

## Progressive Trade Unionism (August 2, 1902)

The action taken by the three national conventions of labor organizations recently held in Denver in adopting a working class political program has created widespread interest in every part of the country.<sup>1</sup> The reactionary element predict for the new policy speedy and complete failure. So certain are they of this that they do not hesitate to misrepresent the action of the conventions and bear false testimony against those who took part in them. A number of misleading statements have appeared in the papers, and others are quietly circulated to bring the personnel of the conventions into disrepute, and this is engaged in by those who lack the courage to openly charge and face the men who led the movement which culminated in a new departure which promises to [revitalize] the entire labor movement of the country and bring it up to date in all its economic and political equipment.

The two men who led and inspired the conventions were Edward Boyce, president of the Western Federation of Miners, and Daniel McDonald,<sup>2</sup> president of the Western, now the American Labor Union.<sup>3</sup> McDonald was unanimously reelected upon that issue and holds his position by practically the unanimous confidence of the members of his great and growing organization. Edward Boyce retired from official life, honored by every true man and only hated by those who found him staunch and incorruptible, and utterly incapable of being swerved from his duty to his fellow workers. The name of this man will be honorably written in the history of trade unionism, as he has already written it in deeds of duty that live forever.

I need not, at this time, repeat the terms of the essential change which has taken place in the western labor movement. It is all summed up in the this simple statement that it has adopted a working class political platform, and is now equipped for united action on the political field in every contest until the victory is finally won.

It has been charged that the trade union, under the new regime, has been converted into a political machine. This is not true. The essential economic features of the movement are as they were before. Indeed, if there is any change, these have been strengthened, and the national organization,

and all local bodies will proceed with their grievances and matters relating to wages, conditions, etc., as before. But when it comes to the use of the ballot, the organization is committed to the policy that it is the duty of union men to vote their class interests as well as to strike for them, and that the man who fails to do this is not in any true sense a union man, nor is he loyal to his fellow workers.

Objection has been made that the organization now controls a member's politics, and that it has as good a right to control his religion. This deduction will not hold. A man's religion is his own individual affair, and does not concern his fellow man. But this is not true of his politics for if he uses his vote to fasten a system of industrial slavery upon his fellows they have a right to object and they are at least justified in interfering to the extent that his action affects their interests.

When a man joins one of the old trade unions, he is expected to quit work when commanded to do so by the union. His employment may be entirely satisfactory to him and he may be sorely in need of it to provide for wife and child. However this may be, if he refuses to quit when ordered to do so, and perhaps takes the chances of imposing starvation upon those he loves, he is kicked out without mercy and branded as a scab and pursued to the end of the earth. Perhaps this is not interfering with a man's "personal rights," as some of our critics would have us believe we are doing when we insist that a union man's best chance to show that he is such is by voting to emancipate his class instead of voting to perpetuate its slavery, and sink it to lower depths of degradation.

To have true power, the labor movement must be class conscious. Until it is so, the trade unions will be among the bulwarks of capitalism and wage-slavery. While the members strike against the consequences of the system, they steadily vote to perpetuate the system, and their leaders encourage them to adhere to, and not depart from, the ancient methods which, applied to present conditions, are marked with increasing impotency and are necessarily resulting in disappointment and failure.

The time is near at hand when the member of a union will be expelled just as promptly for casting a scab ballot, that is to say for supporting the party of the enemy of labor, as if he took the place of a member while out on strike. Indeed, there may be some justification for the latter, but there can be none for the former act of treason, except alone that of ignorance, and this it is the duty of the true leader to use his best efforts to overcome, so that the workers on all occasions — economically, politically, and

otherwise — can use their entire organized class-power in resisting the capitalist system, and in charging it at every point until finally it is overthrown and the world's workers stand forth free men.

Published as “Progressive Trades-Unionism” in *Appeal to Reason*, whole no. 348 (Aug. 2, 1902), p. 3. Republished in slightly edited form as “An Up-to-Date Labor Class Movement” in *Social Democratic Herald*, vol. 5, no. 8, whole no. 212 (Aug. 23, 1902), p. 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to the joint conventions of the Western Federation of Miners, Western Labor Union, and Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union held in late May and early June 1902. The gathering endorsed socialism.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel McDonald, from Chicago, was the President of the Western Labor Union from its founding in 1888 until his resignation in March 1905.

<sup>3</sup> The Western Labor Union changed its name to American Labor Union at the 1902 convention.