

The general strike

Ralph Chaplin

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Introduction

Thousands of thoughtful and class-conscious workers in years past have looked to the General Strike for deliverance from wage slavery. Today their hopes are stronger than ever. Their number has been increased with additional thousands who are confident that the General Strike, and the General Strike alone, can save Humanity from the torture and degradation of the continuation of capitalism and the misery and privation of its recurrent wars and depressions.

The General Strike is the child of the Labor Movement. It is Labor's natural reaction to a system of society based upon the private ownership of the machinery of production. It is Labor's ultimate attitude in the class struggle. It is Labor's answer to the problem of economic disorganization.

Logically enough the General Strike has become the rallying-cry of millions of persons the world over who favor it simply because they do not wish to see the highly industrialized modern world sink into chaos, and human society sink to the level of savage survival.

The idea of the General Strike is here to stay. It came into being with the perfection of the machine process and the centralization of control which made it possible. And it will remain as a constant challenge to capitalism as long as the machinery of production is operated for profit instead of for use.

What is the General Strike?

When Ralph Chaplin wrote this pamphlet in 1933, fascism was on the march in Europe and America. He saw the general strike not just as a broad work stoppage, but rather as the occupation of industry by the workers themselves. It was his belief then that only worker control of industry could combat fascist repression and insure world peace.

This conception of the general strike influenced the stay-in strikes of the '30s here and was modified by Japanese workers after World War II when they occupied the industries to make sure they were kept running. More recently, in the 1980s, workers in Bolivia, the Phillipines, Poland and South Africa have militantly taken up the tactic. It remains to be applied on a mass level once and for all to do away with the dangerous foolishness of private or State ownership of production. It is an idea both revolutionary and constructive, with a tremendous future.

Current IWW literature urges that workers the world over need to reach an understanding among ourselves as to what we will make, where we will ship it, and how we will distribute it in order to make optimal use of our skills and Earth's productive resources without either raping the Earth or making slaves of her people.

Why The General Strike?

Every intelligent person now realizes that there is something radically wrong with the social system under which we are living. Everyone, excepting the beneficiaries of this system, agrees that something ought to be done about it. The trouble is that people at present seem unable to agree on any common program of action. Some accept their unhappy lot with a patience and fortitude worthy of a better cause, others theorize ineffectually and do little, while still others complain bitterly and strike out blindly. Nearly everyone rushes hither and thither seeking escape but without having any clear-cut objective in view. Considering the control of the press and all media of misinformation and propaganda by the present ruling class this situation is not to be wondered at.

Let us examine briefly the things people in general are saying and doing about the desperate situation now confronting society: One group says: "Let us be patient until pressure of public opinion brings about a change or at least a betterment of conditions." Another group says: "As long as we have the ballot let us use political action to bring about whatever changes are necessary." Still another group states: "We cannot wait any longer. Only a violent upheaval ... armed insurrection!"

These groups, regardless of their differences of opinion, are composed of men and women who have given some thought and study to the subject. They deserve credit for trying to find a solution for the baffling problem confronting them. No matter how mistaken they may be their efforts are at least directed toward making the world a fit place to live in. Unfortunately a majority of the population have not gone this far. The majority still lives and suffers in a condition of unthinking bewilderment. They simply do not know what it is all about. Just as they have done, for ages past, they are content to work like robots or starve like dumb beasts without daring to organize to put a stop to the system which is crushing them. And, what is worse they are actually misled into supporting this system.

Economic Illness, Economic Cure

But there is still another and far more significant group. This group represents the viewpoint of the awakened and class-conscious working class. Its opposition to the present order is unalterable and its methods and objective distinctly those of the world's revolutionary proletariat. This group takes the position that, in the face of the present disintegration of the profit or wage system, public opinion, political action and armed insurrection are too unweildly, too uncertain and too unscientific to serve in so great an emergency. This group advocates a General Strike of the world's army of production and its managerial staff as the means of putting an end to capitalism, and inaugurating in its place an era of scientific industrialism and industrial democracy.

The argument for the General Strike is based on the persistent and very logical working class conviction that the ruling class will refuse to permit itself to be dispossessed by any power weaker than its own and that public opinion, political action and insurrection therefore will not be permitted to be developed or used to any appreciable extent. It is further based on the firm belief that Labor alone can save the world from chaos during and following the period of transition. As long as the production of goods under any system depends on the disciplined solidarity of the producing class it is evident that this solidarity alone is capable of stopping the operations of the old order or of starting and continuing those of the new.

Public Opinion

In this sense the General Strike is not only the hope of Labor; it is the hope of the human race. It is the one method which will be found trust-worthy when all other methods fail. If it is true, as many believe, that the economic maladjustments of modern society can be remedied only be economic measures, then the General Strike will become increasingly important with every passing day. The necessity of the collective ownership and democratic operation of socially necessary machinery is now conceded by technician, economist, student and class-conscious worker alike. There is diversity of opinion as to how the change is to be made, but there is no lack of unanimity as to the advisability of the change. In this regard the program of the General Strike is too important not to be seriously considered.

As a matter of fact any power less potent than that of a General Strike is bound to be of doubtful efficacy. Public opinion in America at its best is merely a means of registering the disapproval or indignation of an intelligent minority. At its worst it is all that the Powers that Be could expect of it – mass hysteria and mob violence to be directed at will by those affluent enough to buy it on the market like any other commodity. Any public opinion which ignores the basic fact of the class struggle is bound to be a hypocritical gesture. In this regard the liberals are among the worst offenders. The weak cry of the conventional liberal for peace in a peaceless world is one of the most convincing evidences of the innate sterility of the liberal attitude. Due to their hopelessly restricted outlook these middle class muddlers are unable to see the inevitability of struggle and strife as long as society is divided into two classes with irreconcilable interests.

Reformers

Unless the class struggle is used as a key, human history will remain a matter of guesswork. Unless the evolution of society is studied in the light of social science, social changes will remain inexplicable. How much clearer and less confusing is the position of the Industrial Workers of the World as expressed in its Preamble,

“The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among the millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class have all the good things in life.”

This is submitted as a clear-cut statement of undeniable fact.

Reformers of all types are and must be primarily concerned with the patching up of the decayed and historically unjustifiable capitalist system. They are unable to see society as a process of change under economic pressure — a continuous evolution from one stage of development to another, based on the iron law of economic determinism. Under chattel slavery or serfdom these myopic gentlemen would have believed as they do now under capitalism that the existing system was permanent, preordained and historically unassailable. To them riches and poverty are not the result of definable and remediable social maladjustments but the normal condition of human life. The invention of labor-saving, profit increasing machinery, as they see it, was not a part of an evolutionary process; they prefer to believe it was merely a convenient and very profitable accident. They are childishly amazed that their right to monopolize the earth and her resources should ever be contested. There are even authors, editors and professors who support them in this fantastic illusion. On this point the position of the I.W.W. is as startling as it is scientifically sound:

“Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system.”

If any liberal is capable of seeing that far he is already cured of his liberalism.

