

CORRESPONDENCE

AS TO POLITICS.

(By John Sandgren, San Francisco.)

HAVING been granted the privilege of answering the critics of my views “as to politics,” I shall gladly avail myself thereof.

First, as to the strength of the working class at the ballot box, I have no alternative but to accept the figures given by the Editor of *The People*, namely that the working class in 1900 constituted seventy per cent. of the population and that we would, theoretically, be able to muster a majority at the ballot box. But it must be admitted that the change from 1890, when the working class were fifty-five per cent., with a downward numerical tendency, is so astounding, that one may justly question the correctness of at least one set of the figures.

However, seeing that little importance is attached by my critics, who must be considered to represent the S.L.P. position, to the ballot as such, and to the question of our strength at the ballot box, discussion on this point may be dropped.

But, from another point of view the figures I gave under this head, somewhat amended, are of great significance in attempting to determine the proper posture toward political activity on the part of the working class, namely in the following sense:

Out of the whole mass of actual wage workers, men, women and children, there are approximately eighteen millions who can in no manner be directly interested in politics, to wit: 1,700,000 children wage workers, 4,800,000 women wage workers, 3,500,000 foreign wage workers, 5,000,000 negro wage workers, 3,000,000 floating and otherwise disfranchised wage workers; total, 18,000,000 approximately.

And nobody will deny that in the building up of the economic organization and constructing the frame work of the new, collective form of society, we will sooner or later have to take account of every one of these eighteen million wage workers. In fact, they are “grist for our mill,” but what is to be done with them politically?

This open admission on the part of spokesmen for the S.L.P., although not new or brought out for the first time in this discussion—this admission that the ballot counts for little or nothing, will come as a shock to many faithful adherents of the ballot, who with one of my critics bravely exclaim: “Outvote them we shall!” This admission is another sign of the fact that working class “parliamentarism” has come upon evil days, the tendency throughout the whole world being to bring economic organization to the forefront and relegate politics to the rear. It may be hard for those who have seen and helped the revolutionary movement grow on political lines to vigorous manhood to now discard politics; the new tendency to re-organize the forces on exclusive economic lines, entering the political arena only in the negative way of “direct action” may strike them as unholy violation of sacred principles. But as Marx says in effect: “The proletarian movement ever comes back to its starting point, ever retraces its steps and begins anew, until it has finally struck solid foundation.” So it is now. Parliamentary experience having brought out the weak points of the political method, a revolt from the “million masses” brings into existence an organization in which the workers shall meet the master class face to face (direct action), thus realizing, as Comrade Bruckere says, the Marxian motto: “The emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves.”

In regard to the position that we needs must continue political organization for the sake of political agitation, to be used as a shield under which to mold and form the working class movement proper, i.e., the economic organization, I am far from convinced of its correctness.

Political organization and agitation without faith in the ballot or without, as in Russia, demanding the ballot, or as in Sweden, an extension of the franchise, is like running a windmill without any grain to grind or without any millstones to grind it with. The position being an artificial one, it will soon become untenable. It WILL FAIL to accomplish what it was intended for: to deceive the master class as to our purpose; it WILL accomplish what we least desire: to deceive our fellow workers and confuse. Such is the penalty one always has to pay for one of the gravest tactical errors in the revolutionary movement: double sense, dissimulation, upon which see page 85 in De Leon’s work: *Two Pages from Roman History*.

Political organization and agitation becomes an absurdity without the ballot,

without parliamentarism. On this score allow me to quote from a recent article in *Int. Soc. Review* on the Italian movement: "Parliaments are not and cannot become organs of social revolution. The inherent social and economic qualities and tendencies of parliamentarism limit the possibilities of reforms. . . . It is a most ridiculous utopian supposition that a Socialist party ever can obtain a majority in the parliaments of any country. The social revolution which shall establish 'the autonomous government of production managed by the associated working class' (Labriola), is above all a technical and economic fact which cannot be called into existence by an incompetent assembly, such as the parliaments of all countries are, but must result from the autonomous development of the capacity, and from the spontaneous initiation of those who attend to the process of production."

