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CORRESPONDENCE

## AS TO POLITICS.

*From Jos. Wagner and Leon Vasilio.*

**S**T. LOUIS, MO.<sup>1</sup>—It is with doubt as to being allowed space in the columns of *The People* that the undersigned take the decision to express their opinion in regard to Comrade Sandgren's article. We realize the degree of annoyance that we are causing the editor by our action; and were it not for the fact that we have seen in *The People* so many reflexions cast at the privately owned press of the S.P. in regard to refusals to publish whatever is not to their heart, we would, most assuredly, try to kill our temptation to give out what is our honest and sincere conviction.

We know that our opinion is that of thousands of members of the Industrial Workers of the World, and consequently ask for the same privilege that we both have been granted in the past, when our views were not at variance with the attitude of *The People*.

After reading and rereading carefully both Sandgren's article, and the answer of the editor of *The People*; after giving the matter earnest consideration from all view points for the last three weeks, we arrived at the conclusion that, of all the answers that Comrade De Leon has made in his life in capacity of editor of *The People*, the one just mentioned must be the poorest and the weakest one. Not that he is no more the same brilliant writer, but that the time has come when he is in the wrong, defending a wrong cause. Why and how is this thus? We shall see.

In order to be better understood, we would like to refer the reader to the two

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<sup>1</sup> [Pamphlet editions state that Vasilio and Wagner wrote their letter from Springfield, Ill. However, the *Daily People* (Jan. 7, 1907; *Weekly*, Jan. 26, 1907), gives St. Louis, Mo., as the point of origin, and in a separate article ("As to Politics, Once More," *Weekly People*, Jan. 6, 1907), De Leon wrote: "Since the discussion was closed two contributions have been received in favor of Sandgren's position—one from J.A. Bille, and another from Leon Vasilio and Jos. Wagner, together, both contributions from St. Louis, Mo. . . ."—R.B.]

articles in question, which are published in the *Weekly People* of December 1, 1906,<sup>2</sup> under the title “As to Politics.” But as every one who will happen to lay hands on this number may not be in a position to get that one, we shall give here the quintessence of Sandgren’s article.

His contention is that the political activity is useless and harmful, and that the emancipation of the working class can be accomplished through economic revolutionary organization only.

In the first part of the article, which in our opinion is a complete failure, Sandgren endeavors to prove that the working class are not in the majority at the ballot box. Unless Sandgren wanted to be altogether “original” we cannot understand how a man of his caliber could have ventured such an absurdity. This we consider a waste of time to take up for discussion.

In the second part of the article, he admirably shows the impotence of a political organization, and also how fitted an economic organization is to bear the struggle. “Ten hour laws have been declared unconstitutional in the State of New York. . . . In the meantime the Western Federation of Miners and many unions of the A.F. of L., even, have an eight hour day and a minimum wage. Have they been declared unconstitutional? No, and they did not gain it through political action, but through economic organization. The advocates of political working class activity predicate their success upon being ‘backed up’ by an economic organization which is to rake the chestnuts out of the fire for them. The economic organization stands on its own legs and declines political ‘assistance.’

{“}The economic organization makes just such demands as it is able to enforce, and it is able to make demands and enforce them from the very first; it does not have to wait for the hazy day when we shall have a majority.{”}

And now comes De Leon’s answer. He says that “the basic error that underlies Sandgren’s reasoning” is the confusion of the POLITICAL AGITATION with the BALLOT.

The two are distinct, says the editor. “How completely the vital distinction is missed by those who oppose political action is graphically illustrated by a favorite argument among them, an argument that Sandgren reproduces in beautifully

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<sup>2</sup> [See *Daily People*, November 23, 1906.—R.B.]

pictorial style, when he says that for the working class to waste their time on the building up and maintaining of a political organization which they afterwards have to 'back up' only to awaken to a realization of its impotence, would be like crossing the river to fill your water bucket when you can just as well get your water on this side."

First of all Comrade Sandgren—as well as all of us, industrial workers, who dropped ballot box activity—gives the Socialist political agitation its due credit when it says: "Both these organizations (the S.P. and the S.L.P.) maintain that there is a war between the two classes. In the war both of them have rendered splendid service. . . . They have done well as propaganda societies, but that is all they have ever been, their names and platforms notwithstanding. . . . Their role is now played."

This means that Sandgren does not confuse political agitation with the ballot; he only rejects the ballot, which, as a constructive force, even in the opinion of the editor is zero. In order to make this point clear, let us analyze the nature of a Socialist political party activity. In the first place it is an incessant criticism of the actual system of society based on the private ownership of the means of life, to which it intends to substitute another system, based on the social or collective ownership of those means—the co-operative commonwealth. This is the political nature of it.