Public opinion being largely at the mercy of the predatory interests through their control of the press, radio, etc., is therefore largely out of the question as a means of effecting fundamental social change. Even the unusual program and personality of Ghandi would be helpless in the face of the private control of public opinion which exists in the U.S.A. Within a fortnight the mild-mannered Mahatma would be heaved into the hoosegow charged with planting a bomb or engineering a pay-roll robbery. Such things have happened before with the public being far from unconvinced.

And so the capitalist control of the machinery of publicity coupled with the economic ignorance of the much divided and long misled masses makes public opinion as the sole method of

ending the nightmare of capitalism somewhat remote. Unless crystallized into definite and determined action of some sort or other, about all we can expect from public opinion is the registering of belated and somewhat pathetic disapproval.

Politicos

Political action as a method of obtaining control of the machinery of production seems also peculiarly unconvincing. Only the most naive of politically-minded revolutionists believes that the ballot or constitutional amendments will induce the Vested Interests to give over control and title to the privately owned machinery of production. It is manifestly absurd to expect the class which has stained the pages of history red in countless labor struggles to give over complete control because the electorate (whom they despise) have seen fit to demand it. The parasite class of the U.S.A. can be relied upon not to relinquish their sacrosanct rights to 'property' until they are confronted with a power greater than that which they have at their command. Anything less will be scoffed at.

What is more probable, in the light of past experience, than their capitulation is that the right of suffrage will be revoked or curtailed the moment it threatens to be used for any purpose other than the customary horse-swapping. Even with the menace of the ever-present potential fascist dictatorship removed, there is little reason to believe that the rich will ever hand over their property to the poor just because the poor have decided to vote for it.

Insurrectos

The program of armed insurrection is open to as many angles of criticism as that of political action. First of all the workers as a whole are not only unarmed, but they are untrained in the use of arms. Twelve airplanes can destroy a city and it is quite unlikely that a city of armed workers could control even so small a force of capitalist mercenaries. The technique of modern warfare has made the rifle and the side-arm, and even grenades and machine guns obsolete in the face of tanks, poison gas, planes and heavy artillery. The advocacy of armed insurrection is fatally misleading because it induces workers to believe that what was done in a backward country can be duplicated in a thoroughly modern one. In America the chances of mobs defeating highly trained troops are anything but even. Then there is the danger of premature revolution precipitated by fanatics or stool pigeons.

The advocacy of armed insurrection is misleading also because most of its protagonists, being politically minded and politically-trained, are more determined to capture State power than to capture the industries. The politician is utterly incapable of thinking in terms of industry. He is incompetent either to control or direct industrial processes. In a country like the U.S.A. with 48 state and hundreds of municipal and county capitals in addition to the federal capital in Washington — all adequately guarded — the problem is almost hopelessly complicated. At the worst an attempt at armed uprising would result in a series of unprecedented massacres, at best in an overtowering and very stupid bureaucracy or an equally stupid and far more cruel dictatorship of politicians.

It is far more probable that neither the ballots of the politicians nor the bullets of the insurrectos will ever have an opportunity to 'get to first base.' With the final struggle impending it is very probable that all weapons save that of economic action will have been taken out of their hands. For this reason it is more necessary for Labor to study and prepare itself for the General Strike than to trust its fortunes to either ballots or bullets as a sole means of effecting its deliverance from the toils of wage slavery.

Industrial Solidarity

The General Strike has allied in its service thinkers and men of action of many different schools of thought. For over a quarter of a century the Industrial Workers of the World have consistently advocated the General Strike as Labor's mightiest weapon in the class struggle.

At the present time there is scarcely a Socialist, or Communist Party or Libertarian group anywhere in the world which does not contain minorities, at least that are frank in admitting that the class struggle is largely an industrial struggle and that the final victory must be won by industrial instead of political methods. The many defeats of politically powerful Socialist movements in Europe in the face of war and dictatorship have convinced them of the inadequacy of political action, the futility of violence and of the irresistible logic and power of the General Strike.

It looks like a far cry from Bill Haywood to Thorsten Veblen, yet the non-conformist labor leader and suave and erudite professor meet on common ground in advocating the General Strike.

Not only is it true that Professor Veblen is in perfect accord with the industrial philosophy, program and methods of the I.W.W. in regard to the General Strike, but the preponderance of competent technological opinion of America favors that viewpoint also. The advanced technician has learned from experience to look upon the General Strike with favor. He sees in it the quickest and most dependable method of keeping the vital processes of production and transportation unimpaired during the impending breakdown of the system of production for profit.

Firm and Unshakable

The General Strike, compared with the transient ameliorative slogans and platforms of political parties is as firm and unshakeable as the Rocky Mountains. It is as basic as the instinct to live and as fundamental as industry. All the panaceas and nostrums of the politician and labor union reformer sound shallow and meaningless when considered side by side with industrial action of such magnitude and possibilities.

The politician who seeks to pervert the General Strike into a mere adjunct to a political party is like the tail trying to wag the dog. The logical and legitimate objective of the General Strike is the abolition of capitalism — not reform or political trading of any sort. The General Strike is not the toy of ambitious politicians. It is the red rainbow across the sky of industrial desperation. It is a permanent warning to politicians to keep their promises, to Authority to be careful and to dictators to disappear. The General Strike is Labor's life insurance against betrayal.

Nothing can be more logical than that the General Strike offers a program which is excellent neutral common meeting ground for the two and seventy warring sects of the Labor movement.

If the time ever comes when the organized working class is capable of outgrowing or putting aside the ancient prejudices of political thought, the General Strike will be welcomed for what it is — Labor's supreme weapon for Labor's supreme struggle.

There has never been a major labor struggle anywhere in the world in which the General Strike was not discussed and there has never been a labor union anywhere which has not at one time or another ardently desired to use it in the never-ending struggle against corporate greed and economic injustice.

Direct Action is Instinctive

The interests of the workers and employers are diametrically opposed and each side uses such weapons in the class struggle as are suitable for their purposes. The absentee owners of the industry, unlike the middle class, are too smart to take the politician seriously. And in this respect they are far wiser than many of the workers.

The real capitalists have a contempt for the politician and use him merely as a tool. Being rooted in industry by reason of ownership and deriving their incomes from the surplus value sweated from the hides of their wage slaves they tolerate no intermediaries in the struggle between the workers and themselves. If, for instance, they wish to cut wages, lengthen the hours of the work day or employ women and children in the place of men, they just go ahead and do it. They do not call upon a politician to help them. They do not have to. Every time they discipline, discharge or lay off a bunch of workers the employers are using direct action. Every time the black-list or spy system is used on the job, every time scabs, strike-breakers or gun-thugs are used, every time the speed-up system, poor conditions, long hours and low wages are enforced the employers are using industrial action against their slaves.

A depression is nothing but a lockout against labor. The owners of the industries simply close up shop and cease operations because they can no longer get their customary profits. And all the laws and politicians in the world, or all the armies in the world, could not force them to start up again unless it would pay them to do so. Business is business. The employing class knows full well what industrial power means. They use it all the time in the form of merciless lockouts, strikes and sabotage against labor. But, they are decidedly unwilling to have labor retaliate in kind.

