



Kentucky Law Journal

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 2

1920

Syndicalism and Socialism and Their Meaning

Frank L. McVey
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj>

 Part of the [Labor and Employment Law Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

McVey, Frank L. (1920) "Syndicalism and Socialism and Their Meaning," *Kentucky Law Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/klj/vol8/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kentucky Law Journal by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

Kentucky Law Journal

VOL. VIII

LEXINGTON, KY., JANUARY, 1920

NO. 1

SYNDICALISM AND SOCIALISM AND THEIR MEANING.

By Frank L. McVey, Ph. D., LL. D.*

There took place in August of 1913 two events of more than usual interest. One of these occurred within the peaceful borders of the Commonwealth of North Dakota and the other happened in a country across the seas. Round about the city of Minot in that state was gathered at harvest time what appeared to be the usual group of men waiting to offer their services to farmers needing help. But as the harvest came on it was evident that a new spirit actuated them. The whole northwest was awakened by the unusual demands made. The refusal of the men to accept employment under the ordinary conditions, together with threats to destroy property, increased the excitement and irritation. It needed but little more to fan the passions of men, and that little was furnished before a week had passed by the appearance of recruits from everywhere, as it were, who complicated the situation and forced upon the officers of the law a difficult problem in maintaining order. My portrayal of the incident has not brought to light the association of the men and the direction of strike by the officers of the Industrial Workers of the World, who evidently had chosen a time and place for a field trial of their principles. The public prints reported that a prisoner had stated upon examination that he "did not believe in the constitution of the state or the United States;" that he, in fact, repudiated the existing government and everything upon which it was based. This was a new point not

*President of the University of Kentucky.

often emphasized since the days of Herr Most and wholly new to the people of an agricultural state.

The other event was the death of August Bebel and the attending funeral services at Zurich. This man was the leader of the social democratic party of Germany. The organization which he had built up was developed out of the poorer classes of the population, maintained without hope of the spoils of office, and increased in numbers in the face of the determined opposition of a strong government. In the last election this party polled more than four and a quarter million votes, and they had in the Reichstag of the nation not less than 109 representatives. This immense result was the work of half a century combined with the efforts of William Leibknecht for a similar period. In attendance upon the funeral services of this remarkable man were tens of thousands of persons from all parts of Europe; some that had little faith in the socialistic idea, some that had little liking for their ways, but who nevertheless recognized the greatness of the man and his importance in the historical pageant.

The two events have been referred to for the purpose of introducing the topics under discussion. The first, hinted at only in the description of the incident in the city of Minot, was a crude representation of Syndicalism, while the other, represented in the work of August Bebel, the founder of the social democratic party in Germany, brings Socialism to our consideration. Little justification exists for the discussion of either of these events were it not for the fact that they form an introduction to the topic of this paper and bring to view two social movements now pushing forward with great rapidity.

A few years ago the word Syndicalism was practically unknown as a name. The contrast of it with Socialism and the problems which have come out of the creation of such parties as the Industrial Workers of the World in this country and the Confederation Generale du Travail of France, to say nothing of the various organizations in England and Italy, have brought before the public mind a clearer vision of the viewpoint of some of the radical movements of the present day.

Neither Syndicalism nor Socialism accepts the existing social order. Both, however, emphasize the socialization of industry, although the ends to be obtained and the means of bringing them about differ. To fight against capital continually, by any method that may come to hand, is the purpose of Syndicalism. Disappointed in the political reforms of the day, seeing no hope in the socializing movement of great masses of labor without tools and without land, the Syndicalists have come to the conclusion that the only way in which they can get a larger share of benefits for themselves is to fight capital continuously, hoping that out of the chaos will evolve control of industry by the workers.

Looking at the struggle from this point of view, the syndicalists have accepted the socialists' concept of class strife, and have adopted the ideals of the anarchist and the weapons of the trade union. Syndicalism is, in fact, a form of trade-unionism, though refusing to acknowledge in any sense the value of the wage system. It aims at the abolition of the capitalist class and the replacing of it by a new social order in which there shall be no exploitation of labor. This result is to be gained by direct action without the ordinary political or parliamentary methods practiced at the present time.