On the other hand this Socialist political party activity consists of a laborious propaganda for the attainment of that social system, a propaganda for the class struggle on the political field, which "implies the setting up of a 'ticket,' and that, in turn, implies the 'ballot.'"

But if the ballot, as a constructive force is zero, so must necessarily be all the amount of work spent in getting that ballot such as holding nomination conventions, caucuses, getting signatures on petitions, watching at the polls, etc., etc. And we know that most of the energy of a Socialist political party is wasted on that zero proposition.

A revolutionary organization of the working class that aims at the overthrowal of the capitalist system and the establishment of the co-operative commonwealth is essentially political in character—and such is the I.W.W., as Comrade De Leon

himself ably proved in his Chicago speech on September 12, 1906.

The one who does confuse the political agitation with the ballot is De Leon. It is he who uses the word political agitation or politics in the meaning of ballot agitation. On page 32 of *The Preamble of the I.W.W.* he says: "A part, the better, the constructive part of Socialist economics, translates itself into the industrial organization of the working class: it translates itself into that formation that outlines the mould of the future social system; another part of Socialist economics, however, inevitably translates itself into politics." Should he not confuse the political agitation with the ballot, he would never dismantle a revolutionary industrial organization "that outlines the mould of the future society" of its sufficiency to carry on the political agitation of the working class, and give this function to another organization which, as we have seen is spending its energy on a zero proposition—at the working class expense.

The Industrial Workers of the World sufficiently fulfils that role of a political party of Socialism by that that it aims at the co-operative commonwealth and it teaches the class struggle on the industrial field where every victory is a step towards the social revolution—and doesn't waste the energy of the working class on a zero proposition, on something that not only may be lost, but that is always lost.

So much in regard to confusing the political agitation with the ballot.

Now to "the point at issue." "The very point at issue," the editor says further, "is whether that economic organization, 'able to fill the bucket' can at all be brought together without the political agitation; the very point at issue is whether the politics ignoring economic organization has hitherto accomplished anything of lasting value for the working class at large; or to put it in a third and summary form, whether the decline of power with the economic organization is not due to its contradictory posture of 'voting' for one thing and striking for its opposite. Of course, if such a thing is conceivable as the bringing together of an industrial organization able 'to fill the bucket' without the aid of political agitation, it were folly to waste time, energy and funds in building up and maintaining a political organization."

Let us ask Comrade De Leon why is he beating around the bushes? What does he mean by politics ignoring economic organization? Does he mean the Industrial

Workers of the World, or the American Federation of Labor? His allusion to “the decline of power with the economic organization” on account of “its contradictory posture of voting for one thing and striking for its opposite” conveys to our minds the A.F. of L., and not that economic organization “able to fill the water buckets,” the “I.W.W.,” which is now under discussion.

And since when is Comrade De Leon willing to admit that the A.F. of L. {,} as an organization, is doing on the economic field the opposite of what its members are doing on the political field? This sounds very familiar to those who have heard the pure and simple political Socialist appeal to the pure and simple craft unionist to vote as he strikes. But let us not indulge any longer in these non essentials.

The question is “whether that economic organization able to fill the bucket can at all be brought together without the aid of political agitation.” Before answering this question, let us consider the nature and the activity of an economic organization, such as the I.W.W.

Like the political party of Socialism, it aims at the overthrowing of the present system: it aims to take possession of the tools of production from the capitalist class and operate them for the benefit of the working class, which will be the whole of society.

But for the attainment of this end, the economic organization fighting the class struggle on the industrial field, it organizes the workers in their various locals, industries and departments in order to make them able to cope with modern capitalism in their everyday fight, and wrest concessions from that class locally, industrially or generally, as the case may be—concessions which, unlike the politician’s reforms, are steps towards the revolution, as they put the working class more and more in control of the industries in which they are working.

It is founded on the recognition of the fact of the division of society into two classes, between which a struggle must go on, until all the toilers will come together and take over the means of production. Its aim is revolutionary, its activity **political**. It is revolutionary and political because its aim is to change the foundation of this society from an exchange of commodities to the co-operative commonwealth. In other words it is not like the pure and simple union, which acts as buffer between the opposing forces—the capitalist class and the working

class—but it is one of these forces organized.

Such an organization as the I.W.W. is brought about by the modern economic conditions, that is, by the industrial development and the revolutionary propaganda, absolutely independent of any ballot party activity, which has an altogether different function, as we have seen.