Their defense is wide open only at one point: they get their profits out of the hides of the workers and no place else. And if the workers by a “conscientious withdrawal of efficiency” refuse to be exploited beyond a certain point or refuse to be exploited at all, the exploiters can do little. Their machinery will produce neither profits nor anything else until it is oiled with the sweat of human labor. They fear the General Strike more than anything on earth because they know that the General Strike would in reality be a general lockout — the end of the present dominating class. Against this mighty industrial force they have neither cunning nor power to defend themselves.

The Scissorsbill Worker

But they do have the cunning and the power to fool and mislead the workers and to keep the workers' forces divided so that united action is difficult of attainment. Due to capitalist control of the press, radio and avenues of publicity and education, the workers are effectively denied the right to call their minds their own. In fact the scissorsbill workers have but little in their heads which they can call their own. Their minds belong to the last editor, speaker or politician who filled the aching void with insidious poison or anti-proletarian misinformation. Such workers not only play the sucker end in the shell game of capitalism, but they also are too dumb and blind to figure out what has happened when things go wrong. That is why they are called "scissorsbills."

But, no matter how they suffer from insecurity and privation under capitalism this kind of worker can do nothing for their own interests until they learn to think for themselves. If you are a wage-slave with a capitalist mind, or a decaying middle class mind you will no doubt scratch your head and wonder what the General Strike can possibly mean to you. At first you will not like the idea. You will probably figure that it means turning upside down all the things you had respect for and had confidence in.

The Rebel Worker

But the class conscious worker is different. He has discarded the capitalist prejudices and submissiveness to exploitation and lies. He has shed his middle class faith in both politicians and the efficacy of political action. He knows what is wrong with the world and knows just what ought to be done to put an end to that wrong. He is no longer apathetic or indifferent to his class interests. He can no longer be fooled. He realizes that he, as a member of the working class, is rooted in industry and must unite and make common cause with all other workers in industry, and become an eager active fighter in the struggle to free the world from the age-long curse of social parasitism. He knows what the word strike means and does not have to be told that it is his strongest and surest weapon.

Rebel workers who have been drilled, disciplined and hardened in the class struggle recognize instinctively that the strike is labor's natural weapon. They know what industrial power is and know how to use it. They have been forced to use it all their lives in little things and are willing to use it for bigger things — for everything. They have learned from experience that delegating their power into the hands of politicians is more likely to result in disappointment and betrayal than it is in profit to themselves. They have learned that even in their unions they must have real democracy in order to keep their officials straight. In the class war they are convinced that the strike is the thing.

Labor's Natural Weapon

The logic is simple. If wages are too low to meet the needs of life, if the hours of labor are too long or working conditions intolerable, the thing to do is not call some witch-doctor of a politician, but simply quit work in sufficient numbers and with sufficient solidarity to force a shut-down of operations until the evils are remedied.

Every workingman and woman knows these things to be true. They do not have to read about a strike in books or have it explained to them by a professor. When the time comes to strike they strike. And no one can convince them that there is anything else left to do but strike. Workers as a rule do not take politics very seriously unless they are paid to vote, which is often the case, or unless they are intimidated and herded to the polls by racketeering ward-healers in the interests of a corrupt political machine.

As a rule they vote just as they would bet on a prize fight — to see if they can pick a winner. But they do take striking seriously. And when it becomes plain to the workers that they can put an end to the interminable misery and uncertainty of capitalism by means of a big strike just as easily as they defeated a wage-cut with a small one they will strike with the same vigor and the same determination.

And this is the very type of mind which the advanced development of capitalism is forcing upon them. Strikes have a way of becoming bigger with each passing year. The workers' very association with productive industry suggests and controls the methods they must use in industrial struggle. Like their employers they are forced by their surroundings to think in terms of direct action. The strike grows in power and scope. The strike is Labor's natural weapon and the centralization of control in industry makes the prospect of a General Strike more than a mere possibility.

Webster defines the word 'weapon' as, "any instrument of offense or defense." Surely the machinery of production is capable of being used for offense and defense both by the employing and the working class. Every strike, every lockout proves that the control and operation of modern machinery has developed a new technique of warfare as well as the most powerful weapons the world has ever known. We are trying to show that control of this machinery is the weapon which gives the employing class dominion over all the world, and that use of this machinery gives the working class ultimate power over the so-called owners.

The invention of gunpowder altered the course of human history and so did the steam engine, airplane and radio. Military science concedes that the factory behind the lines is as important as the human cannon-fodder in the trenches for the winning of a war. God is no longer on the side of the strongest battalions, as Napoleon said. He is now on the side of the most perfectly organized industries. Workers should keep in mind that the real weapons of the machine age are the machines themselves.

It has frequently been stated that in the next war there will be no non-combatants. This is but another way of saying that the machine is as potent a weapon as the cannon. Military forces are worse than useless unless they are supplied with food, supplies and transportation. Both in

warfare and industry the individual counts less and the mass more. Individual power is nothing, collective power, everything. An army in battle that is not organized is merely a mob. Workers in industry who are not organized are in the same category. They must be organized by their technical directors and foremen in order to produce efficiently. They must organize themselves into industrial unions, just as they are grouped in the industries, if they ever hope to use the weapon of economic power in their own behalf.

The day of the small war or the small strike is gone forever. Labor, without organization and disciplined solidarity, without unity and singleness of purpose must of necessity remain in its traditional rut. Labor cannot emancipate itself until it learns to use the mighty weapons which contact with the machinery of production has placed in its hands.

Revolutions, Old and New

The onward march of the machine process has not only changed the method and tactics of warfare, it has also changed our concept of the methods and tactics of revolution. It has done this by making old weapons obsolete and by making new weapons available. Warfare used to be an art; now it is an industry. The ancient art of arms is now practiced chiefly for sport. Nowadays a nation does not settle down to the grim business of war until the wheels of industry start turning.

The onward march of the machine process has completely changed our concept of the methods and tactics of revolution. Modern airplanes, poison and incendiary gas, artillery and machine guns in the hands of highly trained specialists have put the unarmed and practically untrained worker at a decided disadvantage in the matter of military combat. But even if the odds were equal it would be an act of folly for workers in any highly industrialized country to take as their models the classical revolutions of 1848, the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, or, even Russia. Labor's power has been transferred from the street to the industry. Job action has displaced the outpouring of the people and the picket line the barricades. The supreme act of the present revolution will not be the raising of the red flag over the old town hall, but rather the continued and orderly operation of the machinery of production, transportation and exchange by the industrial workers functioning just as they function now; only involving a complete lockout of the parasite class and its upholders. The General Strike to break the final hold of the Parasites in Industry!

This is the modern alignment in the world-wide struggle of the working class to free itself from the curse of wage slavery and exploitation. The revolution of our day will be an industrial struggle and the weapons, to be effective, must be industrial weapons.

The Point of Production

Cannons, airplanes, submarines, mines and machine guns are designed for the use of capitalist class mercenaries. Such weapons are hardly suitable for the modern economic struggle to determine whether the workers or the parasites shall control industry. Here the fight takes place at the point of production and the workers have this one big advantage in the struggle: they are the producing army of industry. The machines are utterly valueless without the brawn and brain of the men who tend them.