It is essential in the understanding of syndicalism to have some idea of the meaning of the terms general strike and sabotage. The hope of the syndicalist is to bring all the workers of the world to act together at some agreed time so that they can peacefully lay down their tools and refuse to work, knowing that out of such a situation will come the great catastrophe of a broken society. The stopping of all work will mean that nothing will be done until their demands are met. It is recognized, however, that a general strike is not a possibility at one time; that it may come first in an industry, second in a community, and third in a nation. Looked at broadly, when it reaches its highest form it is the great final act in which the capitalist system is to be overthrown by the simple process of refusing to work. In support of a view of this kind it is pointed out by the speakers of syndicalism that great strikes have taken place which clearly demonstrate the wisdom of such a move

as a weapon in industrial warfare. Attention is called to the Paris Commune of 1871, to the strike in New Zealand, to the general strike in Sweden in 1902, and later in the conflicts that took place on the railroads and in the mines of England in 1911 and in the demonstrations in France, Holland and Belgium in the last ten years. It is a question, however, whether any of these instances can be looked upon as distinctly successful. The Paris Commune had involved in it so many elements, and was, from the point of view of an effort on the part of the mass of the working people to maintain a government and organization, so unsuccessful, that it can hardly be pointed to as a demonstration of this policy. The situation in Stockholm in 1909 showed that under certain conditions the capitalistic system is capable of defending itself against a general strike. The problem of bringing about a condition of chaos by a general strike is by no means a simple one. In connection with the policy of the general strike is the use of sabotage as a means of irritating and interfering in the field of production. "Interfere in every way with the profits of the boss," says Delegate Slayton of the Socialistic party convention in 1912. "Strike, but stay on the payroll." Injure machinery and product by sly means. That is sabotage. In fact, what was the policy of soldiering in England became in France, thru theorizing, the policy and propaganda of the Syndicalist movement.

So much by way of explanation of the movement that has come into large attention and concerning which there now appears an increasing literature.

In the minds of many people no difference exists between socialism and syndicalism. It is true that socialism has many meanings and many exaggerations of the social principle. It has a history, an economic concept, a philosophy and a religion. As syndicalism is in its final analysis an emphasis of the extreme of individualism, so socialism is the manifestation of the opposition to industrialism. At its base is a concept of equality, just as at the heart of every labor movement is a race longing for a society in which the spirit of equality shall be realized. It is not trade-unionism; it is not government ownership; it is not cooperation;

it is a theory of industrial society. To use the words of Richard T. Ely: "Socialism is that contemplated system of society which proposes the abolition of private property in the great material instruments of production and the substitution therefor of collective property; it advocates the collective management of production, together with a distribution of the social income by society and private property in a large proportion of this social income."

Socialism, therefore, proposes to abolish exploitation through profits, rent and interest, to set aside the wages system and to guarantee to every man the realized value of his labor. These purposes are to be accomplished through common ownership, common management or distribution of income through common authority, with private property in a comparatively small proportion of the income.

The philosophy of socialism is gathered around the materialistic conception of history. A society with an economic environment develops classes which are produced by the economic conditions, and these same forces tend to change and destroy the classes as the proletariat is increased. So, out of the factory system comes landless men, who, increasing in their class consciousness, come into a knowledge of the conflict between the tool-owning capitalists and the wage-earning laborers.

It is at this point that the two, syndicalism and socialism, diverge.

Tired and impatient with the political methods of socialism, the syndicalist looks to direct action through the medium of the general strike and the wearing process of sabotage to bring about the great revolution, the chaos of existing society. He refuses to accept the present state, finding in it nothing but a fabric that has been built up by the capitalists. The socialist hopes through the process of legislation, through the capture of the existing government and the state to bring about the result of common ownership of the means of production under a collectivist system.

