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OF

New Unionism.

LECTURE BY MR. W. G. SPENCE,

Delivered in Leigh House, Sydney, N.S.W., on Sunday Night, June 12th,
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AUSTRALIAN SOCIALIST LEAGUE.

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THE ETHICS OF NEW UNIONISM.

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MR. SPENCE, who was received with round after round of applause, said:—Mr. Chairman and Fellow-workers—It is said to be a scientific axiom that all present forms take their character from those which lie behind. Throughout the whole of nature there is undoubtedly a spirit of evolution working, and working in a very definite direction. Specialising the various forms of life, adapting them to their environment. Humanity must, of course, be regarded as part of Nature, and are also influenced by this spirit of evolution. We have been placed at the very apex of the pyramid of created things. We have, by the exercise of our superior intelligence been able to control many of the forces of Nature and utilise them for our own good. We have been able, to a greater degree than any of the lower forms of life, to take advantage of co-operation, or of forming alliances for mutual benefit. In this great movement called "Trade Unionism," or the "Labor Movement," or any other term they choose to apply to it we find the same evolutionary spirit has been at work. When machinery began to be introduced we find the first great division of men into the two classes in which we find them to-day. At that time men began to be employed in groups, or bodies, and then commenced the departure from individualism and the joining together for greater self-protection. Whether you recognise it or not such was the case. Shortly afterwards, seeing the combination effected among the men, the employers began to unite and form joint stock enterprises and the vast syndicates which are so patent to us to-day. The employers recognised that large enterprises would be far more effective than smaller concerns, and the truth of that is exemplified by the power they wield in our midst to-day. As I said before the workers were employed in masses in factories and other places and thus commenced the combination of men, then and now known as "Trade Unionists." It was a complete departure from individualism. When they came under the pressure of competition and felt the grinding of the competitive system, which, unfortunately, rules over us to-day, the two parties,—employers and employés—came into conflict. It was, and is now to the interest of the employer to produce as cheaply as possible, and he naturally only employs men if by so doing he can make a profit out of the result of their labors. During the last fifty years there has been, as you know, a very rapid trend towards the displacement of men by machinery and the crushing out of smaller concerns by the larger syndicates, as they can produce much more cheaply, and by the employment of less manual labor. We find ourselves faced by an ever increasing mass of men who have no work to do although eager and willing to work. In the days of what we call the old unionism there was a certain amount of antagonism among the members. I do not propose to touch upon the history of the "old unionism," to-night. Its underlying principle was, as I have said, a departure from the individualism which previously obtained, each workman sinking his individuality for the common good of the mass. As a necessary consequence wages rose in the particular factory in which these early unionists were engaged and afterwards the movement—with its attendant increase of wages—spread rapidly to other factories and to the various organisations that employed large bodies of men. But these old unions or organisations confined their attention solely to what was called obtaining reasonable wages and hours of labor, or as good a wage as they

