

Syndicalist Tendencies in the American Labor Movement

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In the beginning of May, 1886, 366,000 organized American workingmen voiced the demand for the eight-hour day. It was made in connection with a demonstration of 15,000 employees of the Gould Southwestern railroad lines that took place some weeks previously to protest against the miserably low wages. The latter ranged, in some places, between 55-75 cents per day.

Of the 366,000 workers, 150,000 immediately won their demands, as we learn from Sartorius von Waltershausen in his book "Modern Socialism in the United States." 216,000 men participated in the strike. Of this number 42,000 gained the eight-hour day, so that altogether 192,000 men won their demands.

It is conceivable that these self-reliant, aggressive workers, permeated with what to-day is known as the syndicalist spirit, drew upon themselves the fury of the plutocracy. Brutal persecution followed, the cry being raised that the country was in danger of Anarchy. In Chicago, then the firing line of the movement, the most able and energetic men of labor were brought to trial, which ended with the since historically branded judicial murder of five of the accused.

Under this hard pressure labor here and there lost the gained advantage. However, more than a 100,000 men enjoyed a workday shortened by one hour, and in some instances even by 3 and 4 hours.

This first great struggle of the American proletariat bore the chief features of syndicalism. The eight-hour day, and the consequent numerous strikes, became the cause of the workers in all the industries. General direct action, the solidarity of the different branches took the place of isolated craft conflicts. It was the initial step toward the **general strike**, which modern syndicalists advocate as the most effective weapon toward final emancipation from wage slavery.

That notwithstanding severe police persecution and oppression a comparatively great success was attained, was due mainly to the fact that the lines of battle were sharply drawn: arbitration, impartial conferences, and well-meaning go-betweens were not permitted to obscure the situation.

The strength of a movement depends on the clarity and determination of its aim and activities. A common cause, the vision of an ideal that is rooted in the soil of material existence and yet opens up new horizons of a grander future, is more effective in cementing the ranks of labor than the external successes with which so-called conservative labor leaders seek to satisfy the workers.

This inspiring vision is embodied in the syndicalist idea that the primal condition for the emancipation of labor is the abrogation of wage slavery. The syndicalists refuse to be bound by year-long contracts, based upon the continuation of the wage system and thus sanctioning the same. They regard strikes and sabotage as the outposts for the establishment of a communist commonwealth in which there shall be no trusts, either capitalist or labor.

The difference between the French *Confédération Generale du Travail*, the organization which at present best expresses the syndicalist spirit, and the **American Federation of Labor** can be defined as follows: The French labor body is a consciously revolutionary, proletarian organization, while the A. F. of L., intellectually and in point of principle, represents no particular attitude.

Nearest to the syndicalist idea is in America the organization of the I. W. W. In contrast to the A. F. of L., which consists of craft organizations, each independently making contracts with the employers, the I. W. W. propagates industrial unity. It is a long step forward. It signifies, first of all, the abolition of the petty, egotistic spirit of branch grouping, and the development instead of general solidarity and the active operation of all the workers of an industry. Thus, if the employees of the Harriman railroad lines were to use their energies along syndicalist ideas, all the workers of the system would immediately join the strike and thus

make it impossible for the company to continue its crippled traffic — a situation detrimental to the interests of the strikers and threatening their success, as well as dangerous to the traveling public.

Not corporation but cooperation is the motto of syndicalism. Cooperation and solidarity not merely in national, but also in the international struggles of the proletariat.

Syndicalist tendencies also characterize the strike of the textile workers in Lawrence, Mass., which at the present writing seems to be assuming larger proportions.¹ The situation imperatively demands a general strike. Moreover, this does not apply only to Lawrence, or any separate industrial district, but to the whole country. The general strike is in the air. It forces itself upon the workers through the logic of conditions: compared with the tremendous combines of capital, the little craft strikes are as ineffectual as a worn-out, ancient spinning wheel in comparison with the modern giant steam loom.

A feature of the Lawrence strike, worthy particular consideration, is the manner in which the manufacturers seek to profit by the labor laws. Several union leaders of the quality of those who dance attendance in legislative lobbies, recently proclaimed their success in having a labor bill made into law by the lawgivers of Massachusetts. It provided that women and minors should not be employed for more than 54 hours in any one week, as against the 56 hours previously in force. But now it has become apparent that this labor law, like most of similar makeshifts, is a paper miscarriage. It was passed as a result of a miserable compromise between the labor leaders and the textile magnates. It was promised to the manufacturers that they shall in future have peace — no more demands should hereafter be made upon them, no strikes be put in operation, if they would permit the passage of the labor bill. The mill owners gladly agreed. They realized that the indirect political activity would prove much cheaper to them than the possible direct economic tactics of the workers. The law became operative, and the manufacturers — on the strength of the leaders' promise of a free hand in the factories — at once began to take advantage of the new statute by reducing the wages from 10-15 per cent. They had made peace with the labor leaders!

This foul peace has fortunately been destroyed by the strike. But the diplomatic leaders are lustily assuring the manufacturers and the press that the revolt of the textile workers is not “sanctioned,” — not sanctioned by those who should consider themselves lucky if they are not ignominiously driven from the ranks of labor.

Considering the failure of labor laws, the failure of labor politics, and the bitter disappointments the toilers have suffered at the ballot box, and necessarily must always suffer, it is time the workers should turn to the inherent power residing in them as producers — their economic power. The beginning has already been made. Forward! The shortest way is the best.

Endnotes

1. See "[The Trouble at Lawrence](#)" by Mary Heaton Vorse for another contemporary piece on the strike. —Syndicalism.org eds.

Additional Information

Text taken from [Hathi Trust](#). Image derived from [Figure CLXVI](#) in *Le diverse et artificiose machine* by Agostino Ramelli (1588).