

A New Appeal

By John Reed

It is time for American Socialists to do a little painful thinking. For my own satisfaction I should like to set down here what I think about the American Socialist Movement.

From my observations in different parts of the country, I should say that, roughly, the American Socialist party is composed of two main elements:

1). American petty bourgeois, (Clerks, shopkeepers, administrative officers of small business, a few farmers); and American intellectuals (journalists, mainly).

2). Foreign-born workers; foreign-born intellectuals.

The most significant facts in the American Labor Movement are the American Federation of Labor and the I. W. W. These two organizations prove that political Socialism has very little attraction for the American workingman; in fact, they prove that the American workman is *opposed* to Socialism.

Why?

Let us consider first, the American Federation of Labor. This is a purely economic organization, whose power consists in the fact that it *defends* certain workers against the assaults of the capitalist class, which by raising the cost of living and depressing relative wages, is always attempting to reduce the working-class to the condition of peonage. Above all, men who work with their hands are practical, and the American Federation of Labor offers a *practical* program.

By reason of the history of this country, its boundless lands and natural resources, the stupendous growth of its cities, the immeasurable opportunities presented to energetic individuals in the immense demand for food, manufactured goods, and means of transportation, and the fluidity of social boundaries, the American worker has always believed, consciously or unconsciously, that he can become a millionaire or an eminent statesman. This is expressed in the saying, once heard often but now less frequently that "any American boy can be President."

The American worker knows that this country is owned and controlled by "the Trusts." But he does not realize that the day of universal opportunity has passed. He believes, consciously or unconsciously, that he can still rise above the working-class, and above his fellows. And because *many thousands* believe this, their unanimous sentiment is opposed to any system, like Socialism, which wishes to destroy their imagined opportunity.

Moreover, although the American worker is profoundly disgusted with the dominant Democratic and Republican parties, and if you ask him what he thinks of such-and-such a political candidate, will say, "Oh he's just a dirty politician. They're all alike—they make promises, but they never do anything when they get elected;" although the American worker knows that Congress, the State Legislatures and the City Councils are used by business interests for their own selfish purposes—still he does not know how to answer when he is told, "Well, if you don't like your officials, vote for somebody you *do* like. You are the boss. This is a free country."

The American worker still thinks *politically*, instead of *economically*. No one has ever been able to tell him, in a way which he understands, that in our state of society the vote is almost powerless. As I have said, he knows that the men he elects to political office are dominated by Big Business after they get elected; but he doesn't realize that unless he, *the worker*, takes away the *power* of Big Business before he elects his representatives, those representatives will always be bought—or if they are honest, they will always be powerless.

Why doesn't the American worker vote the Socialist ticket? Is the first place, he probably doesn't like Socialism, which means to him only a system worked out in foreign countries, not born of his own particular needs and opposed to "democracy" and "fair play," which is the way he has been taught to characterize the institutions of this country. In the second place, if he has become conscious of his *class* interests, voting for the Socialist party seems to him *impractical*. "They won't win," he says. "it will just be 'throwing away my vote'."

Of course he does not see that voting for a candidate who promises and does not perform, is just as much "throwing away his vote" as voting the Socialist ticket.

Sometimes, however, the candidate *does* perform his promises; sometimes the popular discontent *does* force a legislative body to pass some needed social measures. The worker is satisfied; he does not follow the law to its most important stage—its operation. He

does not watch the Courts which interpret the law. For example, take the various Anti-Injunction bills which have passed Congress, hailed by the American Federation of Labor as "a new Magna Charta." And yet injunctions are still used as weapons against the workers in industrial disputes. . . . Consider the Child Labor Law, declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The list of cleverly drawn and inefficient labor laws on the statute-books is endless. . . . And if the laws, as sometimes happens, are effective, the employers simply refuse to obey them, and drag out litigation in the courts until the whole matter is quietly forgotten.

The American worker does not see to the heart of the society in which he lives. When the truth becomes too obvious, he is easily persuaded that all abuses can be corrected by agitation, by the law, by the ballot-box. He does not see that *the whole complex structure of our civilization is corrupt from top to bottom*, because the capitalist class controls the sources of wealth.

And yet there is one important truth which he has learned. He knows that the immediate problems of his daily life in industry cannot be solved by politics. For that is necessary a kind of insurrection—direct action—the strike. His craft union, however, is only vaguely interested in the problems of *other* unions, and this vague interest is manifested by the organization of the American Federation of Labor. One union will handle the scab products of a factory in which another union has called a strike. What business is it of the teamster, or the railroad man, who makes the material he transports?

And then, also, a defensive organization such as the American Federation of Labor is necessarily composed of limited and exclusive kinds of workers, because half their power lies in the fact that they are the *skilled* men, and therefore must protect their privileges, not only from the employers, but also from the great mass of the untrained workers who might lower the level of their position. Half the victories of American Organized Labor are at the expense of the unorganized and the unskilled. . . . The machine character of modern industry, however, is itself operating a change in labor organization. The day of the skilled man is passing. Any man can run a machine. In Bridgeport, for example, all the trouble arose from the fact that the employers took untrained men and trained each man to do *part* of the work of a skilled machinist—at wages less than the machinist was doing it. Three machinists cost a good deal in wages; but three men, each trained to perform one-third of a machinist's function could do the work of three machinists, and do it for much less money; and at the same time the Machinists' Union was smashed.

