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# Socialist Unity in the United States

by Charles H. Kerr

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The question of a union between the Socialist Party of America and the Socialist Labor Party is being persistently urged, and the subject is one that demands full consideration and discussion. There are two obstacles to a clear understanding of it in the ranks of the Socialist Party. One is that about 9/10ths of our members have joined since the days when the Socialist Labor Party was the most important socialist organization in this country. The other is that most of the old members are still unconsciously influenced by the bitter feelings growing out of the fight in 1899 for the control of the party organization. My excuse for urging my opinion at this time is that at the time of the fight I was a new convert and an observer, not a combatant on either side, while I am fairly well informed as to the facts which are pertinent to the decision we have to make at this time.

The nature of the decision is well shown by the following resolutions lately adopted by Local Redlands, California, of the Socialist Party of America. I print them in full for the reason that they illustrate better than anything I could say the artless eagerness of our new members who are unfamiliar with the history of the Socialist Labor Party.

## Preamble.

We, the Redlands local, believing that too much stress cannot be put upon the necessity of unity in the Socialist political parties, believing, as we do, that the reasons for their separation are neither permanent or necessary, and

that both having been stripped of their errors, remain essentially as one in their endeavor.

We also believe that the Haywood incident has taught the workmen of America, better than theory can teach, the necessity for the solidarity of the working class, and has forcibly shown its effectiveness. And we further believe that in the face of this event the workers have realized that the end for which they are striving, to wit, industrial emancipation, holds them closer together, than their difference in tactics can hold them apart.

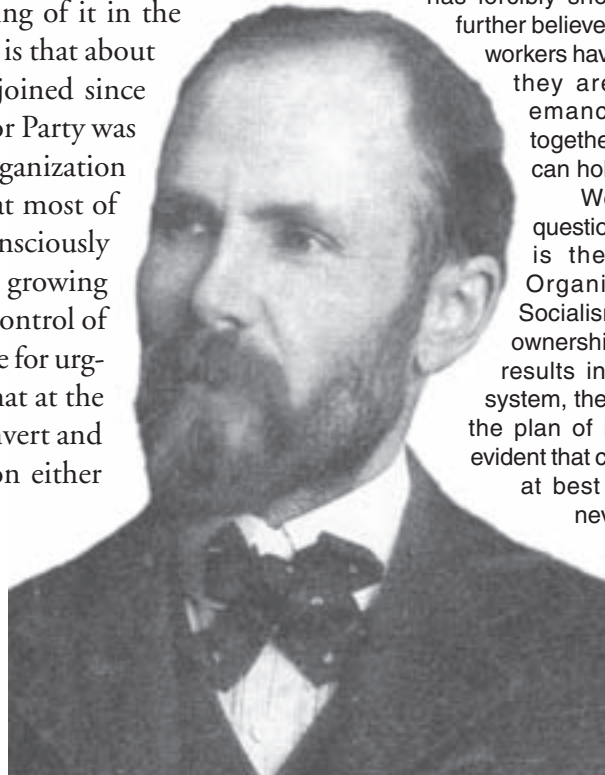
We also believe that the great question before the working class today is the relation of the Industrial Organization to Political Action, Socialism being realized in the social ownership of industries, which at once results in the destruction of the wage system, the workers must be organized on the plan of industrial unionism. It is self-evident that capitalist craft-unionism can offer at best only temporary benefits and never can emancipate the wage-slaves, but that the proletariat must organize on the industrial plan so as to control and direct industrial affairs, when the political party shall be successful on the political field and thus assure to the worker the full product of his toil.

## Resolved.

Therefore, be it resolved, in view of the preamble, we, Local Redlands, initiate a national referendum calling for the union of the two Socialist parties of America — unity to be based on the recognition of industrial unionism as the economic basis of the socialist political movement.

And be it further Resolved, that the official press and means of publication shall be owned and managed by the Socialist Party and that no literature be considered official unless sanctioned by the National Executive Committee.

And be it further Resolved, that no officer of any union shall be eligible as an officer or candidate of the Socialist Party.



And be it further Resolved, that if this referendum be carried and a convention called for the purpose of completing this consolidation, the delegation shall consist of wage workers holding no official position in either party.

**H.M. McCoy**, Chairman Comm.

**M. Shelly**, Secretary.

No special comment is necessary on the first two paragraphs. Throughout 4/5ths of the states, socialist unity has already been reached by the virtual disappearance of the Socialist Labor Party. It is perfectly true, however, that there are still a few hundred tireless, energetic workers who cling to the SLP, and that their efforts are now largely wasted in fighting the Socialist Party instead of fighting capitalism. So that if union could be brought about without committing the Socialist Party to unwise tactics, it would be a substantial gain, well worth some trouble.

In the third paragraph, the resolutions call attention to an important fact. It is indeed true that the great question before the working class today is the relation of industrial organization to political action. But directly after stating this fact, the resolutions plunge into a tangle of utopian speculations that are perfectly futile, and flounder there in a fashion which would make us think that the comrades who prepared them had never heard of Marx's law of economic determinism.

It seems a very simple thing out in California, thousands of miles from the storm centers of the economic fight between capitalists and laborers, to argue theoretically that industrial unions are necessary to help run things when the Socialist Party, years hence, is in control of the government. But to offer such an argument seriously shows a weak grasp of the motives that really make people do things.