Again, I hold that my critics have not established the fact that the I.W.W. needs any shield or that the political organizations have any shield to offer. While the I.W.W. certainly needs the well trained membership of the S.L.P., I cannot but see that we must respectfully decline their offer to hold a shield over us to protect our coddling infancy. The I.W.W. can do, and is doing, everything in the way of agitation that the political organization is doing, it can address by word of mouth, it can distribute and sell literature, it can organize, and what more can the S.L.P. do? In fact, it would be a direct advantage to have the shield out of the way, as we could then address our fellow-workers somewhat in this way:

"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 begone, 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 organized strength." But here are some of the best fighters of the I.W.W., one night fearlessly proclaiming emancipation through organization and the next night "holding the shield" and exhorting street audiences to vote the S.L.P. or S.P. ticket, when they well knew that such course is about as fruitless as an Eskimo dog's barking at the moon. No,

the shield is not needed, not appreciated, and does not shield. Past has shown that the political agitator enjoys no more immunity or security than others. He may be “legal” and “constitutional,” but legal opinions and supreme court decisions are made to order and cost only the paper on which they are written, so we are as much exposed to “law and order” if we parade in the masque and disguise of politicians as if we come openly forward as an economic organization, not to speak of the advantages of an open, straightforward course.

To those who defend political organization and agitation, because it would suggest to the ruling class our willingness to adorn ourselves in the conventional garb of legality, civilization, peace, etc., I would put the question: when did economic organization cease to be a legal, civilized and peaceful weapon? In fact, I would maintain that it is one of the newest and most perfected products of modern civilization. To those who plead for a much to be desired peaceful solution of the social problem, I wish to say that economic organization even with the purpose of taking and holding is primarily a peaceful organization, and it is a straining at gnats to maintain that politics is a more civilized, more peaceful weapon, when the political organization proposes to carry behind its back “the big stick” of the economic organization, with which to emphasize its civilized and peaceable intentions. The whole difference is the difference between direct and indirect action.

The question of peace or war is optional with the master class, it is not for us to decide which it shall be. But it is our duty to be prepared for both. Only the economic organization can do this. The political organization is capable of preparing for neither. It is incompetent to bring about a peaceful solution, because society will have to be reconstructed on economic lines, it would be incapable of preparing for war because its organization is only a general staff without a regular army. But why speak of peace or war? The capitalist class has already chosen war. Our blood has run in torrents, as in the Paris Commune, or bespattered the road to Hazleton and Cripple Creek; the rope has strangled some of our early champions and is in preparation for others. To speak of a 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?

Another thing which seems to worry some of my critics is that if we were to discard politics and have only an economic organization, we would, Peter Schlemiel-like, be without a shadow or reflex, which is against the rule, as no economic manifestation should appear in public without its political reflex or shadow any more than a self-respecting citizen would go out without his shadow. These critics seem to forget that a revolutionary, economic organization with an aim to reconstruct society, has its reflex or shadow projected forward, and that no true reflex could be contained in the frame of politics. Insofar as the organization also serves the incidental purpose of fighting the every-day battles of the working class it is entitled to a shadow on the political field. But that shadow will be thrown as indicated in Bruckere's report of the French movement; our organized strength will cause the ruling class to fall all over themselves in an attempt to "reflect" us on the political field, in order to save themselves from a worse calamity.

For these and other reasons I still maintain that the Preamble of the I.W.W. should be so amended as to exclude political action. Only thus will we have found a solid basis upon which all workmen can unite. The operation may be painful, but it must be endured.

John Sandgren.

[Again, for the sake of keeping the record clear, the first thing to be done is to record the fact that the question asked by *The People* at the incipience of this discussion remains unanswered, to wit, how are the ranks of the I.W.W., of the revolutionary army intended to "take and hold" the means of production, etc., to recruit the necessary forces in America for that eventful and final act of the revolution, if the I.W.W. were to start by rejecting the civilized method of settling social disputes, the method of a peaceful trial of strength, offered by political action, and plants itself, instead, upon the principle of physical force only?—This is the issue. Sandgren, like others who hold with him, leaves it untouched.

We say Sandgren leaves it untouched. That is putting the case mildly for him. In so far as he can be said to have at all touched it, he overthrows himself. What was Sandgren's motion, so to speak? It was that THE I.W.W. DROP THE

POLITICAL CLAUSE FROM ITS PREAMBLE. He who comes with such a proposition, and is met with the question, How are we to recruit our forces if we start by discarding the political, or peaceful trial of strength?—he who comes with a motion such as Sandgren's, and is met with the question just put, cannot do, as Sandgren does, show that the I.W.W. to-day, with the political clause which he would strike out, is doing the very work that we claim it could not do in the long run without that clause. If such a statement was meant as an answer to our question, the answer overthrows the original motion. It yields the point at issue.

