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# A Change of Front:

## Letter to the Editor of the *New York Call*, May 13, 1917

by Jack Carney

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Editor of the Forum:

I have been reading with interest the letters of Comrade [S.J.] Rutgers and his comrades of the SPL [Socialist Propaganda League] and regret to find that in all their writings they do not give us anything definite to work on.



For, after all, it is quite a simple thing to denounce the AF of L and boost the IWW and should mass action from the house tops, but it is quite another thing to back up your arguments with sound reasoning. After you have sat down and written to The Forum — a wise thing to do — you have still got to take into consideration the realities of our everyday life.

It is the idea of the IWW and the other organizations who demand a new form of industrial organization, that the workers can just by a mere resolution walk into a new type of organization, without troubling about the development of industry. [Antonio] Labriola in his *Essays on Historical Materialism* states the position very well indeed, when he writes:

†- Antonio Labriola: *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* [1896]. Translated by Charles H. Kerr. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1903), pg. 50. These are not the words of Labriola, as indicated by Carney, but rather Labriola directly quoting Karl Marx's *Zur Kritik der politischen Oekonomie* [1859]. The English translation of this extract from Marx was made for Kerr from the original German by Marcus Hitch. Kerr's main translation was made from a French translation of the Italian original.

A form of society never breaks down until the productive forces are developed for which it affords room. New and higher relations of production are never established until the material conditions of life to support them have been prepared in the lap of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets for itself only such tasks as it is able to perform; for upon close examination it will be always found that the task itself only arises where the material conditions for its solution are already at hand or are at least in process of growth. †

In England the Syndicalist movement previous to the present war was but a comparatively small organization. All the delegates it could muster could be got into an ordinary dwelling apartment. But with the coming of the war, new material conditions were set up, with the result that at the last Syndicalist conference held in Leeds, Yorkshire, they held one of the biggest conferences ever known. The chairman in his opening address said they had not met as in previous conferences, for the work of outlining propaganda, but rather to outline plans of action. Amalgamation [of unions] is not a subject to be talked of, but is a reality. The masters of Great Britain were forced to organize all their forces, and as a result the workers were forced by these new conditions to reorganize their forces. The same thing is going to take place in America, and we shall see what has taken place with the labor movement in England taking place with the labor movement in this country.

You may find fault with Sam Gompers and his satellites, but when you attack the AF of L because

they do not go fast enough for you, you are doing more harm than good. The mistake we have made, myself included, is that we have restricted our vocabulary to such expressions as “labor fakirs, traitors,” and no progress has been made. Why? For the simple reason that within the AF of L there are good, sound union men, and when you attack the leaders and make general statements, these men resent it. In the same way, if you attack the head of a family, the children naturally resent it. The labor movement has been built up with the lives of many workers, men have sacrificed wives, homes, and children in order to obtain the freedom to organize. Therefore when people come along and endeavor to create dual organizations, they resent it. Let us deal with facts as they are, and not as we would like them to be; then and only then will we be of benefit to the workers.

Here in Chicago, scab joiners make doors, but union painters will not paint them. So with other trades. Experience is teaching these union men the real meaning of solidarity. They are doing things, but they are not shouting it from the house tops. While they are doing things, taking action and working for the best, we are philosophizing, and we wonder why those unions hold the party in contempt. Let us get down

to action along with these men, and do something more than pass resolutions, then they will listen to us; but when we are just talking and they are doing, is it any wonder they will not listen to us?

In England one of the bylaws of the Independent Labour Party reads as follows: “Members who are eligible for a trade union are requested to join such union.”

Here is something the Socialist Party should do, instead of doing as some members of the party do — assume the attitude of “what is the use,” the worker will never emancipate himself until he shouts for the Socialist Party. While they are shouting the worker is organizing, and as the party believes in an industrial and a political organization of the workers, the members join the latter and ignore the former. They are worse than the man who is union and votes a scab political ticket. The party is needed now more than it ever was. The union leaders have gone with the tide of popular feeling. Let us now work with the union men, and the best place to work with him is in the union hall, not on Broadway on a soap box.

*Jack Carney,*  
Chicago.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

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