics in the preamble did much to create the rift that split the union just three years later.

★ DOCTRINAIRE vs. DIRECT-ACTIONIST

The debate over the necessity and efficacy of political action continued to rage within the union between 1905 and 1908. An amendment to the political clause to the effect that "the IWW does not endorse nor wish to be endorsed by any political party" was adopted by delegates at the second convention, but failed when put to referendum vote. [8] Meanwhile, IWW anarchists were busily writing letters to the SLP's newspaper, *The People*, advocating the dropping of political action altogether. Most of these were answered in print by DeLeon, who couched his rebuttals in the most condescending language possible.

It was against this backdrop that the Overall Brigade faced off against the SLP in September 1908 to determine the future of the union. DeLeon's credentials were immediately challenged on the grounds that he was enrolled in the wrong local, and after four days of wrangling he was expelled from the convention.

Recalling Father Hagerty's original preamble, Renshaw's analysis of these events is that "After three years of flirting with politics, the IWW had returned to its basically anti-political attitude of direct action on the industrial front." [9] Brissenden, writing in 1917, disagrees completely, arguing that "The DeLeonites held to that original preamble, and the fact that they did so lends weight to their claim that they, and they alone, are the true exponents of the spirit and purpose which animated the first convention." [10]

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The Detroit and Chicago IWWs hated each other with a passion, and each took advantage of any opportunity to defame the other. DeLeon referred to the Chicago group as "slum proletarians" and "anarchist scum." [11] Writing of the "Bummery," as the Chicago IWW was pejoratively known, Detroit declared:

"This, then is the inspiring task of the IWW, and its purpose and reason of being: To decry the ballot, which is a civilised method of settling social issues; to advocate physical force only; to preach petty larceny, rioting, smashing machines, and all these things that come under the term "direct action," is unnecessary, and also invites disaster to the workers and helps the forces of reaction. Such measures are suicidal and condemned by civilisation. The working class cannot "sabotage," cannot dynamite itself into possession of the plants of production." [12]

For its part, Chicago denounced the DeLeonites as reformist politicians:

"[They] attempted to set up another organisation claiming to be the real industrial movement. It is nothing but a duplicate of their political party and does not function at all. It is committed to a program of the "civilised plane," i.e. parliamentarism. Its publications are the official organs of a political sect which never misses an opportunity to assail the revolutionary workers while they are engaged in combat with some division of the ruling class. Their favourite method is to charge the revolutionists with all the crimes that a cowardly imagination can conjure into being. Their only virtue is that they put their assertions into print, while the other wing of the politicians spread their venom in secret." [13]

★ THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

Our discussion thus far has focused on the 1908 split of the union and the historical background of that split. But what of the ideological context for the conflict? What made the policy of political action coupled with economic action so controversial? The best way to answer these questions is to review the exchange between DeLeon and his anarcho-syndicalist opponents which went on from 1906 to 1907 in the pages of *The People*.

Explaining his view that politics is a futile exercise for workers, John Sandgren wrote in November 1906:

"Political activity may justly be considered of little or no value for the overthrow of the capitalist system ~ Let us assume that a revolutionary political party carries a national election, and is allowed to take possession of all offices from President down. What will be the result? As has been so frequently demonstrated, that day of our political victory would be our political funeral. The function of government is to make and enforce laws for the running of the capitalist system and to safeguard

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it against all comers. Or in other words, the sole purpose and function of government is to regulate the relations springing from the private ownership of the means of production and distribution, and everything connected therewith. But the new form of society, which we are preparing for, does not recognise this private ownership. It proposes to recognise production and distribution on collective lines, a function which cannot possibly be filled by politicians. Like Shakespeare's Moor, the politicians would find their occupation gone. There would be positively nothing for them to do, unless they were to continue to run society on capitalist lines, the very thing they were supposedly elected to discontinue. Neither can it be reasonably suggested that these men, thus elected, should instantly sit down and reorganise society on co-operative lines. Society may be reformed by decrees and resolutions, but a complete organic change, a revolution, as we contemplate, must begin at the bottom. The so-called political organisation does not occupy itself with this task. It is left to the economic organisation of the IWW. [14]

In a similar vein, J. A. La Bille maintained that "It is practically the same for the pioneer to attempt to be an Indian in order to capture their war councils as for the worker to be a politician in order to capture the war councils of the capitalist class. I wish to see my fellow workers quit wasting their time and energy on an illusion, drop politics, and unite on a plan of action which will bring about the results we desire." [15]

DeLeon, on the other hand, considered the ballot to be "a conquest of civilisation," and "the peaceful method of social debate and of ascertaining numbers." [16] Those who advocated direct action at the exclusion of politics were, to his way of thinking, "physical forcists."

"How do you expect to recruit and organise your Industrial army if you begin by rejecting the peaceful method of solving the Social Question? How can the ranks of the IWW recruit the necessary forces for that eventful and final act of the revolution, if it starts by rejecting the civilised method of settling disputes, offered by the political platform, and plants itself instead upon the principle of physical force exclusively? He who rejects political action places himself upon the barbarian plane, a plane where the capitalist class would be but too glad to see him. The capitalist class, however powerful, is not omnipotent. It feels constrained to render at least external homage to the Genius of the Age. The Genius of the Age demands free speech and a free vote. So soon, however, as a Labour Organisation were to reject the peaceful trial of strength, the capitalist class would be but too delighted to apply the system of Russian Terrorism. The long and the short of it all is that the revolution could not gather the necessary recruits. On the other hand, clad in the vestments of fully civilised conflict, the IWW may recruit, drill, and organise the physical force which it may need to demand the unconditional surrender of the capitalist class." [17]

DeLeon did accept the use of force to enforce a legitimate victory at the polls,