We may again stop here. All that is essential to the issue is covered by the above observation. Nevertheless, again mindful of the experience that central errors often derive their nourishment, if they do not actually rise, from collateral errors, we shall here take up the principal mistakes, in Sandgren's reply—mistakes, which, though irrelevant to the real issue are important, relatively and absolutely.

First—Those critics of Sandgren, who agree with him against political action but found fault with his looking for support in statistics, do him and their cause injustice. There is no theory but should be based upon facts. Sandgren yielded to a correct instinct in seeking the support of figures for his conclusion. Who knows to what extent his erroneous conclusion was due to the erroneous figures that he quoted. Yielding to the same correct instinct he correctly returns to statistics. Again his statistical reasoning is at fault. The array of items that foot up eighteen million child, woman, foreigner, negro, floating, and otherwise disfranchised wage workers by no means warrants the conclusion that they “can in no manner be directly interested in politics.” Far from it. The conclusion reveals one of the false notions that dominate the anti-political action mind. That mind cannot disengage itself from the notion that political action begins and ends with conventions, nominations of tickets and voting. This is false. Political action, conducted by revolutionists, consists in something else besides those acts; it consists in something else infinitely more important than any or all of those acts; it consists in revolutionary agitation and education upon the civilized plane that presupposes a peaceful trial of strength; that is, settlement of the dispute. “What is to be done with them [these child, woman, foreign, negro, floating and otherwise disfranchised wage workers] politically?” asks our friend. What? Fully sixty per cent. of them, that is, all, except

the infants and the sick, can be made the carriers of the agitational and educational propaganda of the revolution conducted upon the civilized plane. Though they be not entitled to cast a single vote, they can distribute literature, and those who have the gift—tho' foreign, female, negro or otherwise disfranchised—can by speech promote the revolution by teaching it on the political platform—We all know that this actually happens.

Second—The indisputably correct and, indeed, cheering fact mentioned by Sandgren concerning the widespread revulsion from “parliamentarism,” or be it pure and simple political Socialism, by no means warrants his conclusion that, therefore, the other extreme, total rejection of political action, is correct. Such a conclusion is a “non sequitur”, is illogical from his own premises; indeed: his own premises warn against the conclusion. The knowledge that the pendulum just was at one extreme is a warning against, rather than an argument in favor of the point which the pendulum is bound to strike immediately after—the other extreme.

Aye, Sandgren correctly alludes to Marx. The proletarian revolutions as Marx says, “criticise themselves constantly; constantly interrupt themselves in their own course; come back to what seems to have been accomplished, in order to start over anew; scorn with cruel thoroughness the HALF-MEASURES, weaknesses and meannesses of their first attempts”; etc. The proletarian revolution started with exclusive physical force attempts; it “criticized”, “interrupted” itself, and swung over to the other extreme of exclusive politics; it is again “criticizing” and “interrupting” itself and receding from that second extreme posture. The experience it has been making teaches it to “scorn with cruel thoroughness the HALF-MEASURES, weaknesses and meannesses of its first attempts.” Experience teaches it that all extremes are HALF-MEASURES; that all half-measures are WEAKNESS; that all weakness leads to MEANNESS—corruption and treason. What corruption and treason the half-measure of pure and simple political Socialism leads to is palpably shown by the record of the Socialist party Careys of Massachusetts, Hillquits of New York, Buechs and Bergers of Wisconsin. At the same time, written in the blood of the workers is the corruption and treason that flows from the half-measure of exclusively physical force, or so-called “direct” action. The names of the McParlands, of Molly Maguire fame, and of the McKenneys of modern Colorado fame should

suffice as hints—to say nothing of what the more recent Dumases and Petriellas are capable of.

The S.L.P. seeks not patronizingly to officiate as a shield to the I.W.W. The endeavor of the S.L.P. is directed toward promoting the vigorous development of the I.W.W., to the end that the I.W.W. may, schooled by the experience of previous half-measures, itself set up its own shield and itself hold up that shield which will protect it, in front, against the pure and simple politician; in the rear, against the “agent provocateur.”

