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**TRADE UNION LEFT FORUM SERIES**

## **OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES - JAMES CONNOLLY (1914)**

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Scripture tells us in a very notable passage about the danger of putting new wine into old bottles. I propose to say a few words about the equally suicidal folly of putting old wine into new bottles. For I humbly submit that the experiment spoken of is very popular just now in the industrial world, has engaged the most earnest attention of most of the leaders of the working class, and received the practically unanimous endorsement of the Labour and Socialist Press. I have waited in vain for a word of protest.

### **THE IDEA BEHIND INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM**

In the year of grace 1905 a convention of American Labour bodies was held in Chicago for the purpose of promoting a new working-class organisation on more militant and scientific lines. The result of that convention was the establishment of the Industrial Workers of the World – the first Labour organisation to organise itself with the definite ideal of taking over and holding the economic machinery of society. The means proposed to that end – and it is necessary to remember that the form of organisation adopted was primarily intended to accomplish that end, and only in the second degree as a means of industrial warfare under capitalism – was the enrolment of the working class in Unions built upon the lines of the great industries. It was the idea of the promoters of the new organisation that craft interests and technical requirements should be met by the creation of branches, that all such branches should be represented in a common executive, that all united should be members of an industrial Union, which should embrace all branches and be co-extensive with the industry, that all industrial Unions should be linked as members of one great Union, and that one membership card should cover the whole working-class organisation.

Thus was to be built up a working-class administration which should be capable of the revolutionary act of taking over society, and whose organisers and officers should in the preliminary stages of organising and fighting constantly remember, and remembering, teach, that no new order can replace the old until it is capable of performing the work of the old, and performing it more efficiently for human needs.

### **FIGHTING SPIRIT MORE THAN MASS ORGANIZATION**

As one of the earliest organisers of that body, I desire to emphasise also that as a means of creating in the working class the frame of mind necessary to the upbuilding of this new order within the old, we taught, and I have yet seen no reason to reconsider our attitude upon this matter, that the interests of one were the interests of all, and that no consideration of a contract with a section of the capitalist class absolved any section of us from the duty of taking instant action to protect other sections when said sections were in danger from the capitalist enemy. Our attitude always was that in the swiftness and unexpectedness of our action lay our chief hopes of temporary victory, and since permanent peace was an illusory hope until permanent victory was secured, temporary victories were all that need concern us. We realised that every victory gained by the working class would be followed by some capitalist development that in course of time would tend to nullify it, but that until that development was perfect the fruits of our victory would be ours to enjoy, and the resultant moral effect would be of incalculable value to the character and to the mental attitude of our class towards their rulers. It will thus be seen that in our view – and now that I am about to point the moral I may personally appropriate it and call it my point of view – the spirit,

the character, the militant spirit, the fighting character of the organisation, was of the first importance. I believe that the development of the fighting spirit is of more importance than the creation of the theoretically perfect organisation; that, indeed, the most theoretically perfect organisation may, because of its very perfection and vastness, be of the greatest possible danger to the revolutionary movement if it tends, or is used, to repress and curb the fighting spirit of comradeship in the rank and file.

### **SUCCESS OF THE SYMPATHETIC STRIKE IN 1911**

Since the establishment in America of the organisation I have just sketched, and the initiation of propaganda on the lines necessary for its purpose, we have seen in all capitalist countries, and notably in Great Britain, great efforts being made to abolish sectional division, and to unite or amalgamate kindred Unions. Many instances will arise in the minds of my readers, but I propose to take as a concrete example the National Transport Workers' Federation. Previous to the formation of this body, Great Britain was the scene of the propagandist activities of a great number of irregular and unorthodox bodies, which, taking their cue in the main from the Industrial Workers of the World, made great campaigns in favour of the new idea. Naturally their arguments were in the main directed towards emphasising the absurdity implied in one body of workers remaining at work whilst another body of workers were on strike in the same employment. As a result of this campaign, frowned upon by leading officials in Great Britain, the Seamen's strike of 1911 was conducted on, and resulted in, entirely new lines of action. The sympathetic strike sprang into being; every group of workers stood by every allied group of workers; and a great wave of effective

solidarity caught the workers in its grasp and beat and terrified the masters. Let me emphasise the point that the greatest weapon against capital was proven in those days to be the sporadic strike. It was its very sporadic nature, its swiftness and unexpectedness, that won. It was ambush, the surprise attack of our industrial army, before which the well-trained battalions of the capitalist crumpled up in panic, against which no precautions were available.