The workers are stationed strategically in industry. Unlike the profit-grabbing “owners” they are an indispensable part of the industrial process. Workers are at the machines because they are needed to keep those machines in operation. By sheer force of numbers they already have possession of the industries. They are trained in the use of the machinery of production, transportation and exchange, upon which all the devices of warfare are dependent. In addition to this the workers’ cause, having for its objective the extension of human happiness, has the approval of all right thinking people as compared with the cause of the Kept Class which of necessity can have no other objective save that of the continuation of social parasitism. The workers’ power is greater therefore than the power of the capitalist class and its war-like mercenaries.

Capitalism can continue only so long as the working class ignorantly gives its consent and approval. The exploitation of the many by the few can continue only so long as the many do not know any better than to submit to exploitation. This approval or disapproval can nowhere be expressed so forcibly as in industry where the exploitation takes place. The General Strike will therefore be Labor’s economic rejection of its economic enslavement.

Individually under capitalism the wage worker is weaponless. If he has a job and doesn’t like it he can quit. If he doesn’t have a job he can crawl into an alley and die of starvation. Also he is free to drink himself to death or to take poison or end it all with a bullet, thus doing the master class a favor. Any other private war or revolt of his own against the system is generally classified somewhere between the meaning of the two words, ‘misdemeanor’ and ‘felony.’

The hope of the modern wage slave is in numbers. In class warfare only collective weapons count. He can have strength himself only by combining his individual strength with the massed strength of his fellow workers in industry. The class struggle demands class weapons. Fortunately his position in class society has forced the wage slave to think in terms of ‘we’ instead of terms of ‘I.’

Fighting Attitudes

The modern wage-slave has been trained to think of power in terms of numbers. In contrast to the craftsmen of old times, whose outlook was of necessity limited to that of the individual or the craft, the industrial worker of today is forced to view his troubles from the standpoint of the industry in which he is employed. If he has intelligence at all he can see at once that his personal problem in industry is identically the same as the thousands of workers who are employed in the same plant. Instinctively, when confronted with the greed and ferocity of the exploiting class he thinks not in terms of voting, shooting, bombing and bayoneting (as his masters do), but in terms of striking.

This was true in the beginning when industry was small and it is true today. The only difference is that it is more difficult and takes longer to communicate the impulse of motion to a large object than to a small object. A small strike in the early days of capitalism was a comparatively simple thing. Any strike today under super-capitalism is bound to be bigger and more complicated. The strike impulse, instead of being communicated to dozens or hundreds of men, is communicated to thousands or hundreds of thousands. This impulse, due to the checks and controls encouraged by the employers, may not always succeed in putting the large mass into action. But the impulse is always there and, in the end, large strikes are as inevitable as small strikes ever were.

Job Consciousness and Class Consciousness

From job consciousness to class consciousness, from job action to industrial action, from the job strike to the General Strike is only a matter of degree. Every strike under modern industrial condition, is a General Strike in embryo. Even the proposed decentralization of industry will merely alter the tactics and strategy of the General Strike. It will in no sense do away with the will of the workers to use the strike as a weapon of ever increasing importance in the class struggle. On the other hand it will weaken the position of the master class by giving them perhaps a dozen heavily picketed scab plants, where they now have but one, to be guarded by their limited army of mercenaries when the great struggle is finally under way.

Regardless of how much political dissatisfaction may exist at any given time the worker's bed-rock complaint against capitalism will continue to be economic. He is robbed at the point of production and at the point of production he must fight against continued exploitation. If it can be shown that anything at all can be done by means of political action to make the workers' struggle easier so much the better. But workers must not delude themselves about the efficacy of political action. No matter how red they vote on election day or whom they elect to office they will discover that their power struggle is but the shadow of their struggle in industry.

The danger of overstressing the importance of political action lies in the fact that the workers are thereby led to trust someone else (usually not a member of the working class) to do something for them which, with a little understanding and determination, they could have done a whole lot easier by themselves — and without the danger of betrayal. Confidence in political action not only robs the worker of the initiative for independent action, it also leads him into that state of mind where he is willing to exchange one kind of dictatorship for another. The ultimate aim of the General Strike is not to substitute for the yoke of capitalism, the yoke of the red republican [i.e. state communist. — editor], the fascist, the militarist — or any other yoke. The General Strike can just as well be used by the workers to institute real industrial freedom and democracy and to do away with all yokes save that of necessary social labor which is in the common obligation of everybody born into the world.

Evolution of Industrial Power

In the beginning of the capitalist era the craftsmen were hired either individually or in small groups by the individual employer or partnership. At that time there was no vast and highly specialized industries such as exist today. Neither were there centralized ownership and control of entire industries by a handful of plutocrats operating through interlocking directorates such as we know at present. The plant was a small plant, the boss a small boss and the strike, of necessity, a small strike.

But the small plants did not stay small. With the growth of population and the ripening of the capitalist system they became bigger and bigger. They were merged and consolidated under pressure of economic necessity. They became vast industries. The small shop became a factory, the weaving room a textile mill, the village smithy a foundry. Pittsburgh, Chicago and Detroit arose in all their dismal might and the tentacles of Wall Street reached to the remotest corners of the land. All the while there were fewer and fewer employers and vaster aggregations of wage-slaves. The actual direction and management of industry passed from the absentee owner to the hired technician and both technician and worker toiled to satisfy the insatiable greed for profits of the entrepreneur and the absentee parasite class.

Of course, it was not as simple as it appears but, in a general way, strikes became larger and the industrial power of the working class proportionately greater. The line-up in the class struggle was no longer between the small employer and the small group of workers but between workers in entire industrial areas and numerically smaller but infinitely more powerful corporations. The mines, mills and factories spread like a plague of vast prisons over the land. And the day of the small strike or small union was gone forever.

All this would have been well if the conscious power of the working class had grown in proportion to the growth of industry. Machinery did not perceptibly lift the burden of toil from the shoulders of the working class; it simply increased the profits of the parasite owners. The grievances of the wage-slaves became greater and their strikes bigger and ever more bitterly contested.

In capitalist society the acceleration of the machine process not only changes the way men are grouped together in order to work, it also changes the way they group themselves in order to fight. In each country workers react to the class struggle according to the maturity or immaturity of the machine process in that country. This accounts for the fact that combative proletarian tactics suitable for instance to a comparatively backward land like Russia, are of little value to workers under a highly advanced industrial system like the one prevailing in North America. This also explains why the I.W.W. — the world's outstanding exponent of revolutionary industrial unionism — originated in the U.S.A. where capitalism had reached its most mature and perfect form.

The purpose of industrial unionism is to give the working class the greatest possible organized power in industry. Unquestionably the General Strike, either on or off the job, is the most perfect manifestation of this power. If the craft unions of today are examined in regard to their adapt-

ability to this end it will put the revolutionary industrial union movement in an entirely new light. Also it will reveal clearly the shortcomings of conventional unionism in general and the craft union movement in particular. After all, the full measure of power is the acid test of any labor organization.