Here in Chicago most of the members of the Socialist Party are members of everyday, commonplace trade unions, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. This is not because Chicago Socialists are less revolutionary than the Socialists of Redlands, California. The Chicago Socialists, most of them, joined these trade unions long ago, and for the very good and very prosaic reason that they wanted better wages and depended on the unions to help get them, or perhaps found that they could not get jobs without carrying union cards. They remain inside these unions today for the most part because there are no industrial

unions here in the trades in which they work. If they were to withdraw from the existing unions to join the budding organization of the Industrial Workers of the World, they would stand a very good chance of losing their jobs. Moreover they would seem to their shopmates to be acting like scabs, and they are more sensitive to the opinion of their shopmates whom they have seen than to the opinion of their comrades of Redlands, California, whom they have not seen.

And there is another reason why they should stay inside the existing unions. If they were to withdraw, they would enrage the other members of the union both against the Socialist Party and against the idea of industrial unionism.

There is a far stronger argument for the adoption of the Industrial Union principle than that offered by Local Redlands. The old-time craft unions were the logical form of organization when industry was for the most part carried on by small capitalists in small plants, each employing a few men. Under such conditions, craft unions served their purpose well. But the growth of the trusts has put them out of date. This is day by day becoming more evident to the rank and file of the unions. Simply as fighting machines to keep up wages, they have grown ineffective. A union that shall enroll in its membership all the workmen of a trust is a necessity if the trust is to be met on anything like equal terms.

Every clearheaded Marxian socialist understands that peoples' ideas and institutions at a given moment are in the main the result of the *former* economic environment of the social group in question, and that these ideas and institutions are being continually modified by the *changing mode of production*. To overlook these social laws discovered by Marx and Engels, and denounce people because all unconsciously they act according to these laws, is to talk like a utopian, a single-taxer, an anarchist, or a reformer — but not like a socialist.

Apply these laws to the mass of American trade unionists, those who vote with us and those who vote against us. They are all obliged to make a living if they want to live, and most of us do, whether it is reasonable or not. They find their unions useful in the process of making a living, and unless they have the religious temperament that makes bigots out of the leisure class and revolutionists out of proletarians, they

will not give up these practical unions for the sake of theories about the unknown future. Furthermore, if the zealous revolutionists call them names for clinging to their unions, they will probably call equally picturesque names in return, and resist any change in the form of their union organization with a good deal of indignation.

This being the case, the rational thing for us revolutionists to do is to stay inside the old unions, strengthen them, not disrupt them, but argue calmly and patiently, day in and day out, to show the other trade unionists that the craft union is as much of a back number as the stage coach. Let us keep clear heads and not mix our arguments. If we are talking to socialists inside the old unions, we may well urge the argument offered by Local Redlands in its third paragraph. But if we are talking to non-socialists, let us put all our stress on the need of an industrial union as a better fighting machine to keep up wages.

Let us especially avoid mixing the party question and the union question. The Socialist Party needs no endorsement from trade unions as organizations. What it does need is new members and new voters. Industrial unionism needs no resolutions adopted by the Socialist Party. What it needs is a united effort on the part of the socialist trade unionists to secure the support of the industrial principle by the existing unions, not to disrupt these by organizing rival unions.

The traditional policy of the Socialist Labor Party has been to denounce all officers of the real trade unions as "fakirs," and to encourage the formation of new unions. In the 19th Century they organized a considerable number of paper unions under the name of the Socialist Trades & Labor Alliance. In 1899, when 2/3rds of the members withdrew from the Socialist Labor Party to form an organization now included in the Socialist Party, the Socialist Trades & Labor Alliance had a nominal membership of possibly 30,000, but 5 years later the organization was practically dead. Its remains, however, entered the Industrial Workers of the World when that body was organized, and have been the most serious obstacle to its growth.

Another traditional policy of the Socialist Labor Party has been to control its party press through the

National Executive Committee. The practical result of this method has been to place the editor of *The People* [Daniel DeLeon], wielding the power of the National Executive Committee, in full control of the sources of information of the party membership, so that he has dominated and still dominates the opinions of the rank and file. Personally I do not believe the charges sometimes made that this editor is in the pay of capitalists; on the contrary I think he sincerely believes that his tactics are for the best interest of the working class. But I am decidedly opposed to a system placing such absolute power in the hands of any one man or small group of men.

To sum up the situation briefly, the method of the Socialist Party since its organization in 1900 has been friendly cooperation with the existing trade unions, and a large measure of local self-government throughout the party organization. The method of the Socialist Labor Party through these years has been one of bitter war on existing trade unions and extreme centralization of power within the organization. During these 7 years the Socialist Party has multiplied its membership by 5, while the membership of the Socialist Labor Party has declined.

The Redlands resolutions propose a consolidation of the parties. So far, so good. But they propose that the larger party should discard its successful methods and adopt the disastrous methods of the smaller party. I am for consolidation, but not on these terms.

The sanest official proposition that has yet been made is a National Committee motion by Vernon F. Kind, of the Socialist Party of Michigan, inviting the Socialist Labor Party to state definitely on what terms they will unite. I hope that this motion will prevail and that it will bring a definite answer from the SLP. And if their answer is that they are willing to merge the two organizations, leaving all questions of platform, tactics, organization, and party press to be settled by the majority after consolidation, then I am heartily in favor of union. But if they are only willing to consolidate on some such basis as that of the Redlands resolutions, then I think we may safely wait for further developments.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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