
Sound Socialist Tactics

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *The International Socialist Review* [Chicago], v. 13, no. 8 (February 1913).

Socialists are practically all agreed as to the fundamental principles of their movement. But as to tactics there is wide variance among them. The matter of sound tactics, equally with the matter of sound principles, is of supreme importance. The disagreements and dissensions among Socialists relate almost wholly to tactics. The party splits which have occurred in the past have been due to the same cause, and if the party should ever divide again, which it is to be hoped it will not, it will be on the rock of tactics.

Revolutionary tactics must harmonize with revolutionary principles. We could better hope to succeed with reactionary principles and revolutionary tactics than with revolutionary principles and reactionary tactics.

The matter of tactical differences should be approached with open mind and in the spirit of tolerance. The freest discussion should be allowed. We have every element in every shade of capitalist society in our party, and we are in for a lively time at the very best before we work out these differences and settle down to a policy of united and constructive work for Socialism instead of spending so much time and energy lampooning one another.

In the matter of tactics we cannot be guided by the precedents of other countries. We have to develop our own and they must be adapted to the American people and to American conditions. I am not sure that I have the right idea about tactics; I am sure only that I appreciate their importance, that I am open to correction, and that I am ready to change whenever I find myself wrong.

It seems to me there is too much rancor and too little toleration among us in the discussion of our differences. Too often the spirit of criticism is acrid and hypercritical. Personal animosities are engendered, but

opinions remain unchanged. Let us waste as little as possible of our militant spirit upon one another. We shall need it all for our capitalist friends.

There has recently been some rather spirited discussion about a paragraph which appears in the pamphlet on *Industrial Socialism*, by William D. Haywood and Frank Bohn. The paragraph follows:

When the worker, either through experience or study of Socialism, comes to know this truth, he acts accordingly.

He retains absolutely no respect for the property 'rights' of the profit-takers. He will use any weapon which will win his fight. He knows that the present laws of property are made by and for the capitalists. Therefore he does not hesitate to break them.

The sentences which I have italicized provoked the controversy.

We have here a matter of tactics upon which a number of comrades of ability and prominence have sharply disagreed. For my own part I believe the paragraph to be entirely sound.

Certainly all Socialists, knowing how and to what end capitalist property "rights" are established, must hold such "rights" in contempt. In the *Manifesto* Marx says: "The Communist (Socialist) revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas."

As a revolutionist I can have no respect for capitalist property laws, nor the least scruple about violating them. I hold all such laws to have been enacted through chicanery, fraud, and corruption, with the sole end in view of dispossessing, robbing, and enslaving the working class. But this does not imply that I propose making an individual lawbreaker of myself and butting my head against the stone wall of existing property laws. That might be called force, but it would not

be that. It would be mere weakness and folly.

If I had the force to overthrow these despotic laws I would use it without an instant's hesitation or delay, but I haven't got it, and so I am law-abiding under protest — not from scruple — and bide my time.

Here let me say that for the same reason I am opposed to sabotage and to "direct action." I have not a bit of use for the "propaganda of the deed." These are the tactics of anarchist individualists and not of Socialist collectivists. They were developed by and belong exclusively to our anarchist friends and accord perfectly with their philosophy. These and similar measures are reactionary, not revolutionary, and they invariably have a demoralizing effect upon the following of those who practice them. If I believed in the doctrine of violence and destruction as party policy; if I regarded the class struggle as guerrilla warfare, I would join the anarchists and practice as well as preach such tactics.

It is not because these tactics involve the use of force that I am opposed to them, but because they do not. The physical forerunner is the victim of his own boomerang. The blow he strikes reacts upon himself and his followers. The force that implies power is utterly lacking, and it can never be developed by such tactics.

The foolish and misguided, zealots and fanatics, are quick to applaud and eager to employ such tactics, and the result is usually hurtful to themselves and to the cause they seek to advance.

There have been times in the past, and there are countries today where the frenzied deed of a glorious fanatic like old John Brown seems to have been inspired by Jehovah himself, but I am now dealing with the 20th Century and with the United States.

There may be, too, acute situations arising and grave emergencies occurring, with perhaps life at stake, when recourse to violence might be justified, but a great body of organized workers, such as the Socialist movement, cannot predicate its tactical procedure upon such exceptional instances.

But my chief objection to all these measures is that they do violence to the class psychology of the workers and cannot be successfully inculcated as mass doctrine. The very nature of these tactics adapts them to guerrilla warfare, to the bomb planter, the midnight assassin; and such warfare, in this country, at least, plays

directly into the hands of the enemy.

Such tactics appeal to stealth and suspicion, and cannot make for solidarity. The very teaching of sneaking and surreptitious practices has a demoralizing effect and a tendency to place those who engage in them in the category of "Black Hand" agents, dynamiters, safe-blowers, holdup men, burglars, thieves, and pick-pockets.

If sabotage and direct action, as I interpret them, were incorporated in the tactics of the Socialist Party, it would at once be the signal for all the *agents provocateurs* and police spies in the country to join the party and get busy. Every solitary one of them would be a rabid "direct actionist," and every one would safely make his "getaway" and secure his reward, a la McPartland, when anything was "pulled off" by their dupes, leaving them with their necks in the nooses.