Perhaps a further consideration of these two movements may be of value in bringing out their difference. It is the hope of the syndicalists that when the period of revolution comes, through the

medium of the general strike, ownership and control of industries will take place through the workers actually engaged in them. Thus, the railroads would be owned and controlled by the men who work in the railroads; the business of the manufacturer would be owned and controlled by the men who work in the factories. In some instances this point of view is modified by the statement that the community directly around about the factories shall own and control the industries. On the other hand, the socialists maintain that the means of production shall be owned and controlled by the social democratic organization, that the process of the socialization of industry shall take place through the medium of the state. This difference really marks the distinction between the collectivist and the anarchist, the first admitting the need of an organized society, and the second looking upon it as unnecessary, unwise and deteriorating.

If, then, we have in what has been said up to this point a fairly clear idea of the meaning of these two terms, we may well ask what is their value, what is their purpose?

The frank desire of the syndicalists as represented in the purpose of the Industrial Workers of the World in this country,—to destroy property and to interfere with the means of production as a method of advancing their own interests and of securing a larger justice for the landless and toolless worker, is sure to lead to the breakdown of the movement.* Everything that is now represented

*To discuss socialism without carefully distinguishing between Marxian, Fabian Utopian, Communist, Opportunist, Revisionist, Socialist Labor, Syndicalist and the double I. W. W. is to give offense to all parties. The article on "Syndicalism—The Creed of Force," by Arturo M. Giovannitti, in our issue of October 3, was concerned exclusively with the I. W. W., of which he is a leader, and we have since received several letters expressing the wish to have the attention of our readers directed to the existence of another organization having the same name and ultimate aim but advocating more peaceable methods. We quite appreciate the desire of our correspondents to dissociate themselves from the Haywood and Giovannitti form of the Industrial Workers of the World and we quote the letter that expresses the difference between the rival organizations most clearly and emphatically:

"The I. W. W. was launched in 1905 in Chicago by a body of delegates called together by a manifesto which set forth the necessity of the workers organizing as a class on the political and on the economic or industrial field. One of the faults found with the A. F. of L. was that it prevented the workers from organizing as a class on the political field and striking out for themselves.

"It was at this 1905 convention that the principles of industrial unionism had their birth, the elements being the recognition of the value of working class political action and of the value and absolute necessity of a union based on industrial instead of craft lines, with a revolutionary purpose.

in syndicalism was brought out more forcibly in the labor movement of the early 30's under the direction of Robert Owen. What is now being said and done is not new. The story of the breaking of machines is a story old as industry. "It is the contrast of mass action with individual action, the very contrast that exists between socialism and syndicalism." The destruction of property for the purpose of gaining an end is a naive and a boyish point of view of the industrial world and of social organization. More than that, the practice of sabotage weakens the force of class solidarity upon which the very existence of the movement depends. Instead of

"For three years the I. W. W. went along under these principles without a serious hitch, although the anarchist element among the adherents of the new union had expressed dissatisfaction with the recognition given to political action.

"The preamble to the constitution adopted in 1905 stated: 'Between these two classes (the capitalist class and the working class) a struggle must go on until all the toilers come together on the political as well as on the industrial field, and take and hold that which they produce by their labor'

"If you will read the preamble to the constitution of Mr. Giovannitti's 'I. W. W.' you will see that this clause holds no place therein. Why? Because Mr. Giovannitti's union is not the I. W. W. It is an anarchist offshoot which was given birth to three years after the I. W. W.—it was the result of a packed and 'stolen' convention of the I. W. W. which took place in Chicago in 1908.

"At this convention the anarchist slum element showed itself off to perfection. Pursuant to their declaration that 'questions of right and wrong do not concern us' and 'direct action gets the goods,' the slummers, by arbitrary seating of delegates friendly to anarchy and unseating of delegates friendly to political action and socialism, and by intimidation and all-round disorderliness, 'stole' the convention, mutilated the preamble to the constitution and raped the organization.

"What gives the Giovannitti-Haywood 'I. W. W.' the appearance of being genuine is that it was left in full control of the 1908 convention and of the national headquarters. The decent delegates, who stood by the original industrial union principles, which discard anarchy in all forms, could not and would not fight the slummers at that convention with the latter's own weapons. Instead they 'reorganized' the I. W. W. at a convention in this city a few months later.

