

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 10, NO. 27.

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, JULY 27, 1909.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

“UNION MEN AS STRIKE BREAKERS.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE handbill “Union Men as Strikebreakers,” issued by the International Union, Elevator Constructors’ Local No. 2 of Chicago, and published in these columns last week,¹ deserves careful study.

The facts set forth in the handbill are, in a few words, these—

One hundred and fifty members of the Elevator Constructors’ Union, affiliated with the A.F. of L. and employed by the Otis Elevator Company, struck for higher wages. Thereupon the Machinists, the Ornamental Ironworkers, the Electrical Workers, the Steamfitters’ Helpers, and the Building Laborers’ Unions, all likewise affiliated with the A.F. of L., hastened to sign agreements with the Company whereby their men could and did act as strike breakers.

That such conduct is, just what the handbill calls it, “despicable tactics,” is unquestionable. Equally unquestionable is the handbill’s conclusion that such conduct is scabbery. But the handbill strangely errs when it declares that the business agents of the scabbing Unions “discarded every principle of Trades Unionism.” Correcter would it have been to say that the conduct of the said business agents, together with that of the Unions that tolerate it, is agreeable to every principle of Trades Unionism, as Trades Unionism is known and practised in the land, and that such principles of Trades Unionism stand in the way and are utterly destructive of that Unionism, which alone deserves the name, and which the Working Class requires for its emancipation, to wit, class-conscious Unionism.

The striking Elevator Constructors’ Local Union No. 2 of Chicago is up against the real thing, and does not seem to know it. A visitor now in this country, sent from Germany by his Union to study and report upon Labor conditions in America, and who signs himself “Chagrín,” has in the Stuttgart *Metallarbeiterzeitung* (Metal

¹ [To be appended at a later date.—R.B.]

Workers’ Journal) of the 10th of this month a letter in which the following picture of Unionism, as known in America is drawn. The picture is truthful. How truthful, the striking elevator constructors must feel but too well:

“Here the mass of the workers find themselves engaged in giant industries. Top-capitalism rules unfettered. In its possession are both the live and the dead stock of the land. ‘Money is Power’ holds good in the brutal sense of the term. The striving after the lever of Power possesses all minds—proletarian minds no less so. Appeals to idealism or to solidarity hardly raise an echo. Moreover, the elite of the American working class has been, for many a decade back, organized into firmly-pointed Unions. As a matter of course, these Unions are backward, to a certain extent their attitude towards the workers is not even worthy of proletarianism: nevertheless, they are solid enough to survive many a blow. Furthermore, judging from all appearances, these Unions conform generally with the interests and aims of the mass of their membership. To the Yankee Unionist, the Union is nothing more nor less than what the Club is to the millionaire, or the church association to the small trader—AN INSTITUTION FOR THE PROMOTION OF HIS BUSINESS. He looks upon the Union as an agency for the most profitable disposal possible of his commodity, labor-power. Whether the members of other crafts, or the unskilled workers, or anybody else suffers in the transaction, is a matter for which he has as little concern as the bankruptcy of a competitor concerns the top-capitalist. Whosoever seeks to push himself into the Union-Temple as a proselytiser must be ready for fierce and tough opposition. Nay, more. If the employer scents serious danger, he often strikes an alliance with the Union by means of a ‘friendly understanding,’ and he makes concessions to it at the expense of other groups of workingmen, especially of the unorganized laborers; in short, he drives the proletariat to mutually cut their throats. Of course, there are some more far-seeing Unions, who decline to join in the game. But, as is well known, people think through their stomachs. The prospect of losing a good job in a Union shop increases immensely the distance between thinking and acting. Besides, even if a Union were to kick against the ‘friendly understanding,’ then, in the event of the employer’s not feeling strong enough to smash the Union, he hands out to the Union leader the striven-after lever of power, gold, and the threatening waves go down again. In any event, the ‘outsider’ who seeks to set up his standard in the Union never gets so far.”

If the Elevator Constructors’ Union, appealing against the scabbery now practiced upon it, appeals to “every principle of Trades Unionism,” it should be careful carefully to add: “as Unionism should be.” If it omits the addition, if it appeals as it does now, simply to “every principle of Trades Unionism,” then it will

be understood to appeal to the very principle from which it is now suffering—the A.F. of L. principle of class-unconscious Unionism, which inevitably breeds “Union Men as Strike-breakers.”

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded September 2010

slpns@slp.org