

Mahlon Barnes, "'Trades Unions: Their Logical Mission in the Propagation of Socialism,' Address Delivered under the Auspices of the People's Union, at Well's Memorial Hall, Boston, 28 June 1896," The People (New York), 26 July 1896.

During the 1890s, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was faced with both the rising popularity of the People's Party in rural areas and attempts by the Populist movement to create a farmer-labor alliance. At the same time, socialist trade unionists lobbied for greater political involvement and adoption of several key socialist positions by the AFL. One of those socialist trade unionists was J. Mahlon Barnes, a Philadelphia cigar maker, member of the Cigarmakers' International Union, and member of the Socialist Labor Party. Barnes was a sharp critic of longtime AFL leader Samuel Gompers. In 1894 he played a key role in the only defeat that Gompers suffered in election to the AFL presidency. In this 1896 speech in Boston, Barnes chided Gompers and like-minded mainstream labor leaders for refusing to endorse socialism and, more generally, any form of direct political action.

And what is pure and simple doing to meet the changed conditions which confront us? By boycotting? How are the unemployed or the employed proletaires to strike with the boycott the great steel rail or structural steel trust, or the Carnegie interests? By walking from home to shop, or from Boston to New York, Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, or Chicago? By not trading in a department store or business house built of structural steel? By not crossing a bridge constructed of steel beams? You would have to stay at home beside the stove, providing it is not boycotted, to do that! Armour telegraphed one of his agents in a small town in Pennsylvania: "See to it that Jones does no more killing." Armour alone sells meat in that town now—boycotted—shall we become vegetarians?

You might as well attempt to meet Gatling guns in the hands of the militia or steel cruisers armed with revolving guns throwing solid Sterling projectiles with bows, arrows and pop guns as to use the crude and antiquated weapons of the craft guilds of the middle ages, which the trades unions have used against small employers, but they are woefully out of place against the masterly combinations of concentrated and organized capital at the close of the nineteenth century.

You can just about as much batter down monopoly with the boycott and wring material concessions from organized capital through strikes, with the law, the machinery of the State, and the power and armament of government on land and sea against you, as you can batter down the great granite shaft on Bunker Hill with a battering ram pointed with a pumpkin or a labor fakir's head.

Mind you, we do not undervalue the potency of strikes nor ignore the necessity of boycotts. We Socialists are the best, the most persistent and the most uncompromising strikers and boycotters on earth. . . . But we Socialists desire to extend the power of trades unions and of the working class by uniting political action with economic resistance. We propose to use the highest intellectual weapon known to man; that which has come to us through 600 years of struggle in which the brain and brawn of Roman, Dane, Celt and Saxon and Norman was commingled, and we propose to unite the ballot with the strike and boycott.

In England and the United States trades unions preceded Socialism. Our spirit is now slowly but persistently, and I believe triumphantly, entering the body of the rank and file of organized labor. It has already done so to considerable extent in the large cities, and is gradually permeating the most alert and intelligent men and women in the ranks of labor.

The new trades union has secured a firm foothold, and all the fakirs from fakirdom cannot permanently impede it. . . . In 1894 a popular vote on the now famous tenth plank, out of 5,700 votes cast, 4,300 were for its adoption; the carpenters' vote was an indorsement also, the horse-shoers, shoemakers and miners

and street-railway men, although some of their alleged representatives of these crafts at the Denver A. F. of L. convention ignored their instructions because they thought themselves more brainy than their constituents.

Our European brothers are long ago in the political field. . . . What is all this, let me ask you in all seriousness, but the broader and more-intelligent application of trades union methods? To strike down the representatives of capitalism in the supreme law-making bodies of the world, and placing therein the representatives of organized labor is the kind of a strike that ever can be engaged in.

To refuse to vote money out of the pockets of the people to be expended for powder, bullets and guns, to make your sons bayonet-bearers and cannon-fodder, to orphan your brother and widow your sisters, to break mothers' hearts and fill the land with tears and blood so that plutocracy may survive and barbarism perpetuate itself—that is the most sublime boycott conceivable to the mind of man.

But at the exact point where old trades unionism raises the white flag, Socialism raises the red flag, and insists that there is a class struggle and that capitalism can and must be disarmed at the ballot box, where the workers outnumber its cohorts a thousand to one.

Let me point out to you the fundamental difference between this—the method of Socialism, and the methods of pure and simple democracy.

We have had, upon the economic field, such reverses as came to us from Homestead, Chicago, Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Milwaukee, etc., from which even the most fossilized trades unionist cannot possibly draw more than the "sweet use of adversity." If concentration of wealth into the hands of the few necessitates the pauperization of the masses proportioned to the perfection of machinery, the reduction of wages and increased precariousness of the position of the wage earners, then it follows that the power of resistance on the part of the worker becomes constantly more feeble—defeats more certain and frequent, and victories like angel's visits, fewer and farther between. The result is the logical and necessary outcome of conditions—is certain, absolute and inevitable—and it is discouraging and disheartening to trades unionists and all who sympathize with labor.

Mark now the difference. With honest leaders who will preach the truth and labor for class-consciousness, the great lessons taught by the failures will intensify class feeling, rendering more and more clearly apparent the necessity of political action, and as every election, municipal, state and national, registers the growth of class-consciousness, we shall go, instead of from defeat to defeat, like scourged hounds, from triumph to victory as our growing numbers pass in review, and as the unconquerable hosts of labor, armed with the freeman's ballot, come nearer and nearer possessing themselves of the functions of governmental power, legislative, judicial and executive.

I know very well the pure and simple leaders call us dreamers; but are you [not] quite sure that they themselves are either asleep, or blind, or both?

Dreamers! Indeed? So was Moses, marching out of plague-smitten Egypt with hope-uplifted Israel. So was Luther of Worms defying Rome in her pride of power—the noblest of all the noble there. So was Wilborforce, who smote the conscience of England for more than twenty years, until at last his countrymen became ashamed to longer deal in human flesh and blood. And so was Warren, the finest and loftiest type of the Revolutionary hero, when his young life's blood reddened Bunker Hill, so that fair Freedom should be safe in her new-found Western refuge. And so was Garrison, the iron-hearted, whom you have placed in magnificent bronze overlooking the Commons.

Darkness or light, justice or might, slavery or freedom, Socialism or capitalism, that is the real issue which confronts the world to-day, and it will not down at the bidding of labor fakirs or the politicians, and it must be met and settled, and it will remain unsettled until it is settled right.

