

Industrial Unionism and the Philadelphia Streetcar Strike

[excerpt]
(circa May 1, 1910)

Certain battles are memorable and certain battlefields become historic. The recent struggle of the carmen at Philadelphia will be among these when the history of the war for industrial freedom is written.¹

I never saw a more magnificent body of fighting industrialists.² They were aroused as few similar bodies have been to a true consciousness of the situation and had it not been the temporizing in dealing with the brutal corporation and its myriad murderous hirelings, and some other tactical errors, they would have scored a complete triumph. The fighting spirit of the rank and file was above question and their solidarity under fire was perfectly admirable. Besides this, public sentiment was overwhelmingly with them and if they had persisted in all their demands, conceded nothing, and stood their ground, they could not have failed. They were driven to fight, and fight it should have been to the finish. When they began to concede they began to weaken, and the many fruitless conferences, parleyings, and palaverings but served to sap their waning strength.

The weakness of the strike — the essential weakness of every craft union strike — lay in the fact that it was concerned wholly with securing nominal concessions under the wage system, instead of being also directed against the system itself. Any strike which lacks the conscious aim to overthrow the wage system, however bravely it may be fought, or however favorable may seem the outcome, is certain in the long run to prove more or less barren of substantial results.

A body of blind strikers, blind as to the ultimate aim of what they are striking for, never really won a victory, even though victory be conceded. A body of class-conscious strikers who fight for temporary advantages only as a means of strengthening their position in the struggle for freedom never encounter a defeat, even if their strike is lost.

The former lose when they win and the latter win when they lose.

The object of every strike must be the undermining and ultimate overthrow of wage slavery and if it lacks this vital element it is but a blind

revolt and has to be fought over and over again until the eyes of the slaves are finally opened to what they are up against, and to the imperative necessity of training and drilling, fitting and equipping themselves to take possession and control of the industrial masters.

The utter weakness and hopelessness of craft unionism was so glaringly manifest, so palpably and painfully in evidence in Philadelphia that its blindest devotees were compelled to admit it. Left entirely to themselves the carmen would have been beaten from the start, and the strike would hardly have created a ripple on the surface; but the strong and irresistible class instinct of the workers prevailed and they rushed headlong into the fray, in defiance of their leaders and without regard to consequences to themselves, and this was the commanding feature of the strike, fanned into a roaring conflagration, in the light of which the class struggle loomed in bold relief, and gave to this industrial conflict historic value and significance.

Scathing as a rebuke to craft unionism was the magnificent act of the Baldwin Locomotive Works, who marched out in a body in sympathy with the strikers, although not organized at all, and not only gave to the strike its chief element of support, but struck horror to the hearts of the capitalist all over the eastern states. The inference follows logically that if all the workers of Philadelphia had been free to follow their class instinct, instead of being bound up in craft agreements, they would have all gone out on strike in sympathy with the carmen, as did the unorganized Baldwin employees and won the strike in an hour.

The obvious lesson of the Philadelphia strike is industrial unionism and united political action along strictly class lines. It is the working class against the capitalist class, and industrial freedom against wage slavery!

The strikers at Philadelphia fought a splendid fight, but they can fight a far better one — any they will. They at least showed, a majority of them, that they can think and act for themselves, and that it is not the part of wisdom for intelligent workingmen to blindly follow their leaders, instead of scrutinizing their every act and giving them loyalty and support only when they deserve it.

Let them now strengthen their position and prepare for the future by pushing out into industrial unionism, the only unionism which can cope successfully against the master class, and let them also carry their unionism into politics by joining the Socialist Party, the only party which stands unequivocally for the working class on the political field.

To organize a so-called labor party will be to profit but meagerly by recent experience. Such a party is at best but a makeshift and provides the scheming labor politician with a further opportunity to ply his political prostitution at the expense of his misguided followers.

If the workers at Philadelphia are not class conscious, if they are blind to the class struggle, if they accept wage slavery as a finality, a labor party can do them no possible good; if they are class conscious and their eyes are open to the class struggle, and their conscious purpose is to abolish wage slavery, they will join the Socialist Party.

As a closing word I wish to say that I am proud of the attitude and actions of the socialists of Philadelphia during the strike. They were the first to espouse it and the last to leave the field; they never flinched under fire, never wavered in their loyalty, and the strikers know it and admit it with full appreciation.

Let socialists everywhere follow this splendid example and not only preach the class struggle, but incarnate it and serve in it in every skirmish and every battle of the workers everywhere in the war of emancipation.

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¹ The Philadelphia General Strike began in January 1910 when the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company, which had previously rejected worker demands for a 25 cent per hour wage increase, unilaterally implemented a mandatory withhold for pension and other benefits while terminating 173 members of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America. The retaliatory strike of 6,000 streetcar workers began on January 18. Thousands of strikebreakers were brought in by the company in an effort to maintain operations and strikers began to sabotage cars and lines to keep them inoperable. On March 5 the city’s Central Federated union called for a general strike in solidarity with the striking streetcar workers, which began with the support of more than 60,000 workers and grew to idle an estimated 140,000 before its termination on March 27. Rapid Transit workers remained on strike until April 19, when the company finally agreed to a wage hike, the rehiring of strikers over a three month period, and mediation for the 173 union members previously terminated. More than ten people died in strike-related violence.

² Debs delivered a speech in Philadelphia on March 19, 1910 — a wild gathering in the middle of a great strike in which an estimated 10,000 people could not gain admission.