Of all that preceded we cannot see at all where the role of a ballot organization comes in. In his attempt to answer Comrade Sandgren, the editor tells us of the “jewel” of “civilized or peaceful methods of settling disputes.” If this is the only argument left to defend an organization which wastes our time, energy and funds, then we can rest assured that the industrial organization is the only thing able to fill the bucket or to accomplish the revolution. He might as well tell us about those lovely seances of looking each other in the eyes. They are more to the question.

But it is an irony of fate to hear men telling us of settling disputes. Is that the reason for which we are organizing? We are organizing to struggle, and not to settle disputes, which have never been settled in the interests of the working class.

Nothing could settle disputes better than a powerful organization—able to strike terror in the heart of the capitalist class—would. Confronted with such an organization the capitalist class would either have to submit or bear the consequences.

The methods employed by the revolutionary industrial organization are peaceful and civilized enough for the working class. We are assembling peacefully and in a civilized manner discuss matters of our class interest which we afterwards submit to the capitalist class in form of demands. We cannot understand how Comrade De Leon jumps at the conclusion that the I.W.W. agitation—which he terms “agitation for force only”—has to degenerate into conspiracy, which excludes the masses. The industrial agitation is not and cannot degenerate into a “conspiracy” for the simple reason that it is preached in the open, and thereby enables the Revolution to be brought before the million masses. Not only does the industrial organization bring the revolution before the million masses, but it also draws the million masses to its ranks and keeps aloof the hard pushed middle class element, with its lawyers, priests and intellectuals in general—in a word all that is foreign to the working class. It draws all the toilers of all nationalities; citizens and

noncitizens; all the disfranchised, all the tramps and “coffee-and-doughnuts-bums,” which are able to beat their way from ’Frisco all the way through the “wild west” to Chicago in order to do their own business.

As far as the “chance to a peaceful solution” goes, we are very little concerned about it. It does not depend on the working class how the last blow will have to be struck. If the capitalists will not be satisfied with a decree to step out, we can rest assured that they will, most likely, get worse.

The events that have taken place in the last sixteen or seventeen months have taught us more than the preceding two decades. They have taught us not only that the political party agitation is useless, but harmful to the industrial organization from the Pacific to the Atlantic. We have seen men eagerly listening to the industrial speaker, accidentally being an S.L.P. man, start to show the “difference” or something of that sort, then the men would turn away with a sneer at “the politician.”

That the ballot agitation is harmful to the bringing together of an economic organization able to fill the bucket, is obvious; so obvious is this fact that, at the last convention of the I.W.W. we have witnessed Comrade De Leon make a motion to the effect that no organizer of any political party should be employed as organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World. Yes, one year of I.W.W. agitation and experience has brought about great changes in the revolutionary thought in this country.

Men that but a few months ago were feeling as touching an extremely delicate spot when speaking of non party affiliation clause of the I.W.W. Preamble, are now dropping politics without any reservatio mentalis.

And let us not for a minute fool ourselves and think that this is merely a passing crisis, a temporary manifestation of a few over-heated brains.

No! This let-alone-politics tendency that we now are noticing in this country is the American expression of a general tendency of the revolutionary working class the world over. In Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and France and even Germany with its great three-million-strong-paper-party we can see the same thing.

In a lengthy article by our Parisian comrade A. Bruckere, recently published in *The People*, we can see how the working class of France, tired of political parties, is

gathering in a revolutionary organization, “The General Confederation of Labour,” after dropping politics altogether and adopting the “direct action.” The history of this let-alone-politics tendency in Europe would make a mighty interesting and instructive work, which would considerably help in the understanding of the great change that is going on in the revolutionary thought of the working class of the world.

Before closing we would like to say that, in writing this article, we have not been actuated by any prejudice against any particular man or party; that in speaking against ballot activity we have meant all the Socialist parties of the world.

We have been good, faithful members of Socialist parties in Europe and in America for many years, but our experience as wage slaves has showed us that we have been in the wrong. We expressed our opinion, which we are sure, will not meet with the approval of those who have forgotten nothing and learned nothing by years of bitter experience.

Jos. Wagner.

Leon Vasilio.

[The question repeatedly asked to the advocates of physical force only, who have favored us with their contribution, remains unanswered: “How do you expect to recruit and organize your Industrial army if you begin by rejecting the peaceful method of solving the Social Question, to wit, the political method? It is significant that none of our opponents has cared to meet this point. They all give that question a wide berth. Instead of covering the only point that is decisive they go into a vast number of subjects that may or may not be so, but have nothing to do with the real point—HOW?