A cursory glance at the craft union movement will reveal the fact that it is constructed in such a way as to divide rather than to unify the forces of labor. The craft union is not designed to enable labor to use its full power. This type of union came into existence during the period of industrial evolution known as small production when the tools of the craft and the skill of the craftsman were important things. In those days the organized power of the tradesman consisted in his having monopoly on the skill necessary to make the tools of his trade industrially productive. The withdrawal of this skill during periods of strikes was all that was necessary to force the old-time employer of labor to terms. Thus it happened that the craft union was organized around the, then important, tools of the tradesmen.

Tools and Skills Obsolete

But all this has been changed. The onward march of the machine process has to a large extent made both tools and skill unnecessary. This great advance in technical development has made the old fashioned trades union unable to cope with modern conditions. Craft unions still carry on as a matter of habit, it is true, but they are anachronisms in this modern world. Some of them merely serve as pie-cards for the tired business men who are their officials and all such unions serve more or less as props of the existing order. But they are not unions in the modern sense at all. They are merely the shells of once useful unions operating to secure advantages for a few favored groups of workers without regard to the interests of the working class as a whole. They are organized within the capitalist system which they have been taught to take for granted, and they have no thought or program of anything beyond this system.

In relation to the manifest weakness of the trade union structure and concept the I.W.W. Preamble points out with telling emphasis:

“We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trades unions unable to cope with the ever growing power of the employing class. The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping to defeat one another in wage wars. Moreover the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the workers have interests in common with their employers.”

Labor's Problem is Industrial, Not Craft

Labor's problem today is not a craft but an industrial problem. A labor union at the present time, to be an effectual instrument of offense and defense, must conform to the structure of modern industry. It must be industrial rather than craft in form. But the craft unions have not kept pace with the needs of a changing world. They have very largely remained just where they were in the beginning. Far from being the helpful fighting instruments they were in the old days, they have now become merely a further means of effecting the enslavement of the class whose interests they are supposed to serve.

A General Strike of craft unions is an unthinkable impossibility. Being organized for the sole purpose of enabling a few groups of workers to "get by" under capitalism, they lack both the form and the spirit necessary to make possible united action for a common objective against a common foe. For this reason, as organized today, they would be of very doubtful help to any unified effort of the working class to free itself from wage slavery by industrial means. The modern industrial struggle demands modern industrial weapons. And in this regard the craft union is as obsolete as the dodo. Workers who conceive of the final struggle for emancipation in terms of industrial power will have to look elsewhere for an organizational form more suitable for this purpose.

The so-called independent industrial unions are in the same category. It is true their rather loose industrial structure makes it possible for them to think of their union in terms of a given industry. But, as in the case of the U.M.W. of A. [United Mine Workers of America] and other similar unions, they are divided into districts if not in crafts and are tied down by contracts which make it impossible for them to act in unison. In no case is there evidence of any attempt or desire on their part to ally themselves for the purposes of solidarity with transport or other workers on One Big Union lines. Organized railroad, clothing and many other workers in the U.S.A. are similarly bound, similarly divided and similarly unable to get together for united action of any sort.

As far as the interests of Labor are concerned these steps must be in the right direction. They must not only be distinctly industrial, they must also be unquestionably revolutionary.

"Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,' we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, Abolition of the wage system."

So states the I.W.W. Preamble. And in this historic slogan is found the source of the strength and inspiration of the organized industrial workers of all the world.

Political Parties and the General Strike

Working class political parties, while not unanimous in endorsing the General Strike, are frank in admitting the need for economic power in any program of revolutionary reconstruction. Socialists and Communists alike seem to recognize the importance of industrial unionism but they don't do much about it. They can't. Political parties are not organized that way.

On more than one occasion however, particularly in Europe, both Socialists and Communists have appealed to the workers for a General Strike. This is a thing which is more than likely to happen again. The trouble is that these organizations, being political parties and not labor unions, lack the machinery to put a General Strike into effect. After all other measures fail they issue frantic appeals for what they should have thought about in the first place — industrial solidarity. Usually they are forced to appeal to more or less unsympathetic conservative unions with which their contact has been largely nominal. Such unions, neither in structure nor spirit were designed to respond effectively to such demand.

A planned and consciously modern structure is as necessary for the labor union as is a planned economy for society as a whole. To expect class action from a trades union is at least as foolish as to expect revolutionary planks in a conservative party platform. This haphazard and hit-or-miss method of making eleventh-hour appeals for a General Strike does not indicate the strongest possible confidence in the efficacy of political action. The efforts of the politically-minded Socialists and Communists of Germany in 1932 to call a General Strike in order to forestall Fascism is an example in point. After 1914 they should have known better and should, long since, have prepared for such an emergency by forgetting about the game of politics long enough to build up a powerful industrial movement along One Big Union lines. Then the story would have been vastly different from what it is today.

The I.W.W. from its inception has held before the workers the goal of industrial democracy to be obtained by means of the General Strike. The Preamble, of which hundreds of millions of copies have been circulated, states in unmistakable terms:

“These conditions can be changed and the interests of the working class upheld only by an organization formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to one an injury to all.”

Has ever a statement appeared indicating more clearly the organic interdependence, unity and potential power of the world's producers?

In spite of certain misleading surface similarities, which are unduly stressed by shallow observers, the European anarcho-syndicalist movement and the I.W.W. differ considerably in more than one particular. This was made inevitable by reason of the fact that the I.W.W. was the result of a later and more mature period of industrial development.

This accounts for the fact that European Syndicalism, unlike the I.W.W., is not organized into One Big Union on the basis of perfectly co-ordinated, centralized industrial departments. It also

accounts for the fact that the form of the I.W.W. is designed to serve not only as a powerful combative force in the everyday class struggle, but also as the structure of the new society both as regards production and administration. Incidentally the I.W.W. concept of the General Strike differs almost as much from that of the anarcho-syndicalist as from that of the political or craft unionist. In form, structure and objective, the I.W.W. is more all-sufficient, more mature and more modern than any of its anarcho-syndicalist predecessors.

Technicians and the I.W.W.

It may be objected that the I.W.W. has not contacted and co-operated with the technicians to the extent that the European Syndicalists have done. If this is true at all it is due not to any lack of appreciation of the importance of the technician in the industrial organism but rather the fact that the I.W.W. has been embattled in the American class struggle to an extent which has made sustained contact difficult.

The I.W.W. has always held the technician as a vitally necessary member of the producing class. He is indispensable to any program of fundamental economic reconstruction. His place, in the One Big Union Chart, corresponds to his place and his importance in industry. The I.W.W. conceives of Industrial Democracy as the technological managerial forces cooperating with the working productive forces of the army of industry under the General Administration of the One Big Union in the interests of the entire human race. Practically from its inception the I.W.W. has welcomed the engineer into its councils. Some of its outstanding educators have been technically trained men. The non-political, anti-entrepreneur, industrially-minded engineer has always been recognized by the I.W.W. as a blood brother. In 1921 an attempt was made by the I.W.W. to build up a Bureau of Industrial Research under the direction of a clear-thinking group of capable engineers with both social vision and a sense of social responsibility. This ambitious project the I.W.W. was forced to abandon because so many of its active officials had at that time been sent to prison. Prior to that time and since, the I.W.W. has preached and practiced that type of disciplined solidarity which, according to the technician, is so vitally necessary to any plan of carrying on production exclusive of the profit-grabbing Captains of Finance.