"The genuine I. W. W., which is based on the principles of political and economic action, and civilized methods of warfare—the ballot, education and orderly organization—and which refuses to countenance sabotage, slugging and direct action as weapons that will free labor from wage slavery, now has headquarters in Detroit, Michigan. Among persons familiar with the radical labor movement the I. W. W. is referred to as the Detroit I. W. W. while Haywood's and Giovannitti's union is called the Chicago or anarchist I. W. W.

"The Haywood union would dispossess the capitalist class by physical force alone—economic action—it places itself outside the pale of the law; indeed, of civilization. Its methods are those of barbarism. It represents reaction in its worst form, if reaction has a worst form, and the press of the country is aiding that reaction by holding the anarchist Chicago 'I. W. W.' up to the public as the bona fide organization, and maintaining what it is fast becoming a disreputable silence in regard to the original I. W. W., which has headquarters in Detroit and which is endorsed by the Socialist Labor Party, the oldest and most orthodox Marxian Socialist organization in this country.

"RUSSELL PALMER."

From the Independent of Dec. 4, 1913.

giving to it a broad foundation, it places the crucial and critical events of the struggle in the hands of individuals. The syndicalist discards and despises all legal methods and advocates insurrection as a means of gaining his ends. In his "Class War in France," Engels, writing in 1895, said: "The time for small nonentities to place themselves at the head of the ignorant masses and resort to force in order to bring about revolutions, is gone. A complete change in the organization of society can be brought about only by the conscious cooperation of the masses; they must be alive to the aim and view; they must know what they want." The socialist's view does not call for mere injury of employers unless some benefit is to inure to the workers. "They have recognized that the mere destruction of tools and materials is quite as apt to help the competitor of the capitalist who is injured as it is to materially injure the capitalist who is worked for."

Looked at broadly, these two movements represent a vast difference in point of view. The syndicalists are really anarchists. They do not believe in the state, but accept the idea of groups or communities owning the means of production and engaging in the business of producing wealth. The socialists, on the other hand, accept the state; in many instances they believe in utilizing the existing state and come to the conclusion that in the long run political methods will accomplish larger results than any result that force can bring about. It has taken one hundred years of bitter history to install this truth in the minds of many leaders. That is the reason why syndicalism is more of a menace to the progress of socialism than it is to existing society.

As one listens to the various discussions of economic problems, from the function of money to the business of production and distribution, it appears that many of the fundamentals have been lost sight of. Wealth is a joint product brought about by the utilization of the forces of nature and of labor. But there are two other factors,—capital in the form of existing wealth, and that peculiar thing known as organizing ability and power,—that are fundamental and essential in the production of wealth. In an individualistic society a reward of rent is paid to the land-owner,

wages to the laborer, interest to the capitalist, and profits to the undertaker. The elimination of any one of these factors means a failure to appreciate the problem. It may be that private ownership of land should not exist. It may be that there should be some system other than that of the wage system, but without the power of management, of organization, and administration, it would be impossible to bring together any kind of industrial organization. That society today has defects is known and recognized by all; but the society of today has not been developed in the course of a year or of a decade, but through the slow growth of centuries. To say, therefore, that the process of securing control of modern society shall be through the medium of the destruction of wealth is as naive as to assume that the breaking of glass is good for trade and justifiable as a business procedure. Moreover, present day society is vigorous, strong and powerful. The principle of private property has existed in the social institutions of the Anglo-Saxons for thousands of years. "It runs as strong in the blood of the peasant, of the laborer, of the farmer, of the clerk, as in that of the captain of industry." To seek, therefore, for the destruction of wealth in order that society may be brought to a condition of chaos is a foolish concept of what has been done through the centuries. The socialist is far nearer the real purpose of society than the syndicalist, for he recognizes the need of a central organization. The wisest of the socialists have come to the conclusion that it will take decades, yes, generations, to bring about the thing that they are striving for, and that only through the processes of the existing social machinery and extended education of the masses.