could get, and to a resistance of the crushing tendencies of the employers. (Cheers.) But the older unionists imbibed somewhat the spirit of the capitalist—their views were too narrow. They did not, or could not take much interest or do anything for those outside their own ranks or amongst the great masses of the unemployed. They could not and did not find work for those who were idle for want of it. The old unions confined themselves, if not solely, principally to the question of wages and hours. They refused to touch political matters at all, or have anything to do with either party in Parliament. I am, of course, referring more particularly to the features as presented in England, and whilst we have been more rapid in our progress the same conditions have obtained in these colonies, and in some cases the same conditions rule to-day. Although we have advanced rapidly we have advanced to precisely the same condition of things, and on lines exactly similar to those obtaining in older lands. We have the same faults, the same oppression, the same condition of things affecting labor. (Cheers.) Before touching on the great difference between the "new unionism," and the "old unionism" I should like to call attention to the underlying thought of the movement which brought about the change. You know its history. It is a history of conflict, of struggle, of noble self-sacrifice on the part of hundreds of men, men who have suffered fighting a noble cause. (Loud cheers.) But they came at last to realise that they were fighting on the wrong lines; and they realised that to accomplish the good they sought to achieve, they must not continue to fight on the old lines. Side by side with industrial changes there had been changes in economic thought. A great deal had been written on the subject, and I think that much credit is due to the Socialist side of the question, for their writings have undoubtedly influenced trades unionism. One of the most important features in connection with the movement to-day, and one that was patent to the mind of every thoughtful person was that whilst some of the socialistic writings had been thought to be Utopian, and not so practical as we could wish, they have become practical because they have certainly aroused the unionists, who have given a practical turn to Socialism. Matters had changed during the last few years and the unions ought to change also. Labor bodies have become federated and the employers seeing that felt alarmed because to them the federation of labor, if conducted upon the old lines, meant an attack on their self-interest. They naturally expected—as no definite statement was put forward—that labor having become strong and federated would attack the question of the cost of production, would interfere with their profits and possibly throw them over altogether. This fear we find existing all over the world to-day, and the federation of labor causes the employers to combine, and we thus have two armies drawn up and opposing each other. In the meantime there was spreading amongst unionists this idea—whether socialistic or not—that they could not effect the improvement they desired by dealing only with the mere question of hours and wages. And so comes what has been termed the "new unionism"—a unionism wide and broad in its aim, and one which will certainly be far-reaching in its effects. We find that labor has been educated and is steadily turning its attention to other methods of reform. It is that principle which distinguished the "new unionism" from the "old unionism." There is a difference in our aim which is a most noticeable feature. We are aiming now at securing an improvement by social and political reforms—and by that means alone a revolution will undoubtedly be effected in time. When I use the word revolution—do not misunderstand me—I mean a quiet one. It will be a change from one condition to another, which almost deserves the name of "revolution." I feel certain it will come about steadily and surely and rapidly if we take the proper stand, the only stand—that of common humanity. (Cheers.) Many people do not know anything of the subject, they have not studied the human family, or we should not have existing to-day the condition of things we see around us—a condition of things that we ought not to allow to exist an hour longer than we can possibly help it. I

want you to look at our social system and the evils connected with it and are created by it, and then you will better understand how far "new unionism" may be expected to bring about the desired change. We have now on the one side production on socialistic lines altogether. We have distribution on individualistic lines. You can hardly say that even; but on the lines of just what the other side chooses to give, so to speak. We have on the one side the controlling class. They hold a monopoly. They have as a class power in controlling other men. Any individual or any body of men given supreme control over his fellows is almost certain to act unjustly. And no body of men ought to be trusted with uncontrolled power over their fellows. (Cheers.) I need not reason out how it is that a class has control of the sources of production—ownership of the land, and ownership of the people practically. (Hear, hear.) All that they aim at is producing for profit. The idea is will it pay well, will it fetch anything in the market, can I make anything in the market out of it. They do not care to think that they are producing for use—their leading idea is certainly not production for use. The evil effects—and I aim dealing more with the moral side of the question—I think you will agree with me that our productive system is demoralising and degrading to the human family. (Hear, hear.) Now take the commercial ethics of this life, and does it not develop the worst side of human nature? (Hear, hear.) It develops too much of that instinct which distinguishes the savage. The savage is noted for the exercise of cunning. It is a question of what he can take, and is not that one of the faculties developed in all forms of business. Scheming, cunning, lying, and dishonesty are associated with our commercial enterprise. We have fraud perpetrated by men of intelligence who ought and do know better. I take it that the human family is inherently good. I go against that old idea of always crediting our human frailties to original sin. (Cheers.) I say that humanity is inherently good if we only let it have a chance to exercise its goodness. (Renewed cheers.) There is in commercial life a system of ethics which will not stand setting up side by side with the Decalogue. You cannot get along sometimes without telling lies. Adulteration of goods is very common. The gospel of cheapness has such a hold upon people, and the pressure of competition so keen that if you are to make your way in the commercial world, as in other walks of life, you are forced, I insist, to give way if you are to succeed. To get on you must do as other people do—or you will go down. We have surrounded our commercial men in such an entanglement that they cannot be expected to do right. I do not look at what men should do, but what it is reasonable to expect them to do under the circumstances in which they are placed. (Hear, hear.) I say that if we have a set of conditions under which it is impossible for men and women to do right we are responsible for them. We have the power to utterly change these conditions. We have control over the circumstances under which we live more than any other animal, therefore we are responsible for the conditions under which we live. Men are all struggling against each other. Men start in business and do not think about the market being already supplied by others who are only making a bare living. They think that if they can by advertising secure more custom that they are justified in doing it. What do they care for their fellows so long as they can get on? Get on is the essential submitted to us. If you do not get on you are a failure in society. These evils are produced by the system under which men deal with each other. The characters of the employers are influenced by it. On the workers' side the evils are, perhaps, more felt. We have on their side enforced idleness and poverty. Poverty with all its wretched surroundings—the most degrading thing in all the world. We have unworthy dealings, and all the discontent engendered thereby. Always crushing downwards—the man losing all self-respect as he goes. How can you expect a man to stand against the influences surrounding him. The strong stand for a time, but we have no right to put the weak in a position that will compel them to go down. We