The nearest our above esteemed contributors come to an answer on this particular point is the passage: the “I.W.W. sufficiently fulfills the role of a political party of Socialism by that that it aims at the co-operative commonwealth and teaches the class struggle on the industrial field.” This statement is doubly defective.

If to “aim” at a thing is enough, then to “wish” for it should be equally sufficient. Every practical mind knows that wishes and aims, like steam, must be in the boiler

of a properly organized machine before results can be obtained. Wishes are good, aims still better. Without the organization to realize them they are—well, so much hot air. The question is how to recruit the elements that will constitute the requisite organization.

The second defect in the passage is still more marked. It is fatal to the contention of the anti-political agitationist. Indeed the I.W.W. “teaches the class struggle,” and can teach it freely, and freely can proclaim its purpose to “take and hold”; but it can do so only because it plants itself upon the non-Russian, that is, upon the civilized principle of solving social difficulties. The I.W.W. expressly recognizes the necessity of working class unity “on the POLITICAL as well as upon the industrial field.” So doing the I.W.W. can preach and teach in the open. Its posture is clear—to organize the economic body that shall be able to reflect its own political party, whereby to give a chance to the peaceful settlement of the present social “unpleasantness,” and that shall, withal, have the requisite power to enforce the fiat of its ballot. To say that the I.W.W. can freely teach the class struggle, now that its preamble is so wise and sound, is a substantial denial of the claim put forth by our correspondents that political agitation is worthless. Let the I.W.W. follow our correspondents’ views and strike out the political clause, that moment they will find out that the present revolutionary agitation conducted by the I.W.W. will have come to an end. Having placed itself upon the plane which the Russian revolutionists are constrained to agitate on, the I.W.W. will be treated to a dose which it will itself have invited, a dose of Russian governmental terrorism. So far from having contributed to raise the tone of the country, the I.W.W. will have helped the capitalists to drag that tone down to the level from which the Russian revolutionists are now seeking to raise their country.

This disposes of the only remotely relevant argument made by our correspondents. There are, nevertheless, two others that should not be ignored, however irrelevant.

Our correspondents say: “We can not understand how Comrade De Leon jumps at the conclusion that the I.W.W. agitation—which he terms ‘agitation for force only’—has to degenerate into conspiracy.” The answer to this is: Either our correspondents claim that De Leon has said that “the present I.W.W. agitation has

to degenerate into conspiracy”; if that is their meaning then they will have a hard time to prove that De Leon made any such statement. The I.W.W. is what the I.W.W. is to-day, not what our friends, who sign the letter published above, seek to turn it into. They are not yet so far. If, however, our correspondents merely made a slip in their statement, and what they meant to say is that De Leon holds that by removing the political clause from the preamble of the I.W.W. AND RETAINING THE “TAKE AND HOLD” CLAUSE, then the I.W.W. would have to degenerate into conspiracy—if that was their meaning then they have quoted De Leon correctly. A simple denial of this conclusion does not refute a conclusion drawn from the irrefutable historic experience from which the conclusion flows.

At this point a serious illusion seems to reveal itself as taking possession of the minds of our esteemed contributors. They seem to believe that the preaching of the “industrial” form of organization would be sufficient to drill a revolutionary economic organization. We would like to hasten to dispel the illusion by suggesting to them the following principles:

1. The exclusion of the political clause from the I.W.W., leaving the “take and hold” clause extant, would drive the agitation into the narrow quarters of a conspiracy, with all the evil results thereof.

2. The exclusion of both the political clause and the “take and hold” clause, leaving extant only the “industrial” form of organization, would fatally steer the I.W.W. into the quagmire of the Gompers-Mitchell A.F. of L.

The other of the two irrelevant arguments that should be taken up is the one contained in the passage: “So obvious is this fact [the harmfulness of the ballot agitation] that, at the last convention of the I.W.W., we have witnessed Comrade De Leon make a motion to the effect that no organizer of any political party should be employed as organizer for the I.W.W.”—De Leon is correctly quoted there; the purport of his motion is, however, misinterpreted. So far from his motion being an evidence of the harmfulness of the political agitation, it is an evidence of his position that such agitation is essential to success. Considering such agitation essential to success, he is earnestly bent upon the bringing together of a revolutionary economic organization powerful enough to reflect its own political party, that is, its own forerunner that may afford a chance to a peaceful solution.

Consequently, recognizing the fact that there are to-day in this country two rival and hostile political parties, both flying the colors of Socialism, it should be obvious that organizers of either of the two parties, acting simultaneously as I.W.W. organizers, could not choose but hamper, rather than promote the growth of the I.W.W.—ED. THE PEOPLE.]

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