The I.W.W. is in full agreement with and committed, by a policy of nearly a half of a century, to the idea that workers and engineers are the only indispensable elements in modern productive processes. The technician is in every sense of the word a fellow worker. He is the "other self" of the man at the machine — the managerial technological force in industry which counterpoints the productive working forces in the army of production. Both are equally necessary to any plan of carrying on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. Both are equally necessary to any plan of putting an end to the profit system by means other than those of bloodshed and destruction. This point looms big in the I.W.W. doctrine of the General Strike. It is well for technicians, I.W.W. members, and students generally to keep it in mind.

Real Rebels Meet on Common Ground

Nothing could be more natural than this bond of fellowship between the I.W.W. and other industrially minded groups in the army of production or among working class movements. It has been shown that craft and independent industrial unions make the attainment and use of Labor's full economic power impossible or difficult of attainment. It has also been shown that revolutionary political parties, apart from educational and defensive activities, complicate rather than simplify the situation as far as the General Strike is concerned. Therefore the I.W.W. appeals to the workers in the world's industries to put aside prejudices and differences of opinion as to race, color, religion or politics and unite their economic power into One Big Union regardless of national boundary lines in order to put a final end to the hideous monster of world Imperialism which has enslaved and degraded the workers of every nation. The General Strike is ONE program on which all wage workers should agree.

There has been a great deal of confusion as to just what was meant by the term, General Strike. In the past any strike of considerable proportions has usually been referred to as a "General Strike." But many times this definition was not really applicable. Much of the misconception results from an erroneous or limited conception as to what a General Strike is and what it is supposed to do. The General Strike, as its name implies, must be a revolutionary or class strike instead of a strike for amelioration of conditions. It must be designed to abolish private ownership of the means of life and to supplant it with social ownership. It must be a strike, not of a few local, industrial or national groupings of workers but of the industrial workers of the world as an entity. If we keep in mind that there are four phases of the General Strike it will help to understand clearly what we mean by using the term:

A General Strike in a community.

A General Strike in an Industry.

A national General Strike.

A revolutionary or class strike — THE General Strike.

It will be seen from the above that, while the first three are General Strikes in the limited and commonly accepted meaning of the term, only the last, or revolutionary class strike, is a General Strike in the full meaning of the term. The first three have been attempted at times with varying degrees of success, but the last has yet to be organized and made effective.

Thus, for instance, the display of industrial power by the workers of Finland and Russia in 1905 or that in connection with the upheaval in Moscow which resulted in the overthrow of the Kerensky government in 1917, or the strike of the French Railroad workers in 1909, the great strike in Sweden in 1909, or the strike in Germany when the administration of Von Kapp was embarrassed in the same manner. There were also important General Strikes in Belgium in 1913, in Buenos Aires in 1920 and again in Great Britain in 1926. All these have been referred to as "General Strikes." And they are General Strikes in the limited sense defined above.

Outstanding “General Strikes”

The so-called General Strike in Denmark which was called by the Socialists to block the forming of an unpopular cabinet by the King is an example in point, as is the now famous attempt of the Italian workers to take over the industries in 1920.

The I.W.W. strikes of 100,000 lumber jacks or 40,000 copper miners in 1917 are fair examples of the industrial General Strike, while those affecting Seattle and Winnipeg are examples of the community General Strike. Volumes might be written about each of the instances cited. But in the end it would be plain that in each case the strikes did not cover sufficient area and were not supported by a sufficient number of workers in the various industries. Nor was the abolition of wage-slavery the objective of these strikes. In other words they were merely the foreshadowing of what Labor could do for itself under greater provocation, inspired by a greater sense of solidarity and with a more perfected organization at its disposal.

The conditions necessary for the successful operation of any of the four kinds of General Strike enumerated above have never existed. But, because it has not as yet been possible to use the economic power of Labor to full advantage, is no sign that such conditions will never exist. It has often been said, quite truthfully that, “one swallow does not make the spring.” It is equally true that swallows never visit us in the dead of winter. The fact that Labor has succeeded to a limited extent indicates that it can use its economic power to a much greater extent.

The General Strike, once clearly defined and understood, offers Labor a weapon in the use of which Labor has shown great aptitude and willingness — a weapon with which all other weapons in the class war are puny in comparison. Just as gunpowder replaced the bow and arrow, so economic action will displace Labor’s cruder and less potent weapons in the final struggle for emancipation from wage slavery. Only the most shallow-minded critics of working class tactics will seek to discourage the use of Labor’s greatest power for the attainment of Labor’s highest goal. And only the most superficial observers can fail to see that the organizational plan of the I.W.W. is ideally constructed to enable Labor to use that power.

The Constructive General Strike

The I.W.W. believes that the building of the new society, especially during the period of crisis, is at least as important as the abolition of the old. This is not merely a dogma; it is sound tactics. If the aim of the social revolution is to achieve the socialization and democratic control of industry, the time to make that achievement a fact is during the revolutionary crisis, and with as little delay, red-tape or middle class misdirection as possible. At all events it would be fatal to lose track of the goal during the period of turmoil. It should be plain, even to the most casual observer, that European tactics are not altogether suitable for the needs of American labor. In the U.S.A. there is not one, but three distinct types of culture — the industrial east and middle west, the feudal south and the still pioneering west coast. In any of these it is apparent that it would be an easy thing, under incitation, for the class war to degenerate into a religious, political or race war. And it is even more apparent that the impact of mob violence on the highly developed industrial organism would result in a disaster which might result in universal destruction and ultimate chaos. Sometimes one is forced to wonder at the temerity of the leadership of the American Communist movement in thinking that they can control and direct to constructive ends the sinister forces in the Pandora box of civil war, which they seem eager to release upon a land whose language they hardly know how to speak.

The I.W.W. has always taken the position that armed insurrection in a technically advanced country like the U.S.A. would be quite a different thing from an armed insurrection in a technically backward and largely agricultural country like Russia — particularly under conditions which prevailed in Moscow and Petrograd following the armistice in 1918. What American conditions demand is a large scale operation in the nature of a well-co-ordinated lockout of the Captains of Finance by both workers and technicians which would put an end to the profit system but leave the production and transportation of goods unimpaired. This, coupled with the program of picketing the industries by the unemployed, is what the I.W.W. has in mind in advocating the General Strike. Anything less than this or more, is simply adding confusion unto confusion. The logic runs like this: A perfect modern timepiece can be kicked apart as easily as a tin toy; but it is much harder to put together again.