have the evils of ignorance amongst those less fortunate than ourselves in not knowing right from wrong. We have coarseness, lack of refinement, even brutality. You cannot expect the working classes—especially those who are crushed most low—to be so polished and nice as those who have nothing else to do but study how to be polished and nice. These evils are directly attributable to that condition of society which it has set up to be over itself. The weaker men and the women suffer. Women undoubtedly suffer most. At one time it was the boast of the Anglo-Saxon race—in the ages of chivalry—that they would defend their women. To-day our sisters are shut out and degraded to the lowest of all depths, even to prostitution. Those who know most about that say that there is not one in a thousand of them who ever chose that life. They have been driven to it—driven to it for want of bread. I am charging this to the social system we have set up. It is physically and morally degrading to the human race. (Hear, hear.) It is useless to go on preaching from Sabbath to Sabbath asking men to be better. Doubtless the teaching of ministers of religion has had some effect in giving men more hope, but if the conditions of life are not changed, humanity must go down. Herein is the seriousness of the position we are in, and where the New Unionism comes in. The New Unionism is to deal with these evils in a practical manner, step by step. The New Unionism is this—production must be for use not profit. (Cheers.) It means the substitution of co-operation for competition. Competition is not necessary. Competition does not cheapen. Competition increases and does not cheapen the price of an article. Competition is not necessary to stimulate as some argue. How many men think about the question of competition, or of the sale of an article when they are working at it? Do not good tradesmen take an interest in their work for the love of it and the desire to do the work well? It is nonsense to say that if you remove competition men will not excel. How many men of genius—the men who have given us the great things—thought of profit when they were inventing them? Was it not the thought of the gratification of having accomplished something with many of them? They did not think of themselves, or of profit. Money has become a god it has been said, and all humanity is asked to fall down and worship it. The preachers of Christianity have wandered from the teaching of the lowly Nazarene so far that even in our pulpits you will hear the ring of this money question. (Hear, hear.) Some of them are afraid to denounce the sins of the wealthy class because many of them subscribe largely to the church and they dare not denounce them. They make collections and appeal for funds in the nature of a demand for services rendered. Is there anything of that kind put forward by the founder of Christianity? I think it is time that we looked into what they are doing. (Cheers.) Well, then co-operation instead of competition is one of the aims of the New Unionism; giving equality of right, equality of opportunity, and equality of justice to all men. The destruction, so to speak—and destruction is an ugly word to use, but I don't know a better one—annihilation if you like it better—the doing away of that abnormal growth the aristocracy of land possession, and setting up in its place an aristocracy of character, genius, and intellect. (Cheers.) That is the principle of the New Unionism. When I have used the term of New Unionism it is not because we are going to abandon the principles that guided men in the early days of the old unionism. Under the old Unionism men sank their individualism for the common good of their own class. New Unionism asks the masses to sink individuality for the common good, to unite on the common platform when they speak, and when they vote to vote for the reforms that are necessary. (Cheers.) Many of the unions or Labor organisations that are in existence have adopted the “new unionism” out and out, taking part in political questions and giving effect to their wishes at the ballot box. But “new unionism” means more than mere labor organisation. You have had an example during our recent elections of how men have endeavored to give effect to the proposals of the Labor

