

Why Political Democracy Must Go

By John Reed

V.

THE formation of the Workingmen's Party marked the beginning of Socialism as a political force in the United States. The old distinctions of Internationalism and Lassalleism gave way to the native American conflict between Trade Unionism and Politics—which continued to sway the movement from one side to another until the last generation.

So far I have described the background of the movement in this country. With the Union Congress of 1876, Socialism entered upon the political arena in the struggle for power against the capitalist class.

A few sections locally entered political campaigns, and the resulting vote was so encouraging that others prepared to follow. Then came the nation-wide strikes of 1877, the activity of the sections in the strikes, the violence of the police, especially in Chicago, where a meeting of striking cabinet-makers was fired on. The National Executive Committee saw its opportunity, and ordered the sections to hold mass-meetings endorsing labor demands. The autumn elections in many parts of the country showed a large Socialist vote. Immediately a special convention of the Party was called to define its attitude toward politics.

This convention met in December 1877 and remodelled its Declaration of Principles to the effect that "political action is the natural function of the Party." However, owing to the influence of the Trade Unionists, it declared also that the Party "should maintain friendly relations with the trade unions and should promote their formation upon socialistic principles." The name was changed to Socialist Labor Party and a few years later, to Socialist Labor Party.

In the spring elections a curious paradox was observable. In localities where the Trade-Unionists were supreme, the candidates, who had been forced into politics by the Party policy, polled large votes because the unions supported them and worked for them; while in the districts where the pure Political Actionists predominated, the Labor vote went to the Greenbackers or the Republicans.

In the next national and state elections, the same phenomenon prevailed. The Chicago section, the most powerful in the country, elected four members to the legislature, who were influential enough to compel the appointment of an Industrial Commission, and the following year, secured four aldermen. In St. Louis, three Socialist candidates were elected to the legislature. But the draw-backs of the situation were made clear by the effects of the boom of 1879; prosperity drew the attention of labor away from politics, and the membership and vote of the Socialist Labor Party rapidly declined.

In 1880 the Political Actionists, in view of the diminishing Party vote, forced through a referendum to send delegates to the Greenback Convention in Chicago, and support the candidates of the Greenback Party. This compromise was passionately opposed by the Trade Unionists of Chicago, as well as by a group of revolutionary Socialists in New York, whose center was a handful of refugees from the German anti-Socialists laws.

Since the first campaign of the Workingmen's Party, the Trade Unionists had never abandoned their instinctive distrust of political action. In 1877-78, it is true, the election of candidates to municipal and state legislatures was of considerable agitational value. The state was not yet clearly defined as a direct instrument of capitalist exploitation; the Socialist legislators took it by surprise. But from then on gangs of armed thugs invaded the polling-places on election day; Socialist speakers were attacked; Socialist votes were torn up; and in Chicago, in 1879, the only Socialist alderman elected was deliberately refused his seat by the corrupt Democratic Council.

In 1879-80, as today, the lawless brutalities of the ruling class in nullifying the Socialist vote created a wide-spread disgust with political action. Already many workingmen's military organizations had sprung up to protect the Socialists from attack. The Political Actionists in control of the National Executive Committee repudiated these armed societies. The "deal" with the Greenback Party was the last straw for the Trade Union faction, which, with its growing system of labor organizations armed for defense, broke away from the Political Actionists, and in 1881 issued a call to "all revolutionists and armed workingmen's organizations in the country," pointing out the necessity of "getting ready to offer an armed resistance to the invasions by the capitalist class and capitalist legislatures."

In October of the same year a convention of Unionists met at Chicago, and formed the Revolutionary Socialist Party, which rejected all politi-

cal action and endorsed the so-called Black International, the anarchist International Working People's Association, declaring that it stood "ready to render armed resistance to encroachments upon the rights of workingmen." Before the referendum was completed, however, the Chicago section took part in one more municipal campaign, whose effect upon the Socialists was so disastrous that it destroyed the last vestige of faith in even the agitational value of political campaigns.

The Convention of 1883, at Pittsburgh, defined the two currents in the new organization; that led by Spies of Chicago, recognizing revolutionary trade unionism—and that led by Johann Most of New York, advocating pure revolutionary anarchism. A compromise between the two was reached, resulting in a philosophy of organization and action almost analogous to modern Syndicalism.

It was under the influence of this organization that the great labor upheaval of 1885-86 took place, centering around the Eight-hour strikes, and culminating in the Haymarket Bombs of the summer of 1886, which broke the Black International.

The provocation of the ruling class which resulted in the explosions (analogous to the San Francisco bomb cases and the recent Post Office bombs), demonstrate to what lengths the capitalists will go in order to wreck all efforts of the workers to free themselves. *It is impossible to capture the capitalist state for the workers by means of the ballot; this has been demonstrated again and again; and yet when Labor repudiates political action, it is met with fearful violence.* . . .

During this time the Socialist Labor Party had almost disappeared, not emerging until the Henry George Campaign of 1886 in New York, when the Socialists saw their opportunity to arouse the worker-masses to political action once more, the result of which, they thought, would be to win the new movement to Socialism. But the Henry George movement concentrated on Single Tax, and finally repudiated Socialism; so the Socialists threw their strength into the Progressive Labor Party, in New York. All over the country independent Labor Parties sprang up, and for a time the political results were astonishing. These Labor Parties elected no less than ten Congressmen, many legislators, judges, etc. Even in New York State, where the vote was small, the effect upon the legislature was such that a great quantity of labor legislation was enacted.