The Fighting Vanguard

In America the I.W.W. is, and has been since its inception, the standard bearer of revolutionary industrial unionism. From the very beginning the I.W.W. has been industrially-minded. Largely as the result of its constant insistence on the use of economic power, both Socialists and Communists have been forced to admit that, in the revolutionary movement, the labor union is the fighting vanguard. Both parties now seek industrial contacts and both stand, theoretically at least, in favor of industrial unionism. Both will admit, when pinned down to it, that the future society will be organized on the basis of industrial administration rather than political government. The trouble is both parties, due no doubt, to the generous admixture of non-proletarian elements in their ranks, are top-heavy with politics. They think in terms of political campaigns (and even more foolish things) instead of strikes, picket lines and unions which make the attainment of substantial economic power possible. Political parties being organized within specific national boundaries, must of necessity remain nationalistic. In the very nature of things it is impossible for them to conceive of international solidarity save in terms of the federation of national units.

The I.W.W. on the other hand, ignores national boundary lines and views the problem from the standpoint of the closely knit and organically related, world-embracing interdependence of the producing class. The I.W.W. contends that "hands across the sea" must be the hands of industrial workers and not politicians. Nothing more forcibly proves the correctness of this position than the two world wars. Four and a half millions of Socialist voters in Germany, and additional millions of Socialist voters in France, England and Belgium, were unable to stop the greed-inspired cataclysm which started in 1914 and which has been progressing until the recent world holocaust. Labor gained nothing from these wars. It lost heavily. It paid the cost in blood, misery and substance and it will continue to pay for many years to come. And the goal of Labor is even further now than it was at the start of World War I. The I.W.W. claimed in 1914, and still claims, that, had the workers of Europe been organized industrially, drilled, disciplined and educated in the use of industrial power, not only would these imperialist slaughterfests have been impossible, but the final victory of Labor would long since have been achieved.

The Function of the Labor Union

If the political saviors of the working class in the U.S.A. would only profit from this fatal mistake and, even now, seek to build up a powerful revolutionary industrial union movement instead of huge, unweildy political machines, the prospects for a clean-cut victory for Labor would be immeasurably brighter.

On the face of it the precise function of a political party with its largely non-proletarian leadership in a labor union movement is difficult to determine. The advantage to the rank and file in the union of control by politicians is still harder to discover. To imply that the industrial union, for instance, needs the leadership and domination of the political party is to imply that union men are incapable of managing their own affairs. To admit that the industrial union is and must be merely the adjunct of the political party is to admit that economic power is of less importance than political power and that the labor union is designed to be merely the plaything of the ambitious politician or the tool of the designing bourgeois leader. If this is to be the attitude why is it necessary to have unions at all? Why not go back to the pre-war “yellow” Socialist who believed that unions were much more of a hinderance than a help to the workers inasmuch as the union distracted the mind of the worker from the ballot box? If the term “Industrial Democracy” means anything at all it means that the membership of the union — the actual workers in industry — are entitled to and capable of controlling the affairs of their own organization without interference from outsiders.

Workers Should Build Industrial Power

In teaching the working class the need for and benefits of revolutionary industrial unionism political parties are doing necessary and valuable work. But in seeking to dominate and control the industrial movement from outside or inside political parties, knowingly or otherwise, they are making a ghastly mistake. The I.W.W. still remembers the lesson of 1914.

It stands to reason that it does not and cannot come within the province of a political party to organize or make effective either a General Strike or any other kind of strike. They can advocate, encourage and call for the full or partial use of Labor's industrial power, but only an organization functioning in industry can make such action possible. The political party lacks the machinery either to call or carry on a strike. If it had this machinery it would be a labor union and not a political party. Only the workers organized into their own unions can function either for purposes of combat or administration in this capacity.

For this reason workers in all countries who wish to use their combined industrial power to put an end to exploitation and wage slavery should seek to build up an irresistible One Big Union movement along lines advocated by the Industrial Workers of the World. And, unless they wish to give up the principle of democracy for the principle of dictatorship, they should refuse to give over the control of their organization to politicians or non-proletarian leaders of any stripe or color.

The One Big Strike on the Job

It may be argued however that the General Strike might prove to be as difficult to control and, due to the possible paralysis of transport, equally productive of privation as civil war. If State power were not captured by the workers would not the armed forces of the master class crush the strike with military power? Would not the result in the long run be the same as far as mass starvation and disorganization are concerned?

The answer is that, as the I.W.W. conceives of the General Strike, it would be so perfectly organized by workers and technicians and effectually used that the feeding, supplying and transportation of armed mercenaries would be practically impossible. The strikes at Seattle and Winnipeg gave some indication of the ability of strikers to organize, picket and police their strike and, at the same time arrange for the adequate distribution of food stuffs to the population. As for machine guns, tanks, airplanes and bombs of asphyxiating or incendiary character, it is well to remember that such things are only available when they are manufactured and transported by labor and would be more difficult to use against workers stationed in and about the nation's widely spread industries than against mobs massed together in the labor ghettos of the great cities.

According to the modern idea of the General Strike it would not be at all necessary, during a well organized class movement of this sort for the employed workers to leave their assigned places in industry at all. On the contrary, the effort would be made to get workers into the industries instead of out of them in order to keep the wheels of production going. The General Strike, in other words would be a means of feeding rather than of starving the people.

This is in keeping with the I.W.W. program of STRIKING ON THE JOB. The only difference would be that the factory doors, under the direction of the technical managerial staff of the productive forces, would be thrown wide open to absorb the millions of unemployed. The wheels of industry would operate in their customary manner only for the purpose of supplying human needs instead of the enrichment of a profit-greedy Kept Class.

The General Strike therefore would simply mean that the army of production under competent technical and managerial direction, would continue to man and remain in the industries, producing and transporting goods for consumption but refusing any longer to yeild up surplus value to the parasite class. The General Strike would be a General Lockout against these idle drones who now hold as their 'private property' the machinery upon which the human race depends for life.

Mass Opposition to Exploitation

The General Strike is conditioned upon the WILL of the workers to make it effective and their stubborn determination to put an end to exploitation by producing goods for USE instead of PROFIT. Unlike the small strike the General Strike does not necessarily depend on the complete withdrawal of productive effort from machinery, but rather their ability to withdraw or withhold only such effort as will put a complete stop to the profits of the parasitic 'owners'.

The ultimate aim of the General Strike as regards wages is to give each producer the full product of his labor. The demand for better wages becomes revolutionary only when it is coupled with the demand that the exploitation of labor must cease. Labor is exploited at the point of production, and it is at the point of production alone that Labor can stop the idle, absentee drones from receiving any more than they produce. Only the complete disallowal of any share whatever to nonproducers will guarantee economic justice to the working class. Working conditions under capitalism have occasioned many bitter controversies but even the most necessary demands for their betterment could hardly be called revolutionary. Even under Industrial Democracy such things will be matters of expediency and consistently sustained improvement, in keeping with recognized needs.

Short Hours, THE Revolutionary Demand

The demand for shorter hours however is decidedly a revolutionary demand. On the basis of an eight hour day less than three hours are all that is necessary for the worker to earn his wage; the rest of the day he is employed in producing surplus value for the boss. Each hour of the shortened workday means for the employer one hour's less profits from every man employed — one hour less opportunity to exploit. This accounts for the fact that the worker's demands for shorter hours have always been contested more vigorously than demands for better conditions or even increased wages.