In my own view, society will not proceed either by the lines of anarchy or the medium of extreme socialism, but along the middle ground lying between the two. In the main, the basis of the present social order is undoubtedly found in private property and the freedom of contract. In its development private property has been greatly modified and it has not yet reached its final form. With this growth of property rights has come an increase in the mass of what the economists call free goods. These are found in an enlarged body of knowledge, expired patents, parks, forest

lands, enjoyments provided the people by municipalities and national governments and in the feeling, a more and more intense one, that private property is a social trust to be administered carefully and wisely with some regard to the community in which its possessor lives. The law, too, has attempted to restrict incomes due to monopoly profits and by proper classification to provide for the regulation of inheritances, expecting through these methods to change the distribution of wealth and consequently to open the opportunities now held by a few to a much larger group. Every generation sees a marked change in the movement and ownership of property. The state, by an easy and natural method, can exert a great influence upon wealth distribution by establishing wisely framed inheritance laws. This in itself is sufficient to indicate that the time for a social revolution has not yet been reached, for it is possible to materially modify the present system without destroying its best elements.

The presence of a democracy in a state complicates the problem, particularly if that state has no restricting monarchical system. In its earlier history a popular sovereignty may be one in which the citizens are on an equal material basis and the distinctions between men largely of an official nature. In time the satisfaction of material wants becomes the dominant aspiration and wealth the means by which power is secured. Power and wealth, then, are synonymous, religion loses its hold on men, the sentiment of loyalty so manifestly strong in a monarchy declines and selfishness becomes the rule of life as well as the motive for participations in the activities of government. Men come to confuse personal ends with those of the state, regarding the government of the latter as a means to secure their purpose. There is then brought into the political life a mercenary spirit that is exceedingly demoralizing to the morale of citizenship. Public welfare is overlooked and important problems are constantly met by restrictions and difficulties. The modification of the disturbing elements—private property and freedom of contract—depends upon the democracy; but if the democracy is a mercenary one, there is little hope for the alteration of property rights by inheritance laws and adequate taxation,

and as a consequence a social movement, directed by a class spirit and a definite code of action, appears as a distinct factor in the life of the state. That social movement is based upon three elements; first, an existing order of society resting in the main upon the methods of production and distribution of the material goods necessary to human existence; second, a class which is discontented with the existing conditions; and third, an ideal which the discontented hold up and express in programs and demands. All these elements are present in modern states. The movement forward from the simplicity of the agricultural stage is marked by greater inequalities of material conditions and a hardening of class lines. It is evident that a forestalling of these difficulties must be met by wider activity on the part of the state and a reasonable change in existing conditions and methods of production and distribution, in order to withstand and prevent anything like a hasty and ill-considered social movement.

The problem centers about the phrase "Equality of Opportunity." The desire bound up in it expresses itself in the demand for social reforms that shall give a new freedom for race development. "We want," says Mr. Webb, "to bring about the condition in which every member of society shall have a fair chance to use and develop the gifts with which he happens to be born." A few influences are now at work in this direction: these are public education, sanitary laws and their administration, the building of better tenements, the shortening of hours of labor, the prevention of child labor, establishment of banks, charity organizations and philanthropic enterprises. But they are inadequate to withstand the great industrial forces constantly making for inequality. There can be no denying that land and property ownership, whatever the economic grounds of their defense, develop influences working toward inequality in production and distribution. Their tendency is constantly in the direction of inequality of income, and that in turn works toward inequality of opportunity and production. One follows the other.

With the filling of countries by immigration commerce and invention are restricted, because there are then new regions to open

up, and an outlet for the ambitious and discontented must be found in some other way than this traditional one, so long practiced in commercial lands. The method of satisfying discontents has been to extend the suffrage to larger and larger numbers of workers and also to grant more extended privileges through the enlarged functions of the government. In a democratic state the tendency is toward wider suffrage, even to universal suffrage, because the ruling classes find it difficult to carry their policies without a greater voting power, but the masses have begun to reflect that this power of the ballot can be used for their own well-being, through the control of the governing machinery of the state. The use of such a power is, however, fraught with a great danger, a danger always inherent in a democracy, but in this case emphasized by the wider activities of the state. That danger is the possible loss of individual liberty and the dominance of incapable and demagogic leaders. To these are but two possible offsets in a state not yet socialistic, the maintenance of civil liberty and the submission of the people to rational guidance.