In various sections of American industry there is appearing now a new tendency. Political parties are being organized; the American Labor Party is a symptom of this new movement. But why an American Labor Party? Why not the Socialist Party? The reason is that the Labor Party is a *practical* organization, designed to carry out politically the work done economically by the Unions; while all the Socialist Party has to offer is the election of candidates to office, where they are uniformly impotent, on a platform which is too broad to appeal to the craft union training of the American worker.

The I. W. W. presents another phase of the same question. Here again is an organization which is *practical*, and appeals to the man who does things with his hands. If an American worker becomes conscious of his class-interests, and sees the truth, he naturally wants to change the system of society in the most practical, the quickest way. He sees that the workers must control, first of all, the sources of wealth. He sees that the ballot does no good. Industrial action works; he knows that. He realizes the utter failure of the craft-unions as organs of a working-class bent on controlling industry. He is disgusted with politics. Why should he bother the vote at all? Revolutionary direct mass action is the only weapon he needs. . . .

If anything were needed to demonstrate the value of political action, the Russian Revolution ought to do it. No true Socialist denies that the parliament of the future Socialist State will be an Industrial parliament; but the transformation from the political to the industrial system must be expressed by political action, whose value in the class struggle lies in the fact that it *creates opportunities* for the education of the workers, and for industrial direct action, and

protects these two essential methods of the struggle of the working-class for power.

If the immediate program of the Socialist party in this country is inadequate, that is because it is not influenced by the needs and power of the American workers, who above all others, are competent to formulate the Socialist program in this country. If the Socialist party is politically impotent, however, it is because there is behind it no economic force from the American working-class.

The dominant theory of Socialists about Socialist propaganda to American workers seems to be the "Menshevik appeal," to give an impression that Socialism is really Jeffersonian democracy, to intimate that all we want are reasonable reforms, labor legislation, the full dinner-pail. The idea seems to be, "First make a Liberal, and then convert him to Socialism." This is my interpretation of Socialist campaign literature, and Socialist speakers at election time. Fully a third of the Socialist votes in normal times, are, I think, cast by middle-class persons who think that Karl Marx wrote a good Anti-Trust Law. . . .

I have no quarrel with that kind of Propaganda—except that it does not make Socialists. My idea is to make Socialists, and there is only one way of doing that—by teaching Socialism, straight Socialism, revolutionary Socialism, international Socialism. This is what the Russian Bolsheviks did; this is what the German Spartacus group did. They approached not Socialists, but *people*: workers, peasants, soldiers, who did not know what Socialism was. First, they found out from the working people what they wanted most. Then they made those wants into an immediate program, and explained how they were related to the other demands of the complete Social Revolution. And they explained, explained, eternally explained. . . .

Revolutionary Socialism is not a refined theory adapted to cultivated minds. There is no value in inventing new Socialist tactics, merely so that intellectuals can discuss what Karl Marx would have thought about it. Revolutionary Socialism, above all other kinds, must be *practical*—it must *work*—it must make *Socialists* out of workers; and make them quick.

Comrades who call themselves "members of the Left Wing" have an immediate job to do. They must find out from the *American workers* what they want most, and they must explain this in terms of the whole Labor Movement, and they must make the workers want more—make them want the whole Revolution.

They must do this in words which can be understood immediately by the workers, in terms of their own lives. In this lies the secret of success of the Non-Partisan League. In this lies the secret of success of the baby American Labor Party—or will lie, if it is successful. We, however, have a bigger job than the organization of either of those movements; for we must include them and go beyond them, and our appeal must be first of all to those whom they do not touch—the unorganized, the unskilled, the landless, the propertyless. . . .

That all workers belong to the *working-class* and must be conscious of it; that all the sources of wealth belong to the capitalist class—who are conscious of it; that this wealth must become the property of the workers before they can control their own lives; that the civilization we live in, and our Government, are controlled by Force—Economic Force—and that it can only be opposed by Economic Force.

And finally, the workers must be told that *they have the force*, if they will only organize it and express it; that if together they are able to stop work, no power in the universe can prevent them from doing what they want to do—if only they know what they want to do!

And it is our business to formulate what they want to do.

Said Nicolai Lenin, at the Peasants' Congress in Petrograd. "If Socialism can only be realized when the intellectual development of all the people permits it, then we shall not see Socialism for at least five hundred years. . . . The Socialist political party—this is the vanguard of the working-class; it must not allow itself to be halted by the lack of education of the mass average, but it must lead the masses, relying upon the Labor Organizations for revolutionary initiative. . . ."

And again, at the Third Congress of Soviets, "You accuse us of using force. . . . We admit it. All Government is legalized force, controlled by one class and used against another. For the first time in history, we in this hall are creating a legalized force controlled by the working-class, the vast majority of the people, and directed against those who have exploited us and enslaved us. . . ."