
Why Are We Not Stronger?

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *The Socialist World* [Chicago], v. 1, no. 5 (Nov. 15, 1920), pp. 17-18.

The labor movement in the United States, in proportion to the working class, is the weakest and most backward in the world. Most workers belong to something in the way of a labor union or a labor party, but there is utter lack of coherency and clarity and unity of aim and purpose when it comes to organization, economic and political, as a whole.

There has been a Socialist Party in the United States for forty-two years, during which time cargoes of literature have been distributed, thousands of speeches made, and untold sacrifices and privations in the service of the cause, and we ought to have a powerful, united, and aggressive party to show for it, but as we have not, there must be something wrong that will have to be set right before we can succeed in the future where we have failed in the past.

One reason, and in my opinion a very real one, why we have not better succeeded in organizing the workers is to be found in our intolerant attitude and ill-tempered spirit toward those of our own class and our own ultimate aim who differ from us.

Socialists, communists, anarchists, syndicalists, and IWWs spend more time and energy fighting each other than they do fighting capitalism. Each faction assumes that it is entirely right and that all others are entirely wrong, a very human way of seeing things, but far better calculated to prevent than to promote the effective organization of the workers.

There are of course and of necessity differences between these various groups of organized workers, and these differences are wholesome and result in clearer understanding and a corresponding unity and solidarity, provided they are met in the right spirit and are made the means of promoting intelligent discussion and acquiring more truth and greater knowledge, thereby building and adding up new strength to the organization.

But if such differences are allowed to provoke ill temper and ugliness of spirit, the result is disastrous if not fatal to efforts to unite the workers in a class-conscious body for a common purpose, and that is what has happened among us and kept the labor movement in a backward state in America.

Why can we not differ without denouncing each other?

Why can we not give those with whom we differ credit for being as honest as ourselves?

Why can we not reason with those with whom we disagree in a decent spirit instead of treating them with ridicule and contempt?

Personally I have equal respect for all who stand four square for the working class and for the overthrow of the capitalist system, whether they be socialists, communists, anarchists, or IWWs. I don't find it necessary to hate and denounce them because their method differs from mine. They may be right. I don't think they are, but I have been mistaken a good many times in the past and am just as apt to be so now as anyone else.

We certainly find a large measure of common ground for all these groups if we have the right spirit and seek to convince and win over by argument instead of offending and driving away by abuse.

I read this in a communist paper recently: "The first thing we must do is to smash the Socialist Party." The writer of that sentiment will find ready allies in Wall Street, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Manufacturers' Association, and I am inclined to think they would pay a round price for the job. More than likely this comrade, who now calls himself a communist, once belonged to the Socialist Party, and now he wants to smash it. His former comrades are either crooks or fools, and he must now devote his time to smashing their party.

The Socialist Party is not going to be smashed, either by the capitalists or by their allies in the labor movement. It has cost too dearly to build up, and the same indomitable spirit that built it in the face of all kinds of opposition in the past is going to sustain it against all attacks in the future.

We know that the Socialist Party is not all that it should be, but instead of deserting it we are going to do our best to make it a clean, virile, uncompromising revolutionary party of the workers in their worldwide struggle for industrial freedom.

I have been reading another communist comrade who sneers with scorn at the persons from whom and the places from where he got his first lessons in Socialism. They seem to appear utterly contemptible in his eyes since he has scaled the peaks of science and now sees it all with a clear eye and an outstanding heart. I confess I can not understand that feeling. I have not only a deep sense of gratitude but a sort of reverence for those who gave me the least help or encouragement in finding my way into the Socialist movement, and there shall never be in my hear or upon my lips a sneer for one of them, however far the movement may have left them behind.

There are some comrades who seem to think that loud talk and a raw way of putting things, with a hateful intolerance of all others, is the only real revolutionary method. They have no patience with those of milder manners and quieter ways and dub them "soft heads."

I have known those who could talk blood-raw about the revolution and denounce others of less noisy methods as lacking in "guts," to turn out cowards when the test came.

And I know comrades who are quiet and reserved in manner and speech whom I know to have the highest courage and to be ready to lay down their lives for the cause.

I hope we may have a more decent, tolerant, and truly revolutionary spirit in our attitude toward those with whom we differ in the movement, and that we may devote our whole time and energy in organizing the workers into one industrial union and one political party for the gigantic struggle which confronts them and which they must win, or remain in slavery.

The most effective way to answer those who sneer at political action is with silence when argument fails. Let them alone and stick to your work of education and organization!

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I need not say that I am heart and soul with our Russian comrades and the Soviet republic. Lenin and Trotsky are colossal historic figures and their marvelous achievements have struck terror to the ruling class and inspired the workers of all the world.

In May last when our convention met [May 1920] I regretted that the delegates did not see their way clear to apply for admission to the Third International without reservation. Since seeing the conditions laid down by G. Zinoviev, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Moscow International to the German Independent Socialists and the Independent Labour Party of Great Brit-

ain, I have changed my mind. No American party of the workers can subscribe to those conditions and live.

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I am thinking of Mollie Steimer.† A child still in her teens, the victim of such a savage sentence, seems unbelievable! Brave little girl, we shall not rest while you are there!

And I am thinking of Tom Mooney and Jim Larkin and Ben Gitlow and all the rest of the comrades shut away from the world, and I send them all love and greetings.

Another day is dawning.

† - Mollie Steimer was a 21 year old anarchist from New York City who was arrested in August 1918 along with six of her comrades for distributing two leaflets condemning allied military intervention against the Russian Revolution. Steimer was convicted of violating the Espionage Act of 1917 and sentenced to 15 years in prison and fined \$5,000. She served six months in jail in New York and another two years at the penitentiary at Jefferson City, MO, before being deported to Soviet Russia on November 24, 1921. Steimer's anarchist views caused her to run afoul of the Soviet secret police, the Cheka, who arrested her in 1922 and again in 1923. As a result of her second arrest, Steimer was expelled from Soviet Russia to Germany on Sept. 27, 1923. Steimer left Germany for France when Hitler came to power, but was arrested and sent to a concentration camp in 1940 following the Nazi occupation of France. She escaped after 6 months — completing the extraordinary trifecta of having survived imprisonment by the capitalists, the communists, and the fascists — and fled to Mexico, where she lived out the rest of her life. [Source: Stephen M. Kohn, *American Political Prisoners: Prosecution Under the Espionage and Sedition Acts*. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), pp. 133-134.]

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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