With the sanctioning of sabotage and similar practices the Socialist Party would stand responsible for the deed of every spy or madman, the seeds of strife would be subtly sown in the ranks, mutual suspicion would be aroused, and the party would soon be torn into warring factions to the despair of the betrayed workers and the delight of their triumphant masters.

If sabotage or any other artifice of direct action could be successfully employed, it would be wholly unnecessary, as better results could be accomplished without it. To the extent that the working class has power based upon class-consciousness, force is unnecessary; to the extent that power is lacking, force can only result in harm.

I am opposed to any tactics which involve stealth, secrecy, intrigue, and necessitate acts of individual violence for their execution.

The work of the Socialist movement must all be done out in the broad open light of day. Nothing can be done by stealth that can be of any advantage to it in this country.

The workers can be emancipated only by their own collective will, the power inherent in themselves as a class, and this collective will and conquering power can only be the result of education, enlightenment and self-imposed discipline.

Sound tactics are constructive, not destructive. The collective reason of the workers repels the idea of individual violence where they are free to assert themselves by lawful and peaceable means.

The American workers are law-abiding and no amount of sneering or derision will alter that fact. Direct action will never appeal to any considerable number of them while they have the ballot and the right of industrial and political organization.

Its tactics alone have prevented the growth of the Industrial Workers of the World. Its principles of industrial unionism are sound, but its tactics are not. Sabotage repels the American worker. He is ready for the industrial union, but he is opposed to the "propaganda of the deed," and as long as the IWW adheres to its present tactics and ignores political action, or treats it with contempt by advising the workers to "strike at the ballot box with an ax," they will regard it as an anarchist organization, and it will never be more than a small fraction of the labor movement.

The sound education of the workers and their thorough organization, both economic and political, on the basis of the class struggle, must precede their emancipation. Without such education and organization they can make no substantial progress, and they will be robbed of the fruits of any temporary victory they may achieve, as they have been through all the centuries of the past.

For one, I hope to see the Socialist Party place itself squarely on record at the coming national convention against sabotage and every other form of violence and destructiveness suggested by what is known as "direct action."

It occurs to me that the Socialist Party ought to have a standing committee on tactics. The art or science of proletarian party tactics might well enlist the serious consideration of our clearest thinkers and most practical propagandists.

To return for a moment to the paragraph above quoted from the pamphlet of Haywood and Bohn. I agree with them that in their fight against capitalism the workers have a right to use any weapon that will help them to win. It should not be necessary to say that this does not mean the blackjack, the dirk, the lead-pipe or the sawed-off shotgun. The use of these weapons does not help the workers to win, but to lose, and it would be ridiculous to assume that they were in the minds of the authors when they penned that paragraph.

The sentence as it reads is sound. It speaks for itself and requires no apology. The workers will use

any weapon which will help them *win* their fight.

The most powerful and the all-sufficient weapons are the industrial union and the Socialist Party, and they are not going to commit suicide by discarding these and resorting to the slingshot, the dagger and the dynamite bomb.

Another matter of party concern is the treatment of so-called "intellectuals" in the Socialist movement. Why the term "intellectual" should be one of reproach in the Socialist Party is hard to understand, and yet there are many Socialists who sneer at a man of intellect as if he were an interloper and out of place among Socialists. For myself I am always glad to see a man of brains, of intellect, join the movement. If he comes to us in good faith he is a distinct acquisition and is entitled to all the consideration due to any other comrade.

To punish a man for having brains is rather an anomalous attitude for an educational movement. The Socialist Party, above every other, should offer a premium on brains, intellectual capacity, and attract to itself all the mental forces that can be employed to build up the Socialist movement, that it may fulfill its emancipating mission.

Of course the Socialist movement is essentially a working class movement, and I believe that as a rule party officials and representatives, and candidates for public office, should be chosen from the ranks of the workers. The intellectuals in office should be the exceptions, as they are in the rank and file.

There is sufficient ability among the workers for all official demands, and if there is not, it should be developed without further delay. It is their party, and why should it not be officered and represented by themselves?

An organization of intellectuals would not be officered and represented by wage-earners; neither should an organization of wage-earners be officered by intellectuals.

There is plenty of useful work for the intellectuals to do without holding office, and the more intellectual they are the greater can their service be to the movement. Lecturers, debaters, authors, writers, artists, cartoonists, statisticians, etc., are in demand without number, and the intellectuals can serve to far better advantage in those capacities than in official positions.

I believe, too, in rotation in office. I confess to a prejudice against officialism and a dread of bureaucracy. I am a thorough believer in the rank and file, and in *ruling* from the *bottom up* instead of *being ruled* from the top *down*. The natural tendency of officials is to become bosses. They come to imagine that they are indispensable and unconsciously shape their acts to keep themselves in office.

The officials of the Socialist Party should be its servants, and all temptation to yield to the baleful influence of officialism should be removed by constitutional limitation of tenure.