The reason is obvious: The difference between the six hour day and the eight hour day is the difference between the three hours and five hours given to the employer in which to sweat profits from the hides of his help, each hour of reduction being made at the expense of the exploiter. The difference between the six hour day and, say, the three hour day is the difference between three hours of profit-sweating and none at all. Therefore, if the employer wishes to continue to live off the labor of his wage slaves he must (and does) guard jealously the length of the toiler's work day. Upon it depends not only the amount of his unearned income but also the continuation of his privilege to live without producing.

The chief demand of the General Strike would therefore logically be a demand for an average workday of not longer than three hours or whatever length of time is technologically necessary to carry on production on a non-profit basis. This is the most revolutionary of all demands because it dries up the possibility of class exploitation at its source. Under a planned industrial system and with the perfected machinery of modern production placed at the disposal of the human race even with the present staff of competent directors there is no reason at all (apart from the profit system) why anyone should be forced to work longer than two and a half or three hours per day. Any workday longer than that required to do the actual necessary work of the world simply serves to fatten the already hog-fat parasites of industry. The General Strike for the three hour day would not only put the millions of unemployed back to work, but it would also put the Thieves of Big Business to work alongside of them. In this regard it is well to remember that I.W.W. loggers in the northwest won the eight hour day by the simple expedient of blowing the whistle at the end of eight hours and then walking off the job en masse.

The General Strike and General Picketing

The I.W.W. is credited with having introduced two outstanding tactics of industrial warfare into the American labor movement – the strike on the job and mass picketing by the unemployed. Both of these are of utmost importance to the successful operation of the General Strike. In fact the success of the move (apart from competent technological direction) would depend upon the solidarity existing between employed and unemployed workers. In a class strike this solidarity is indispensable, because only by joint action and common understanding of this sort can the hours of labor be shortened to permit all to return to work. The effect on the capitalist system of millions of unemployed picketing the factory gates for a shorter workday can easily be imagined. By so doing the jobless would not only be hitting at the root cause of unemployment (long hours) but they would also be hitting at the root cause of exploitation (the private ownership of socially necessary machinery).

It may be objected that, admitting the General Strike to be a good thing, there is still but slight possibility that it will ever be used. The answer is affirmative. There is every reason to believe that a victory by the General Strike is far more probable than a victory by either ballots or bullets. It must be admitted however that its possibility is impaired by the insistent promulgation by politicians, insurrectos and reformers of non-industrial methods, just as it would be helped by an aggressive educational campaign along revolutionary industrial union lines. Unless a great effort is made to direct the growing discontent of the working class along industrial lines for the attainment of Industrial Democracy by means of the General Strike many other things are likely to happen. The only other alternatives appear to be mob disorders and dictatorship of one kind or another. Workers should make every effort to get what they want, but they should be mighty sure they want it.

The New Society Not Inevitable

The capitalist system, rotten as it is, has resources which cannot be overlooked. The armed forces of the state are not nearly so formidable as the venal press and other avenues of publicity and class mis-education. The capitalist press and class-controlled radio are perhaps the very strongest bulwarks for the established order. By means of these, labor hatred and mob frenzy can be lashed to fever heat at any time and against any individual or group which dares to challenge the capitalist system. It will be recalled however that newspaper workers have at times, notably in Seattle, refused to set-up or print slanderous and inflammatory anti-labor editorial matter. So here as well as in the manufacture and transportation of war material, the economic power of the workers can be used to advantage.

The system of exploitation is still strongly entrenched and deeply rooted in the economic ignorance as well as in the habits, customs and imbecile individualism of the groove-minded electorate. But regardless of these obvious advantages the upholders of the present order are fighting a losing fight. Capitalism has outlived its usefulness as a social system. It has become a curse to the entire human race. There is no further historical justification for its existence. It has become an obstacle to further social progress. It is doomed by the iron law of inexorable change. Just as chattel slavery yielded to serfdom and serfdom to wage-slavery, so the latter is forced by evolutionary and revolutionary pressure to make way for scientific industrialism — Industrial Democracy. But even this is not inevitable, for the present ruling class shows unmistakable willingness to plunge the entire world into disorganization and chaos. They may succeed unless steps are soon taken to stop them.

Let Come What May...

Already the world is a tumult of disorder and rebellion due to starvation and misrule. No individual or organization can predict with blue-print precision what course events may take in each of the civilized countries, during the last days of the expiring social order. All that we are able to see in the light of social science is that the industries must be taken over by the ones who use them and need them and be operated for use instead of profit. The socialization of the means of production, transportation and exchange is now necessary for the survival of the human race. Only the workers are in a position to do this and it is their duty AT ALL COSTS to see that it is done. Properly organized and disciplined no power on earth can stop the aroused working class from coming into its own.

The scientifically sound and thoroughly constructive character of the I.W.W. program has never been stressed more forcibly than in the concluding paragraphs of its Preamble:

“It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized not only for the everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”

“Labor Shall Be All”

“Seize the industries,” is at present a discredited slogan, for, by inference, we are led to understand that this means to seize the industries from the outside. But, frankly, is it necessary for workers to “seize” something they already have?

Every day, on the job, workers are in possession of the industries. The problem is not how to “seize” them, but how to keep from giving them up. The scientific modern General Strike would have a much simpler slogan and a much more sensible program: For the employed: “Retain the industries, but refuse to produce for profit.” For the unemployed: “Picket the industries and refuse to scab or to let anyone else scab.”

It is vitally necessary for the present “owners” that machinery and resources be manned by labor. It is equally necessary, during the revolutionary transition, that labor refuse to relinquish its hold on machinery either to “owners” or to their scabs or mercenaries.

That labor will defend its own interests goes without saying. The I.W.W. has taught and is teaching workers to fight, not to beg — to demand, not to plead for what they want. And in this final struggle to free the world from social parasitism, courage, clear-thinking and fearless fighting spirit are needed as never before.

Realizing that the control of industry can only come into the hands of the producing class when the producers have sufficient power to keep and to hold this control, the I.W.W. advocates the General Strike on the job reinforced by formidable, determined revolutionary picket lines of unemployed. The change from private to social ownership being inevitable, only thus can the danger of serious destruction and bloodshed be minimized.

The working class should bend every effort to this end. The full current of the revolutionary movement should be directed from the streets to the industries. The revolutionary struggle should be thought out and fought out in terms of industrial action — control, defense, operation. The class struggle, in the last analysis, must be a struggle to control the means of production, transportation and exchange. It will probably be a bitter fight, but one that can have but one ending — complete victory for the workers in the world’s industries.

Let come what may, no worker should count the cost. Even at the worst a General Strike could scarcely entail more privation and suffering than one of capitalism’s many and all too frequent depressions. The General Strike is saner than insurrection and surer than political action. And beyond it — after the storm — is a scientifically planned and ordered world based on peace, plenty and security for martyred humanity. What other thing is more worth striving for by courageous men and women than the ideal of this classless Industrial Democracy for which the I.W.W. has battled so valorously and for so many years?

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Ralph Chaplin
The general strike
1933

<https://archive.iww.org/history/library/Chaplin/TheGeneralStrike/>
Classic IWW pamphlet outlining the philosophy and practical activity of the IWW and their belief in the greatest weapon of the working class, the general strike.

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