Third—Sandgren slips badly when he quotes, against the S.L.P. attitude, page 85 of De Leon’s *Two Pages from Roman History*, wherein the warning is correctly uttered and illustrated against the practice of double sense and dissimulation in revolutions. The passage is recommended to our readers. It describes Gaius Gracchus as bent upon overthrowing the power of the Senate, but keeping the secret “locked in his breast”, and indulging in a bit of pantomime that could not throw his foes off their guard, and only succeeded in confusing, thereby “keeping away forces needful to his purpose, whom straight-forward language would have attracted.” We take Sandgren for too honest a seeker after truth to wish to imply that anything the S.L.P. has done, said or printed, whether with regard to the economic or the political action, can even remotely be compared to that HALF-MEASURE of Gaius Gracchus. The ballot of the S.L.P., and the ballot of that political reflex which the I.W.W., as a full-measure body, is bound to reflect, demands and will demand plump and plain the unconditional surrender of the capitalist class; that ballot does, and will, place the revolution on the civilized plane of a peaceful trial of strength; last not least, and above all, that ballot, equipped with all the experience of our Age, will school the proletariat in the absolute necessity of organizing the physical force—the integrally industrial Union of the working class—which it may and in all probability will need in order to enforce its program in case the capitalist class resorts to the brute measures of the barbarian. There is no “double sense” or “dissimulation” in that posture.

Fourth—Not unless Sandgren would make out of Marx a sort of Bible—a compilation of scraps from different periods of civilization, and therefore often contradictory—can he quote the Marxian saying “the emancipation of the workers

by the workers themselves”, as an argument against political action, seeing that the same Marx stated: “Only the Trades Union can give birth to the true party of Labor.” Was Marx’ idea that the Union would give birth to a useless thing? If “the emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves” excludes the thought of political action, then Marx floundered when he made the latter utterance. Marx was not infallible. If he is found to have erred the error should be specifically pointed out. Otherwise, in quoting Marx, he should be quoted fully.

Fifth—The next slip made by Sandgren is closely related to the previous one. He quotes Labriola. The quotation is a misquotation. It is that because it is put in a way suggestive of the idea that Labriola wholly spurns political action. The idea is wrong. Labriola’s syndicalists (substantially the attitude of the S.L.P.) are affiliated with—what?—with the Socialist PARTY of Italy!—A POLITICAL ORGANIZATION! The sentiments in the quotation from Labriola are not different from those of the S.L.P. Such sentiments recognize the necessity of the ballot, without “pinning our faith” to it. They recognize in the ballot a potential means of a peaceful trial of strength, and they, so far from “pinning their faith to the ballot,” provide for the organization of the physical force, which the political agitation enables us to organize, and which in all likelihood will be needed, but which the Movement will not allow itself to be heated into the blind passion of pushing out of the proper perspective.

Sixth—We must frankly admit our utter inability to handle Sandgren’s contention that an economic organization determined to ignore the political ballot, is “a peaceful organization.” Either he is color blind, or we are on the subject.

Seventh—Finally, Sandgren’s closing paragraphs, declaring that there is WAR now, consequently, what is the use of considering peaceful solutions, reflects the unfortunate psychology of our anti-politics friends. Why spend so much time with claims about the peacefulness of the revolutionary economic organization, quotations from Labriola and Marx, statistical figures, parallels in history, etc., etc.? What they mean is that there is WAR now, and consequently we might as well fight. THERE IS NO WAR NOW. Unreliable are the conclusions of men who take a word, used in a technical sense, transfer that word to another technical sphere, and then give it, in the second, the meaning it has in the first sphere. There is CLASS

WAR to-day; but the word WAR in that sense means something essentially different from the word WAR in the sense used by Sandgren when he says we might as well wage WAR now against the capitalist class. War, in the sense used by Sandgren, has not yet broken out. If it had his articles could not be published in *The People*, this discussion could not be going on, the capitalist institutions would not be available for the transportation of our thoughts, and neither could write with the peace and comfort that we do. There is no such WAR now. If there were, the discussion would be superfluous; the very fact that Sandgren has raised his anti-politics point is proof that there is no such WAR now. The only justification for Sandgren's contention would be the actual existence of war. Seeing there is none, the ground fails on which to sustain his point.

In the absence of the only reason why political action should be dropped—the existence of actual war—the only question of moment is how to equip ourselves for that war that we are all agreed we shall in all likelihood be involved in. The question put by *The People* at the incipience of this discussion remains unanswered. The glove, thrown down to our anti-political friends, remains on the field challenging to be picked up.—ED. THE PEOPLE.]

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

Uploaded August 2009

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