

CORRESPONDENCE

AS TO POLITICS.

By H.B. Hoffman, N.Y.

WHETHER the debate on the political situation is closed or not it is up to the editor of the *Daily People* to reply to the following trite questions and answers. And as no comment can be made without presenting the matter from which the argument is drawn I would be pleased to see this contribution printed in full:

The questions are addressed to an S.L.P. man:

1. "Are you a revolutionary body?" "We are and decidedly so."
2. "Very well. If, then, you are a political party you are organized to enforce or evolve legislative enactments?" (Hesitatingly.) "Yes we are organized for legislative purposes."
3. "And yet you call yourself revolutionary. Legislation within the capitalist state, in order to be declared valid, must be of a mild constitutional nature. It must partake of the capitalists' notion of validity. It must harmonize with the existing order of things, does it not?" "Yes."

"So that if you harmonize with the capitalist state you can effect reforms, radical or ultra-radical but such reforms are drawn within the boundary lines of private property. In fact you succeed {in} palliating rotten conditions{;} you ease the lot of the workingman and make him able to bear up. You unconsciously harmonize the workingman to existing conditions because you build up a hope in him that you are there to help him, and that through legislation. You are in fact doing the work of the reformer which he as a useful lieutenant of the capitalist can better do himself. Hearst can bring about more reforms through legislation in a shorter time than can five revolutionary parties.

"You furthermore build up a false hope {for?} which the working class will not forgive you, when they realize the emptiness of it. As a conscious Socialist you know

that the capitalist is well entrenched; legislatures, courts and police, make up his armaments of war, all effective legislation can be nullified by the courts which are generally not of an elective nature. You know the helplessness of your situation and yet you would goad the workers on and make them believe in the strength of legislation.”

“No! No! We are in politics for agitational purposes,” answers the disturbed S.L.P. man.

“Ha! ha! in politics for agitational purposes! Were I not fully conscious of your extreme honesty I would call you a knave. As it is I am content to think you are in the wrong.

“A political party means something. It has its classical mission which is popularly understood. A political party is a body either in office or trying to get in office. It nominates men for especial offices. In coming before the electors it makes certain specific promises which it also promises to enforce if elected. Absurd is it not to imagine that it can masquerade as a political party with no political intentions. Absurd is it not to simply spread agitational propaganda and yet go to the trouble of organizing a political body. It is misrepresentation, culminating in a farcical tragedy. And how absurd would it be to practice both politics and agitational propaganda thro’ {thru’?} a political party and yet sustain its revolutionary character of the body. It is a reformers’ carnival with the fitting mask of the masquerader.”—H.B. Hoffman, 7 W. 116th St., N.Y. City.

[Again let, first of all, the significant fact be recorded that, along with his predecessors, this week’s opponent of the S.L.P. position also leaves unanswered the question put by *The People* at the beginning of this discussion—how can the ranks of the I.W.W., of the revolutionary army, intended to take and hold the means of production, etc., recruit the necessary forces for that eventful and final act of the revolution if it starts by rejecting the civilized method of settling social disputes, offered by the political platform, and plants itself instead upon the principle of physical force only?

Surely none can claim the question to be a trick, or unfair. Men who aim at the overthrow of the capitalist system; men who recognize the necessity of a

revolutionary economic organization of the working class to accomplish the revolution; finally men who reject the civilized method of social warfare, political action;—such men certainly owe to the public, the working class public, an answer to the question put above—how do you expect to recruit your forces?

The persistent avoidance to answer this question justifies the conclusion that it is unanswerable; that it knocks the bottom from under the notion of rejecting political action; that indeed, the question needs but to be put in order to expose the error of the notion. Nor is the evasion at all concealed by an answer which puts other questions and, as Hoffman does this week, himself furnishes a series of answers unwarranted, in the main, by the exhaustive answers given by *The People* to previous correspondents on the subject, and the well known posture of the S.L.P. in the premises.

The facts in the case are simply these:

The Socialist party asserts that political action is all-sufficient to emancipate the Working Class. “Elect us to office,” it says, “and we will emancipate you.”