#### WEAKNESS OF THE NATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION

Since that time we have had all over these countries a great wave of enthusiasm for amalgamations, for more cohesion in the working-class organisations. In the transport industry all Unions are being linked up until the numbers now affiliated have become imposing enough to awe the casual reader and silence the cavilling objector at Trade Union meetings. But I humbly submit that, side by side with that enlargement and affiliation of organisations, there has proceeded a freezing up of the fraternal spirit of 1911; there is now, despite the amalgamations, less solidarity in the ranks of Labour than was exhibited in that year of conflict and victory.

If I could venture an analysis of the reason for this falling-off in solidarity, I would have to point out that the amalgamations and federations are being carried out in the main by officials absolutely destitute of the revolutionary spirit, and that as a consequence the methods of what should be militant organisations having the broad working-class outlook are conceived and enforced in the temper and spirit of the sectionalism those organisations were meant to destroy.

Into the new bottles of industrial organisation is being poured the old, cold wine of Craft Unionism.

The much-condemned small Unions of the past had at least this to recommend them, viz., that they were susceptible to pressure from the sudden fraternal impulses of their small membership. If their members worked side by side with scabs, or received tainted goods from places where scabs were employed, the shame was all their own, and proved frequently too great to be borne. When it did so we had the sympathetic strike and the fraternisation of the working class. But when the workers handling tainted goods, or working vessels loaded by scabs, are members of a nation-wide organisation, with branches in all great centres or ports, the sense of the personal responsibility is taken off the shoulders of each member and local officials, and the spirit of solidarity destroyed. The local

official can conscientiously order the local member to remain at work with the scab, or to handle the tainted goods, 'pending action by the General Executive'.

#### RECENT EVENTS FORETOLD IN 1914

As the General Executive cannot take action pending a meeting of delegates, and as the delegates at that meeting have to report back to their bodies, and these bodies again to meet, discuss, and then report back to the General Executive, which must meet, hear their reports, and then, perhaps, order a ballot vote of the entire membership, after which another meeting must be held to tabulate the result of the vote and transmit it to the local branches, which must meet again to receive it, the chances are, of course, a million to one that the body of workers in distress will be starved into subjection, bankrupted, or disrupted, before the leviathan organisation will allow their brothers on the spot to lift a finger or drop a tool in their aid. Readers may, perhaps, think that I am exaggerating the danger. But who will think so that remembers the vindictive fine imposed by the NUR upon its members in the North of England for taking swift action on behalf of a persecuted comrade instead of going through all this red tape whilst he was suffering? Or who will think so that knows that Dublin and Belfast members of the Irish Transport Workers' Union have been victimised ever since the end of the lock-out by the Head Line Company, whose steamers have been and are regularly coaled in British ports, and manned by Belfast and British members of the Seamen's and Firemen's Union?

#### TACTICS THAT WILL WIN

The amalgamations and federations that are being built up today are, without exception, being used in the old spirit of the worst type of sectionalism; each local Union or branch finds in the greater organisation of which it is a part a shield and excuse for refusing to respond to the call of brothers and sisters in distress, for the handling of tainted goods, for the working of scab boats. A main reason for this shameful distortion of the Greater Unionism from its true purpose is to be found in the campaign against 'sporadic strikes'.

I have no doubt but that Robert Williams, of the National Transport Workers'

Federation, is fully convinced that his articles and speeches against such strikes are and were wise; I have just a little doubt that they were the best service performed for the capitalist by any Labour leader of late years. The big strike, the vast massed battalions of Labour against the massed battalions of capital on a field every inch of which has been explored and mapped out beforehand, is seldom successful, for very obvious reasons. The sudden strike, and the sudden threat to strike suddenly, has won more for Labour than all the great Labour conflicts in history. In the Boer war the long line of communications was the weak point of the British army; in a Labour war the ground to be covered by the goods of the capitalist is his line of communication. The larger it is the better for the attacking forces of Labour. But these forces must be free to attack or refuse to attack, just as their local knowledge guides them. But, it will be argued, their action might imperil the whole organisation. Exactly so, and their inaction might imperil that working-class spirit which is more important than any organisation. Between the horns of that dilemma what can be done? In my opinion, we must recognise that the only solution of that problem is the choice of officers, local or national, from the standpoint of their responsiveness to the call for solidarity, and, having got such officials, to retain them only as long as they can show results in the amelioration of the condition of their members and the development of their Union as a weapon of class warfare.

#### ADVANCE OR RETREAT

If we develop on those lines, then the creation of a great Industrial Union, such as I have rudely sketched in my opening reminiscence, or the creation of those much more clumsy federations and amalgamations now being formed, will be of immense revolutionary value to the working class; if, on the contrary, we allow officialism of the old, narrow sectional kind to infuse their spirit into the new organisations, and to strangle these with rules suited only to a somnolent working class, then the Greater Unionism will but serve to load us with great fetters. It will but be to real Industrial Unionism what the Servile State would be to our ideal Co-operative Commonwealth.

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