

EDITORIAL

VINCENT ST. JOHN IN DENVER.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE seventeenth annual convention of the Western Federation of Miners has come and gone.

As far as the convention itself is concerned, on and of itself, it was the regulation affair, distinguishable from A.F. of L. proceedings only in phraseology, in spots.

As is now pretty well understood, the move on the part of the W.F. of M. officials in 1904, which materialized in the Manifesto that called the next year the Industrial Workers of the World into being, was not, as it had been supposed, the result of a healthy radicalism on their part. As now pretty well understood, and quite strongly suspected as early as 1906, their move in 1904 was the result of unhealthy reactionaryism. Class-unconscious Unionism is but a caricature capitalist realm for its officials. The officials of the W.F. of M., apprehending, in 1904, that things were going to the bad with their caricature realm, or estate, had sought to save themselves by taking the lead in a radical move, that, moreover, was expected to give them a standing in the East. The apprehended danger had very materially vanished when the first I.W.W. convention met. The convention had literally to drag Moyer, the President of the W.F. of M., along. The rapid course of events that followed rendered the I.W.W. more and more unnecessary, also distasteful, to the Moyer element. The final dropping out of the W.F. of M. was shrewdly foretold as early as 1905. Its dominant, the Moyer element, could not “round” their estate with I.W.W. affiliations. Things had changed. Accordingly, the W.F. of M. convention that met last month, presented essentially the aspect of the A.F. of L.—a body run for the benefit of its officialdom (the same as



VINCENT ST. JOHN
(1876–1929)

the capitalist class runs the workers) with a rank and file that is kept in subjection by their individual and often visionary self-interests, being played upon (exactly as the workers are kept and played upon by their employers.)—Altogether a logical picture.

Nevertheless, stale and twice-told as was the tale of the W.F. of M. convention in so far as itself was concerned, it also told a tale that is neither stale nor twice-told. The occasion therefor was St. John.

Vincent St. John had long and deservedly enjoyed among W.F. of M. people a reputation for integrity; a capacity to learn and grow; thoughtful deliberation; aggressive fibre, tempered with the modesty becoming a man of his young years; and unflinching loyalty to his class. At the second, the critical I.W.W. convention of 1906, St. John made these qualities good. Unfortunately for him, fortunately, perhaps, for the Movement that needs the experience, the convention rewarded St. John by elevating him to the National Executive Board, and subsequently, in 1907, to virtual headship.

The Chicago policeman, who was chosen as the model for the Haymarket statue that was to commemorate the judicial assassinations of 1887, went crazy, literally crazy, with vanity. The notoriety was more than his mental stamina could stand.

Again, the instances are too numerous to require more than being alluded to, of men, who join the Labor Movement with unquestionable probity, being overtaken by financial stress, and, then, going by the board. Their imperfect information leads them to expect easy sailing on a path strewn with struggles and hardships and disappointments. The strain of such experience proves too severe for such men. Indeed, it is a conservative estimate that such is the history of ninety-nine per cent of the labor leaders who have gone astray, and in various degrees betrayed the trust imposed upon them.

The elevation of St. John to the dignity that two successive I.W.W. conventions elevated him to, coupled with the expectations, frankly expressed, that were entertained of him, was more than the man's mental stamina could stand. Then followed the inevitable struggles, hardships and disappointments—some of which were, in his instance, exceptionally trying—together with the long train of financial distress, and the man collapsed.

In St. John's instance another circumstance contributed powerfully to his downfall.

The organization of which St. John virtually became the head in 1907, held, in some respects, a position as threatening, in other respects, even more threatening than the position held by the Socialist Labor Party, both towards capitalist rule and towards the swarm of more or less freakish political, economic and anti-political associations that hang upon the flanks of the Socialist or Labor Movement in the land. Such a position demands sterling qualities in its officers to discourage, if not repel the Tempter in the shape of the Flatterer and the Seducer. The Spanish proverb has it: "Where there are ripe bananas little birdies will be seen; where there are pretty lassies loving laddies will be found." St. John proved a ripe banana for obscene birds to peck and bore holes through.

Instead of learning and further equipping himself, St. John organized himself into a moving tableau of elaborate erudition, thereby becoming a center from which nonsense radiated; instead of grasping the profound principle of the Social Revolution of our generation that Social Democracy is a sane movement: that it can not contemplate the insane idea of everyone being fit for everything, and that its distinctive feature is a place for everyone, and everyone in his place, with equality of dignity in the co-operation towards a goal that requires the services of all,—instead of grasping that principle, he stooped to the demagoguery of condoning and inciting disorder; as a consequence, instead of setting the example of discipline, he set exactly the opposite example by adopting that worst of discipline-smashing methods, to wit, coarse brutality, accompanied, as brutality ever is, with cowardice; finally, instead of keeping to the keynote of rectitude, which the I.W.W. had struck, he justified the theft preached and practiced by his flatterers. In short, instead of a strong, he proved himself a weak man—putty in the hands of those who operated upon him, until he tumbled head foremost into the worst sort of Anarchy, veiled dynamitism.

The metamorphosed St. John appeared in Denver at the time of the convention of the W.F. of M. with the intent of "rescuing the miners," meaning thereby to rescue himself, by causing them to join and thereby float the wreck he had been lured to make out of the I.W.W. The move brought Vincent St. John in juxtaposition

with Charles H. Moyer—the latter, a logical, the former, an illogical consequence of his own premises. The latter the head of raw material from which the Social Revolution can and will yet be spun; the former the suffocating dust of shoddy, that has no place in the texture of the Industrial Republic. The former, a representative of that without which Progress is impossible—order; the latter the breath of Chimera.

The late convention of the W.F. of M. served as a background for the two types—Moyer and St. John. The former, a type that represents the Movement at rest, and away from which it is to evolve; the latter, a type that represents utter dissolution—physically, mentally and morally—and from which the Movement must steer as a ship would from rocks below the surface.

The issue was in line with healthy development. St. John was cast and left aside.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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