party. You have seen how those who were non-unionists—the whole body of labor in fact—followed the advice of their mouthpiece or spokesman and joined together to achieve a common end. Dealing as we are to-night with the thought underlying the “new unionism” I call attention to that fact by way of illustration. This spirit is spreading amongst men and it is not to be measured by the number of members in Labor organisations or Trades Unions. It cannot be destroyed because members of some of the unions quarrel amongst themselves and their unions fall to pieces. It will go on. It is growing and the principle actuating men, the spirit of evolution, is spreading from mind to mind, and it must have its ultimate effect. The aim of “new unionism” is a grand one, a noble one. The principle underlying and guiding it is simply the principle laid down by Him who long ago laid the foundation of a great reform—I mean the principle of love for one's fellows. (Cheers.) Those we love we will not injure. We all believe in justice, in truth, in honesty. The world to-day believes in them. The world could not get on at all unless there were reasonable men practising those great principles. If we are not able to carry them out in their entirety, if we are not able to practice what we preach because of our circumstances in life we can at least do this much—we can try to change our circumstances by exercising whatever power lies within us, and by so controlling the affairs of life remove impediments from human progress so that there will be an expansion of the good, of the noble, of the best. (Cheers.) All these are qualities to be admired in man, and mark the distinction between the higher and lower in humanity. We must try and act and react upon the nature and character of those around us, and must not judge the results from trifling incidents here and there. The chief scientists in their study of nature see much that you and I do not, and in the same way all who study the present movement carefully must see there is a great gathering of forces. I would ask you not to look at the matter in the paltry spirit of your own life-time. It must be dealt with in a far broader spirit than that. Unfortunately the old unionists, and many who to-day pretend to be “new unionists,” look at every little barrier they have not overcome, which after all prove to be questions which simply require the putting forth of a certain amount of effort. A man who wants to see an equivalent for his contribution to the cause, whether it be in the shape of money or effort it matters not, is not imbued with the true spirit of “new unionism.” New unionism is broader than mere “unionistic” theory. It recognises those who are non-unionists. An organisation of labor, constituted on the lines of “new unionism,” will have to abolish entrance fees and contributions to the lowest sum at which it can possibly carry on. (Cheers.) The aim in this case is, so to speak, to go outside a particular organisation and take in all workers, no matter what their occupation. Women workers will also be included, for the spirit of “new unionism” makes no distinction of sex. Our present social system is altogether against the weak and certainly in favor of the strong. It is to me, and must be to all strict observers, a struggle in which a person possessing the least conscience sometimes wins the race. The weak are crushed down and on their prostrate bodies rise to eminence the unprincipled men, who crush them. (Cheers.) New Unionism, with its complete organisation must achieve a greater work than the old unionism, which sought principally to maintain the rate of wages and the hours of labor. Love of our fellows should be broad enough to permit your taking in even those who are non-unionists—so long as they earn their living by labor. Remember that hereditary and environment make each one of us what we are to-day. There is naturally a strong feeling, something akin to hatred, sometimes even a revengeful feeling when we look at what the capitalists—the employers of labor—are doing. In the old days labor looked askance at the employer and felt a hatred for him. New Unionism is to-day looking beyond the employer and fixing its hatred upon the system, (cheers) which is bad not alone for the workman but for the employer—which forces the employer to act unjustly even if he did not wish