Whatever there is intellectually clear and clean in the Labor Movement readily sees through the error; it even sees deeper and perceives that such a body, if it does not start corrupt, must inevitably degenerate into a fraud upon the proletariat. The emancipation of the proletariat, that is, the Socialist Republic, can not be the result of legislative enactment. No bunch of office holders will emancipate the proletariat. The emancipation of the proletariat can only be the mass-action of the proletariat itself, “moving in,” taking possession of the productive powers of the land.

This correct, this indisputable position leads directly to the principle that the revolutionary proletariat can not fulfill its historic mission unless it is so organized economically, that it can take possession integrally, shed the slough of the capitalist political State, and assume the reigns of industrial administration of the country. The industrially organized revolutionary Union, in short, the I.W.W., was the product of this insight into things.

This position, by reason of its very purity, brought its leas along with it. An element there arose, which—whether nauseated by the unavoidable corruption in the pure and simple political Socialist party; or whether, dazzled by the very brilliancy of the position itself, disabled them from seeing aught but that—contends

that political action should be wholly discarded; accordingly, that the I.W.W. should drop the political clause from its preamble where it expresses the necessity of uniting the working class “on the political as well as on the industrial field.”

The I.W.W. denies the soundness of such a position. It goes further; it points to the fatal error involved in the same. The rejection of political action would throw the I.W.W. back upon the methods of barbarism—physical force exclusively. Where, as in Russia, no other method exists, none other can be taken up. Where, however, as in the rest of the Western Civilization, especially in America, the civilized method exists of public agitation, and of peaceful submission to the counting of the ballots that express the contending views;—where such methods exist, the man or organization that rejects them does so at his or its peril. This is especially the case in the capitalist America of to-day. The capitalist class, however powerful, is not omnipotent. It feels constrained to render at least external homage to the Genius of the Age. The Genius of the Age demands free speech and a free vote. So soon, however, as a Labor Organization were to reject the peaceful trial of strength, the capitalist class would be but too delighted to apply the system of Russian Terrorism. The long and short of it all is that the physical force organization of the revolution could not gather the necessary recruits. On the other hand, clad in the vestments of civilized, fully civilized conflict, the I.W.W. recognizes the indispensable usefulness of political agitation whereby it may demand the unconditional surrender of the capitalist class; whereby it may preach and teach the reasons therefor; whereby it may express its willingness to abide by the fiat of the ballot, that is, by the peaceful trial of strength; and by reason of such conduct, recruit, drill and organize the physical force which it may need in order to safeguard the civilized because peaceful victory that it has striven to win. Putting the matter in a nut-shell—without the revolutionary economic organization of the Working Class the day of Socialist political victory would be the day of its defeat; without the revolutionary political action of Socialism, the revolutionary economic organization of the Working Class can not be fully shaped for action.

The Socialist Labor Party represents this view. Though recognizing its preponderatingly economic importance, it perceives its incidental political necessity.

“Ha!” cries out Hoffman, our this week’s opponent. “A masquerade!”

The ways of civilization are no mask on the face of civilized man. The ways of civilization are part and parcel of the civilized man's being: they sharply mark the profile of his face.

For the same reason, and by the identical principle, that Sherman's defeat in the I.W.W. could be encompassed only by the policy of those delegates who went to last September's convention sincerely believing, not masked with the belief, that the man was honest, but who soon as they found him out a scoundrel, grabbed him by the slack of his reputation and threw him out of the Convention and the I.W.W.,—for the same reason, and by the identical principle, the overthrow of the Capitalist Class will be the work of those men only with whom the ways of civilization are, not a mask, but part of their nature; men who insist upon exhausting the ways of civilization, and who, when Capitalism shall have dropped its mask, will be found ready to resort to the ways of barbarism—all the more determinedly so because the method is repellant to the civilized cause that they are the apostles of.

For the same reason, and by the identical principle, that Sherman would have remained in possession of both the convention and the I.W.W. if the policy of those delegates had prevailed who went to the convention convinced in advance of the man's scoundrelism, and who wanted to throw him out from the start,—for the same reason, and by the identical principle, the Capitalist Class would remain enthroned if the policy were to prevail of that impatient and angry element who reject in advance the expectation of a peaceful trial of strength, and would start with resort to physical force.