The wage-earners, and particularly those following the socialistic parties, complain constantly of low wages and a small share of the product created. Here is a problem as important as those of corporation and monopoly. The option offered is some form of the wages system (which must always exist under a capitalistic form of society) or the complete elimination of the wages system and the introduction of a form of share which shall depend upon abilities or needs. If the present society is to continue, the wages system will be a part of it, but by introducing profit-sharing, gain-sharing or collective bargaining, it is possible to so modify it as to render greater justice in the division of the product. Whatever may be said of these methods of determining wage contracts, they give to the wage-earner an incentive and a larger share of the product. The development of employing and trade-union groups has placed special emphasis upon the collective bargaining method of determining wages. For its final outcome there must be an increased responsibility on the part of the bargaining groups in their relation not only to each other, but to the public. With monopoly power

limited and restricted by law the wage-earner ought to secure that portion of the product which is due to the increased skill of the worker, because of his power in the group organization to modify the old wage contract. In times of depression, however, the large capital organization can dictate terms of employment, but the possibility of modifying the wages system and the hope of actually doing so will retain many men in the ranks of the conservatives long after the more radical have given up the hope of anything better under a capitalistic regime. The continuance of the present system depends upon private property, private capital, labor and the wages system. The breakdown of any one of these materially affects it; in fact, so much so that every effort should be made to modify them so as to make the worker satisfied with his share.

The solution of such difficulties as are presented in the immediate problems referred to in the last paragraphs require some attitude on the part of the state. The individualist believes in the minimum of state interference, justifying it, when necessary, on the grounds of forcing equal conditions: namely, of giving economic principles an opportunity to act without restrictions, moral, ethical or political. He believes that a wide suffrage will place the government in the hands of the emotional rather than the intellectual. He, therefore, looks to a limited suffrage and an increased responsibility of officials as the two things necessary for a betterment of present conditions. In this view he has much to justify him, but the regulationist says we must have systematic legislation, for the institutions of government and industry are not well enough formed to give the service and freedom from abuse that a people have the right to expect. Consequently this group of advocates present certain legislation of a curative and preventive kind which they expect will be enforced and carried out by the officers of the state. They also present a third requirement—the elimination of political fraud from the conduct of government. Each and all of these are based upon the notion of a wider interest in the state and its functions on the part of the people, and further upon the idea, constantly becoming clearer, that the state is a means to an end. Still, the advocates of socialism, various as they are, regard the

state as a final form of social organization; but in justice it should be repeated that the form and functions are materially different from those now devolving upon the state.

In the main, the problems have fallen, so far as their evil effects are concerned, upon the wage-earners, though here and there are small producers and merchants who, because of a trust organization or the high wages and exactions of trade unions, have lost their places in the business and trade of the community. Nevertheless, whatever the difficulties or whatever the class upon whom the burden may have fallen, the fact is that the form of organization is largely to blame for the serious complications now so clearly seen. Industry on its mechanical side has developed faster than its administration and management, monopoly has grown much more rapidly than the powers and organization of the state, and the same may be said of private property, railroads and the other institutions engaged in producing and distributing commodities. The control of these factors is, in the United States and England, where male suffrage exists, in the hands of the class suffering from the evils. This is, however, but a nominal control, for the actual solution of the problems involved can be attained only under rational guidance, even though the management and direction of the government may be in possession of the wage-earner, for the difficulties will appear in but another and more aggravated form if not met in a scientific and non-partisan way. And if the solution carries the state into socialism, individual liberty is materially jeopardized by what must ultimately be an oligarchy of power. More and more the situation must clear when it is seen that a radical departure from fundamental principles is impossible; the solution must be attained by working out from the existing conditions and modifying them.