to do so. (Renewed cheers.) It is a system which produces the non-unionists and all other matters of which the unionists have had reason—and justifiable reason—to complain. We must take in the whole of them if we are to do any good, to accomplish what we desire. If asked to give a short definition of our aim I should say it is an effort to give practical effect to the teachings of the founder of Christianity, by making it possible, easy, and natural for men to act justly, truthfully, and honestly. To effect this by social and political reform we believe to be possible. We believe it is within our reach. To secure the machinery to give effect to it and to the will of the majority we simply want organisation. (Cheers.) Those who are writing and speaking are teachers, educators of the masses, but although you may hold opinions you will not accomplish anything unless you organise, unless you take some means of giving expression to your views as the opinion of an organised body, and thus exercise an influence on the legislature, and through them on the Government of the country. (Cheers.) How can we best accomplish the object conveyed in the term unionist? Simply by individuals not quarreling amongst themselves about trifles but agreeing to abide by the will of the majority. By this means, and this means alone, can you accomplish what the people want. (Cheers.) What is it that has separated many of the working classes in the past? Why the classes by whom they have been employed. Those who have ruled us in the past have failed hitherto to do anything to change our social system, or to improve the community in any way. They have done nothing to ensure that a man seeking work and willing to work shall have the right and opportunity to work. It is owing to this fact that labor, both in these colonies and in England has made and is making a demand for Parliamentary representation. Men long ago agitated for political privileges and had the right denied them. Political representation therefore is one of the first and most necessary steps. But I want to call your attention to one or two things which must be got rid of before we can be as successful as we ought to be, and desire to be, as a great party. We must get rid of all foreign matter, of all schism, of anything like sectarianism, of anything which is beside the real issue—and one which it was long ago declared the churches have failed to accomplish. There is no doubt that that is so. In saying this I claim to be a Christian, and am not saying a word against any denomination. But as an organisation the churches have failed to accomplish the desired change, and have had associated with them a great deal of narrowness, bigotry, and superstition. In taking up this new unionism we must see if we cannot get right back to the level of the founder of Christianity, imbibe some of His spirit and get rid of musty theology, for some of it is very musty. (Laughter and cheers.) And above all we must get rid of everything that prevents us becoming one family. Each one of us may hold our individual opinion or have our own faith with regard to the future, but there is very little difference of opinion regarding the present. (Cheers.) If I understand anything of the teachings of the founder of Christianity it is that He came to bring heaven upon earth—to set up the kingdom of heaven on earth. I fully believe that we can make this heaven. (Cheers.) Heaven is an ideal state. It has been pictured in various ways, and children and others have been told that there is truth in some of the pictures. Heaven is an ideal state where we escape from all the ills and sorrows that we experience here. In our present state we see many, very many cases of suffering and of trouble. We can trace its cause and see a way of removing it, and shall we sit idly by and allow the misery to go on? No, a thousand times no. Christ taught men that they could and should bring the kingdom of heaven upon earth. New unionism aims at giving practical effect to that, knowing full well that the inherent good in humanity, if it has an opportunity to expand, will rise, will become practical, and bind the people together. It is not difficult to trace the cause of the failure of the churches. They are only now awakening to the fact that there are considerations beyond the mere questions of the soul's welfare in the future world. The great ideal we have set before

us is the ideal of the lowly Nazarine. I don't want to preach to you, but I will ask you, on reading His life—and I suppose all of you have read it—did it ever strike you that it seemed possible to live as he did, and to do what he did—aye even everything he did? To me it does not seem impossible to live as He did. He went about doing good. He did not say anything in favor of thrift, but rather it seems to me He particularly exalted poverty. Those who have followed Him have told the people to be content with the lot Providence has given them, and they will get their reward in the next world. I do not believe in contentment, I believe in discontent. When a people are contented it is a dangerous sign. I believe the first step towards reform is by creating discontent. I cannot understand anybody being contented with the present condition of things, I do not care what position in life they may occupy. Surely a man has some little love for his fellow-men, and cannot satisfy his own body with a good meal without thinking of the thousands of his fellows without a meal at all. It takes good surroundings to make any of us happy. We have, all of us, several desires in our mind. Some would like one thing and some another. All admire the beautiful, whether in nature, art, or elsewhere. Without a share in many of these things how can anybody be as happy as they should be. Under this present system nobody can be contented, and nobody ought to be contented. Under the new we shall have change and progress. (Cheers.) The principles underlying this movement are those founded on eternal truth. They aim at giving exercise to the highest and very best qualities of human life and nature. Times were when we could not advance the social system as we can do to-day. It was not clear that we could have a sufficient food supply without working a considerable more number of hours than we now find necessary. We know no limit to nature's productiveness. To-day the cry is advanced that we are over-produced. Too much food, while at the same time there are too many hungry people; (cheers) too much clothes and an immense number of bare backs, the owners of which ask to be allowed to earn their own bread and clothes, and we will not let them. Are we to be satisfied with this condition of things when it is in our power to alter it? Surely our civilisation might do something better for us. (Cheers.) Humanity is divided into two classes—the employers and the employed. The employes can only work at the will of other men, and whether they are employed or not depends upon whether they can be paid. It is certain that there will be always an ever-increasing army of those who will be idle. These employers are producing on socialistic lines, and by producing for large numbers by large numbers are teaching us an important lesson. They are showing us that men can manage immense concerns, and that we can have what we desire by a simple change—the establishment of complete co-operation. (Cheers.) What we have now is one large syndicate controlling one line of industry. Now, if the people were the owners of that industry this would be all right. Those who are wealthy to-day cannot be happy or enjoy life under present conditions. Every wealthy man is afraid when he goes to bed at night that he will pick up his newspaper in the morning and find it telling him that his bank has broken or that something else has happened to deprive him of his wealth. There is no happiness anywhere—“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” All the way down through life there is this struggle which makes life not worth living. Numerous young men and women have said to me that there is nothing for them worth living for, and that they would almost as soon die. How long is this condition of things to remain with us? Is it to continue, and are we to have an eruption like that described by Donnelly in “Cæsar's Column.” Are we to have this or are we to set to work together by agreeing to sink every little difference existing amongst us, all the little “isms” that have been thrown amongst us for the express purpose of keeping us apart. Are we to agree to drop all this, and to make a united effort to get that improvement which can be effected in our social system, taking as our underlying principle what the great founder of Christianity taught to all men. You