The S.L.P. ballot demands the unconditional surrender of the Capitalist Class. The S.L.P., accordingly preaches the Revolution, teaches the Revolution, and thereby enables the recruiting and organizing of the physical force element requisite to enforce the Revolution. The S.L.P. does all this, including the latter, because it strikes the posture of holding the Ruling Class to the civilized method of a peaceful trial of strength.

May be the S.L.P. will triumph at the hustings, that is, win out and be rightly counted. In this case the S.L.P. would forthwith dissolve; the political State would be ipso facto abolished; the industrially and integrally organized proletariat will

without hindrance assume the administration of the productive powers of the land. Is this impossible? We admit it is highly improbable.

More likely is the event of S.L.P. triumph at the polls, but defeat by the election inspectors, or resistance, as the Southern slave-holders did at the election of Lincoln. In that case also the S.L.P. would forthwith dissolve into its economic organization. That body, having had the opportunity to recruit and organize its forces, and the civilized method of peaceful trial of strength having been abandoned, the Might of the proletariat will then be there, free to resort to the last resort, and physically mop the earth with the barbarian Capitalist Class.

Most likely, however, the political expression of the I.W.W. will not be afforded the time for triumph at the polls. Most likely the necessities of capitalism will, before then, drive it to some lawless act that will call forth resistance. A strike will break out; capitalist brutality will cause the strike to spread; physical, besides moral support, will pour in from other and not immediately concerned branches of the Working Class. A condition of things—economic, political, social-atmospheric—will set in, akin to the condition of things in 1902, at the time of the great coal miners' strike, or in 1894, at the time of the Pullman-A.R.U. strike. What then? The issue will then depend wholly upon the degree, in point of quality and in point of quantity, that the organization of the I.W.W. will have reached. If it has reached the requisite minimum, then, that class-instinct of the proletariat that Marx teaches the Socialist to rely upon, and the chord of which the Capitalist Class instinctively seeks, through its labor fakirs, to keep the Socialist from touching, will readily crystallize around that requisite I.W.W. minimum of organization. The Working Class would then be organically consolidated. Further efforts for a peaceful acquiring of strength would then have been rendered superfluous by Capitalist barbarism. Capitalism would be swept aside forthwith. For this consummation, however, in the eventuality under consideration, be it remembered, the I.W.W. must have reached the requisite quantitative and qualitative minimum of perfection, AND THAT IN TURN WILL DEPEND UPON THE FREENESS OF ITS PREVIOUS AGITATIONAL WORK, A FREEDOM THAT IT NEVER COULD ENJOY EXCEPT IT PLANTS ITSELF UPON THE PRINCIPLE THAT RECOGNIZES THE CIVILIZED METHOD OF PEACEFUL TRIAL OF

STRENGTH—THE POLITICAL BALLOT.

Accordingly it all comes back and boils down to the question, How is the I.W.W. to recruit and organize its forces if it starts with the absolute rejection of the political ballot?

All talk concerning the thorns that beset the political stalk are beside the question. Such talk our opponents should reserve for the pure and simple political Socialist party men. Addressed to the S.L.P. men, such talk is superfluous and inconsequential—as inconsequential as would be extensive dissertations on the stench that periodically is felt in dissecting rooms, and of the diseases such stench occasionally breed: THE DISSECTING ROOM IS NECESSARY;—as inconsequential as would be extensive dissertations on the accidents and discomforts that result from ocean travel: OCEAN TRAVEL IS REQUISITE. The pure and simple political Socialist man is on the political question what a man would be who favors the dissecting room for the sake of its stench, or the man who favors ocean travel for the sake of its perils and discomforts. That, our physical force opponents know, is not the S.L.P. position. The S.L.P. knows that the political State is worthless, and can not legislate the Socialist Republic into life. The S.L.P. man clings to political action because it is an absolute necessity for the formation of that organization—the I.W.W.—which is both the embryo of the Workers' Republic and the physical force that the proletariat may, and in all likelihood will, need, to come to its own.—ED. THE PEOPLE.]

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

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