

The Growth of Unionism in America (September 3, 1903)

While there has been more than a century of labor agitation and organization in the United States, the labor movement of today, in its economic mold, has developed its main proportions since the Civil War and its principal power and prominence during the last 20 years.

Eight years ago I made an extensive agitation tour of the Southern states,¹ and barring the few scattered unionists I met in my travels, there was not a healthy sign of organization in that entire section.

Today all the states of the South are organized and in some of the industrial centers the agitation is as active, unionism as far advanced, and the movement as intelligent and progressive as in any other part of the country.

Ten years ago the great West, especially the Rocky Mountain states, where the genius of unionism now towers above the crags, had but the merest shadow of the close-knit and powerful organization that now spreads over that vast territory and locks it fast in mighty embrace.

In 1886 Prof. Richard T. Ely published his *Labor Movement in America*.² The work is now being revised and enlarged by the author to embrace the last two decades, without which it lacks the most important chronicles of organized labor and is essentially incomplete.

The germs of American unionism were developed in the colonial period of our national life. The primitive state of industry prevented anything like a general spread of unionism in that early day, but here it had its inception, and as the agricultural community gave way to industrial society, the new growth, in all essential respects the same as its British progenitor, and, in fact, its direct transatlantic offspring, struck root, its tiny fibrils seeking nourishment in the industrial soil of the new nation.

For many years the growth of unionism was necessarily slow and sporadic. The conditions from which it springs and in which it thrives were just beginning to develop after the war of the revolution, which also traced in shadowy outlines the approaching industrial revolution, since invention and discovery in the realm of physical science had already begun their

miraculous mission, and the world was being awakened from its age-long torpor and inactivity.

The pulse of the new century was quickened and its heart thrilled by the magic touch of inventive genius. The Reign of Steam began and this invisible monarch proved to be the greatest revolutionist of all the ages.

The closing years of the old century were illuminated by the discovery of the push-buttons of science; the opening years of the new century in turning on the light, building the machinery, and setting it into operation. The development and expansion of manufacture followed and labor unionism "burst full-blossomed on the thorny stem of industrial society. The trades inspired the workers with the consciousness of their trade interests and from this sprang the sentiment of solidarity, the pith and core of unionism.

The early form was a "pure and simple" trade union, consisting exclusively of the skilled mechanics of a given craft, limited to the local community in which they were employed. In its elementary state the union was purely a local affair; this was the unit of organized labor, the cell composing the anatomy of the trade union movement. The workers were thus drawn together instinctively for purposes of self-defense, having scarcely a hint of industrial evolution and making little, if any, conscious attempt at a constructive program.

With the introduction of machinery, the subdivision of labor, the increase of production, the extension of the markets, the improved facilities for transportation afforded by the railroads, and the general development of industry, the local unions were united in district, state, and national bodies and in time were knit into federations of international organizations.

There are still, curiously enough, many workingmen who, notwithstanding a century of industrial growth, the most phenomenal in all history, have profited nothing by experience and observation, and stand rooted to practically the same moss-covered spot their great grandfathers occupied in revolutionary days. Everything has been revolutionized except their hoary notions of union labor, and upon these not a patentable improvement has been made in a hundred years.

More curious still is the fact that these antiquated notions are embalmed by many of the leaders (!) as sacred relics, and any attempt to relegate them to the past where they belong is resented by these union guardians as high treason to the working class.

This simply shows that the ruling class are potential in the councils of organized labor as they are in other affairs.

It would seem that even a potato would open its eyes to this obvious fact. But the workingman sleeps on — or if he opens his eyes, he sees not. The machine he makes to lighten his task takes his job, pushes him into the street, and starves his child. And he knows not the reason why. But he *will* know as certain as the sun shines and that in the not distant future. He is waking up at last and beginning to see, and when his eyes are open wide and his vision has been clarified, there will be a mighty shaking up and he will emerge unfettered, the master of the earth.

The labor movement is the nascent collective workingman. It is this giant who is to do battle with the collective capitalist for supremacy of the globe. In the preliminary engagements he is meeting many a defeat, but he profits by them all, even by the doping of his own trainers, and in the final conflict when he summons all his mighty powers, he will vanquish his antagonist, the tyrant of capitalism, and proclaim the triumph of light and freedom.

The one thing above all others for the workingman to see and understand is the class struggle. The very instant he grasps this fact his feet are on the rock — he takes his place with his class and, come what will, he holds it, especially on election day.

This is the work to which the labor agitator must give himself with all the powers of his mind and body.

The American labor movement has come with a rush during the past few years; it is still largely in the hazy, nebulous state and is sure to bump and bruise itself severely before it develops the class-conscious solidarity, strength, and clearness it must have to triumph in the struggle and fulfill its historic mission.

The truly revolutionary labor movement which has sprung up in the West in the last 15 months is the most advanced and pronounced type of 20th century unionism in America. Pure and simple unionism is splintering in the strain of the class conflict and Grover Cleveland, Mark Hanna, Archbishop Ireland, and Bishop Potter will try in vain to poultice it up with the bandages of capitalistic conciliation.

The socialist philosophy for capitalist confusion; the class struggle for the middle class muddle; revolution for reaction — that is the program. The whole American labor movement, resist as it may, must be permeated

with the spirit of class-conscious solidarity, the only kind that is fireproof and fakir-proof.

The American Labor Union,³ the Western Federation of Miners, and affiliated bodies have made a tremendous start and are now on the main track under increasing pressure. The capitalists see it and are seized with frenzy and terror. Idaho Springs, Colorado City, and Denver, are the sentry shots fired to arouse their army.

It is all magnificent. Nothing will give organization greater impetus — nothing more vividly reveal the class struggle and hasten the overthrow of industrial slavery and the triumph of the working class.

Published in *American Labor Union Journal* [Butte, MT], Sept. 3, 1903, unspecified pages. Copy preserved in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm edition, reel 10.

¹ Debs began his first tour of the South, a six week journey that took him to Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, and Missouri during the second week of February 1896.

² Richard T. Ely (1854-1943), a de facto Christian socialist, was one of the leading scholars of the progressive era. He was for more than three decades a professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin and was the author of a number of books on the history of socialism, the labor movement, and economic theory.

³ The Western Labor Union changed its name to the American Labor Movement at its 5th Annual Convention, held in Denver from May 26 to June 8, 1902.