cannot have a better or a more simple one than that. You cannot have success in any movement unless it is morally and ethically correct. This social system of ours is wrong in every stage. It is ethically and morally wrong and cannot be expected to bring any good to those concerned in it. We have to make changes and I expect those changes to come rapidly. I want to impress the necessity of people getting rid of that selfish idea that has been enforced upon us of caring only for and looking for our own happiness. Let us see if we cannot have something of the spirit of the Father of Humanity infused into our life. Surely we ought to make a stand. What is your life or my life worth, unless it has been exercised in doing something to add to the sum of happiness of the human family? Those who are conservative enough to let things run as they are of what use are they to the human family? They retard progress. There are now certain well-defined paths with which you can see the thoughts and actions of reformers are trending. Human energy has hitherto been exercised in a wrong direction. Shall we remove the obstacles and put it in the right direction. Our present system has been a pronounced failure. Political parties have failed to deal with crime, or to found a system which will make criminals better; and I do not think that you will find (under the circumstances of life surrounding us) a way to do it. In the future things must be done in the mass. There must be unity and co-operation if we are to rise and take upon ourselves the responsibility of proving that we, as an Australian people, can under the favorable conditions we have around us—setting before us the ideal of being the first people to accomplish what they are aiming at in all parts of the civilised world—to find the solution of what is called the labor problem. I think that we can do it. We can if we set our minds upon it. We can never do it if we are apathetic or careless, nor unless we are an organised party, nor if we do not drop those petty differences existing between us. (Cheers.) Let us sink every one of them to effect the changes necessary. There is thus, I think you will see, considerable difference between the new and the old unionism. It is a brighter, it is a broader, and it is an entirely new method for accomplishing these necessary reforms. It requires disinterestedness, unselfishness, and courage on the part of those who are entering into the work. They will have to put up with personal inconveniences, and stand by each other without losing faith in the result, only thinking of accomplishing their object. I am not afraid of the ultimate destiny of mankind. I believe that the movement will triumph in the long run—that we are making for a better state of things. I believe that there is an evolutionary principle at work, and that our present condition is only an incident in the great change that has been going on for the last 50 years, and possibly in the next 50 years we shall be shown the safe way to remove the obstacles we have hitherto been engaged in finding out. We have special advantages in this young country, and if we make use of them we can accomplish all we desire. We shall then have the satisfaction of having made the world a little better than it was when we came into it. A satisfaction greater and nobler than the satisfaction of a man who dies leaving his children a mass of wealth. That does not bring the satisfaction to a man that doing good for his fellow-men does. Let us have the unselfish spirit that the New Unionism teaches us—the willingness to subscribe to the will of the majority, even though we believe the majority to be wrong—to have sufficient love for our fellow-men to take them on, no matter what they may be or what position in life they may occupy. I expect to see economics advance, and I expect to see what will be really a revolution in our social system in Australia. Let us set up a system that the rest of the world will not be slow to follow. We have certainly, so far, had a good name and held our own in the world in modern social movements. I am anxious that we as a people should be able to do this great work, and that we should be able to give the rest of the world something to imitate, and they will quickly follow in our steps. (Loud cheers).