An attempt was made, in 1887, to combine these scattered parties into one national organization, which was accomplished by the Cincinnati Convention, wherein were included the Knights of Labor, the Farmers' Alliance, Greenbackers, etc. Here was launched the National Union Labor Party; but this turned out to be merely another "deal" with Greenbackism—the farmers (the small property holders) captured the organization, and the Socialists did not support it, nor did the industrial workers vote for it.

In 1888 began anew within the ranks of the Socialist Labor Party the old bitter fight between the Political Actionists and the Trade Unionists. In 1889 the Political Actionists on the National Executive Committee were replaced by Trade Unionists, and the Party placed itself behind the Eight-hour Movement, and promised support to the Unions. A minority of the sections revolted, organized their own machinery and declared for pure political action. This was known as the "Cincinnati Socialist Labor Party"; in 1897 it amalgamated with the Debs-Berger Social-Democracy of America, which was a combination of the political expression of the old American Railway Union, and the Populism of Berger. The new Party immediately plunged into politics.

In the meanwhile the Socialist Labor Party was passing through a rapid evolution in its relations to organized labor. The gradual consolidation of the craft-union, wage-conscious philosophy of the American Federation of Labor finally led to a battle in the old Central Labor Union of New York. The Socialist Labor Party set up an opposition body, the Central Labor Federation, which was refused a charter by the A. F. of L., and finally definitely expelled. Then, under the leadership of Daniel DeLeon, the Socialist Labor Party attempted to capture the Knights of Labor. Using the United Hebrew Trades as his instrument, DeLeon got control of District Assembly 49, and then ousted Powderly as President of the Knights, and elected Sovereign. But Sovereign played him false. Beaten in both of the great labor organizations, DeLeon started his own Socialist Labor Party organization, to compete with the two—the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance.

Indirectly this was the chief cause of the formation of the Socialist Party. A group in the Social-

ist Labor Party—called the "kangaroos"—were against the policy of combatting the labor organizations from without. They favored the policy of "boring from within." This meant to capture the A. F. of L.—at the time supreme—by working within the Unions to elect officials, and through them to dominate the membership.

In 1889 the "kangaroos" seceded from the Socialist Labor Party, and in 1900 they joined the Social Democracy—the new Party took the name of Socialist Party of America. In the campaign of 1900 the Socialist Party rolled up a vote of almost 90,000, while the Socialist Labor Party's vote dwindled.

With the foundation of the Socialist Party, the history of the Socialist Labor Party, as a movement of the workers at grips with the capitalists on the political field, comes to an end. Henceforth the Socialist Labor Party is identified with the development of a great Socialist theoretician, Daniel DeLeon. The last attempt of the Socialist Labor Party to annex the labor movement occurred in 1905-07, in connection with the I. W. W., and resulted once more in the secession of the S. L. P. and the formation of a rival organization.

In the light of recent history, when the relatively enormous Socialist vote has failed to influence seriously the make-up of capitalist legislatures, it will be a surprise to many persons to read of the legislative victories of the small and strife-torn Socialist movements of early days—small as they were in comparison with the huge spread and power of the capitalist system. But capitalism had not yet consolidated its hold on the State; the independent ballot was still a power—although even forty years ago could be discerned the answer of the ruling class to any challenge of its hegemony on the political or industrial field—violence.

The political power of the working class increased slowly; the bourgeois dictatorship of society grew by leaps and bounds; today the citadel of great capitalism is impregnable to all assaults except the mass assault of the united working class.

[To be continued.]

I. W. W. and Bolshevism

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have been profoundly influenced by the Russian Revolution, and that in Italy, for example, they are working hand in hand with the revolutionary Socialists.

If these articles in *One Big Union* are the real expression of the thought of the I. W. W. upon Bolshevism, then the I. W. W. has learned nothing and forgotten nothing. It cannot see any difference between the Bolsheviki and the Scheidemann Socialists. *It will not face the fact that the period of Social Revolution has come, and that the collapse of Capitalism will not wait until the working class is entirely organized according to the I. W. W. chart.*

The final gem of the collection is this:

"Economic reconstruction of society cannot be accomplished by a government trying to order things with a high hand through laws and regulations, but has to be an organic growth from the bottom, through the industrial organization of the workers at the place of work."

If the Fellow-Worker by this time has not discovered the essential characteristic of the Russian Revolution—its economic as well as its political side—namely, that it is "an organic growth from the bottom", then we don't know what to do with him. While the Fellow-worker is criticizing the Proletarian Revolution in full swing, from the lofty point of view of an organization professedly not ready for revolution, Russia is tackling "the immense task of organizing the workers industrially, in order to obtain the necessary organs for taking over production." In Russia the workers are taking over production, and there is no return to the capitalist system of ownership and control, however much of a halt may be necessary in the process.

We of the Left Wing have learned our lessons from the War and the European Revolutions. We humbly admit our mistakes, and the fallacies inherent in political Socialism. We turn with more and more intense interest toward the industrial field, where the I. W. W. has gained priceless experience in a dramatic labor struggle lasting more than a decade. We are reaching toward you, Fellow-Workers.

But we demand that you, too, shall learn your lessons from events, and cease to repeat formulas which date back to the old world—before the War.