There is a tendency in some states to keep the list of locals a solemn secret. The sheep have got to be protected against the wolves. No one must know what locals there are, or who its officials, for fear they may be corrupted by outside influences. This is an effective method for herding sheep, but not a good way to raise men. If the locals must be guarded against the wolves on the outside, then some one is required to guard them, and that some one is a boss, and it is the nature of the boss to be jealous of outside influences.

If our locals and the members who compose them need the protection of secrecy, they are lacking in the essential revolutionary fiber which can be developed only in the play of the elements surrounding them, and with all the avenues of education and information, and even of miseducation and misinformation, wide open for their reception. They have got to learn to distinguish between their friends and their enemies and between what is wise and what is otherwise and until the rank and file are so educated and enlightened their weakness will sooner or later deliver them as the prey of their enemies.

Still another matter about which there has been not a little ill-natured discussion is the proposed investigation of the Kerr publishing house. I cannot help wondering what business the National Committee has making such an investigation. It would be quite as proper, in my opinion, to order an investigation of a building and loan association in which members have their savings invested.

It is true, without a doubt, that *The International Socialist Review* has published articles with which many of us disagreed, but why should it be investigated on that account? Are we Socialists who are constantly protesting against the suppression of free speech now go-

ing to set an example of what we propose doing by putting a gag on the lips of our own publications?

I don't agree with a good deal that appears in the *Review*, and I like it all the better on that account. That is the reason, in fact, why I subscribe for it and read it, and I cannot for the life of me understand why any one would want to suppress it on that account.

If the *Review* and the concern which publishes it belonged to the national party it would be different, but it does not belong to the party, and the party is in no wise responsible for it, and if I were a stockholder I should regard the action of the national committee as the sheerest impertinence and treat it accordingly.

I do not know if the house of Kerr & Co. needs investigating or not. I am satisfied that it does not, but it is none of my business.

The Kerr Company consists, as I understand it, of some 1500 stockholders, nearly all of whom are Socialists and none of whom, as far as I am advised, are feeble-minded and in need of a guardian. They have paid in all the money, they own all the stock and they are responsible for the concern; and if they want their publishing business investigated that is their affair and not the affair of the national committee of the Socialist Party.

If the object aimed at is to punish Kerr & Co. and cripple the *Review* for its advocacy of industrial unionism and for opposing pure and simple craftism, and for keeping open columns and exercising the right of free speech, then it will be found in due time that the uncalled-for investigation of the National Committee and the uncomradely spirit which prompted it will have produced the opposite effect.

I cannot close without appealing for both the industrial and political solidarity of the workers.

I thoroughly believe in economic as well as political organization, in the industrial union and in the Socialist Party.

I am an industrial unionist because I am a Socialist and a Socialist because I am an industrial unionist.

I believe in making every effort within our power to promote industrial unionism among the workers and to have them all united in one economic organization. To accomplish this I would encourage industrial independent organization, especially among the millions who have not yet been organized at all, and I

would also encourage the “boring from within” for all that can be accomplished by the industrial unionists in the craft unions.

I would have the Socialist Party recognize the historic necessity and inevitability of industrial unionism and the industrial union reciprocally recognize the Socialist Party, and so declare in the respective preambles to their constitutions.

The Socialist Party cannot be neutral on the union question. It is compelled to declare itself by the logic of evolution, and as a revolutionary party it cannot commit itself to the principles of reactionary unionism. Not only must the Socialist Party declare itself in favor of economic unionism, but the kind of unionism which alone can complement the revolutionary action of the workers on the political field.

I am opposed under all circumstances to any party alliances or affiliations with reactionary trade unions and to compromising tactics of every kind and form, excepting alone in event of some extreme emergency. While the “game of politics,” as it is understood and as it is played under capitalist rules, is as repugnant to me as it can possibly be to any one, I am a thorough believer in political organization and political action.

Political power is essential to the workers in their struggle, and they can never emancipate themselves without developing and exercising that power in the interests of their class.

It is not merely in a perfunctory way that I ad-

vocate political action, but as one who has faith in proletarian political power and in the efficacy of political propaganda as an educational force in the Socialist movement. I believe in a constructive political program and in electing all the class-conscious workers we can, especially as mayors, judges, sheriffs and as members of the state legislatures and the national Congress.

The party is now growing rapidly, and we are meeting with some of the trials which are in store for us and which will no doubt subject us to the severest tests. We need to have these trials, which are simply the fires in which we have to be tempered for the work before us.

There will be all kinds of extremists to deal with, but we have nothing to fear from them. Let them all have their day. The great body of the comrades, the rank and file, will not be misled by false teachings or deflected from the true course.

We must put forth all our efforts to control our swelling ranks by the use of wise tactics and to assimilate the accessions to our membership by means of sound education and party discipline.

The New Year has opened auspiciously for us, and we have never been in such splendid condition on the eve of a national campaign.

Let us all buckle on our armor and go forth determined to make this year mark an epoch in the social revolution of the United States.

Transcribed by Joseph B. DeNeen. Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.