

THE ONE BIG UNION

**Idea Flew Like Fire on Dry Grass
Over Great Britain, Europe
and America**

PLAN DIDN'T STAND TEST

**Such Organization Must of Necessity
Come Into Sharp Conflict with the State**

[By Andrew Furuseth, President of
the International Seamen's union
of America]

THE GENERAL situation along the Pacific Coast taken together with what appears to be a rather widespread sentiment in favor of some kind of amalgamation into one big union seem to require that this panacea should be looked into with some care.

The one big union is the child of the so-called bourgeois—their estate—or government based upon business, trade and commerce. The very first action of the state general when called together at the beginning of the French revolution was to create the one big union by the repeal of all the laws which permitted the existence and which gave to the guilds the status, which they then occupied. There were to be no voluntary associations with voluntary self given laws.

It mattered not if such associations were based upon blood, land or skill—they were to be abolished. There was to be one big union of all the people. It was found, however, that in this great brotherhood all the plums fell to the most cunning, the most far-sighted and strong. The plain toiler got all the hardship with a crust; while the leaders of the new brotherhood obtained all or practically all the so-called good things.

Humanitarians, such as Robert Owen, tried to organize the toilers into one big union of the toilers. The idea flew like fire in dry grass over Great Britain and Europe and then had its reflex in the United States under the name of the American Labor Union. There was a fervent belief, then as now, that mass and bulk is strength, hence the one big union.

Plan Didn't Stand Test

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Then came the Chartist movement in England with its cry of one big union. Of course it was mainly political and went to pieces when the corn laws were passed and the disintegrating group interests came to the surface. The American Labor Union went into politics with its hopes and aspirations, but was badly beaten and disintegrated under the group spirit.

Then we had the third attempt in Great Britain to use the advantageous position of the higher skilled to lift the lesser skilled up into an equal social well-being with the higher skilled. The English trade unions assisted in the organizations of the International Workmen's Association. It, too, went like fire in the dry grass but finally extinguished itself. The force behind the movement—the trade unions—found themselves swamped, stripped of their usefulness, and quit. The one big union had failed again and for the same reason.

Here in the United States the second attempt was the Knights of Labor. It had a run like a shooting star. It died out like a shooting star, because it undertook to lift all the working population through a mass movement ostensibly industrial; but in fact political. It was trying to build a new society within the old, hoping that the growth would be gradual, and the birth would be easy, bloodless and safe.

Group Interests Bar to Success

Again the disintegrating group interests came in the way. The small compact groups were again used regardless of their immediate interests and so much to their disadvantage, that they kicked over the traces and quit. And so then did the Knights of Labor.

In Great Britain and America alike there had been attempts at the one big union, and they had failed. In Great Britain three such attempts, in America two. In Great Britain the workers were cured and might have remained so, but for the employers' attempt to use the state as their shield. That brought politics to the fore over there.

Here the unions being purely industrial—excluding all who did not work in the business or calling from the union—sought to co-ordinate the movement through voluntary associations of the unions—the American Federation of Labor. Then came in this country the third attempt at the one big union in the shape of the I. W. W. On the surface it is industrial but fundamentally it is political. It seeks to organize the toilers industrially and then to use them politically—in a revolution—to take charge of the state.

Such organization must of necessity come into sharp conflict with the state as such. It is not a struggle between classes, as it is sometimes called, it

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The One Big Union

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is an effort to take charge of and to use the state.

Big Union Plan Brings Autocracy

Being very large and unwieldy the one big union needs, so far as the world to-day knows, to be governed by an executive committee. When that is developed the real self-government passes out. In industry—built by the joint action of all factors—the autocratic principle spells death. If the attempt be made to govern the sections of the big union as trade unions are governed the majority will rule as a matter of course and it will follow what it thinks are its own interests.

Apply this to the seamen and the harbor workers and we shall have at least ten harbor workers to one seamen in the meetings. What will then happen to the seamen? Why, he will be relegated to being the servant of the harbor workers without any effective say in any decisions. His will be a case of simple obedience to the orders of the majority. He will be compelled to go on shore in every harbor while the harbor workers do the work on the ship.

We already have that condition obtaining, at least very extensively, both in Great Britain, on the continent and on the east coast of the United States. You know the result. You come into port and you go on shore to eat up your earnings and then look for some other vessel ready to proceed to sea. You can not earn enough to keep decent clothing on yourself. You are doomed to single blessedness while you are sailing, because you can not take care of a family even if some woman should be foolish enough to marry you.

Seamen Would Be Helpless

But you say: we shall all act upon the principle that an injury to one is an injury to all. That of course is a fundamental truth; but neither the individual nor still less the group can really apply that to themselves, when they want something. The group, especially, will consider that anything which is good for it, is good generally.

You will be helpless. The longshoremen call a strike and you must quit. You leave at least one-half of your wages behind. The longshoreman leaves nothing behind. In nearly every country you go to jail, the longshoreman goes home. The strike is settled or lost, while you are in prison. You come out, nobody knows you. You are alone, destitute, and you have lost all. You manage to get on board of another ship and you arrive in the next harbor to repeat—as likely as not—the same performance.

You are hunting for help and you acquire shackles. You distrust your own power, and you become the abject dependent not upon the master, but upon your fellow toiler. You might get some consideration from the master as he is an individual, but you can expect no consideration from the group, which conceives it to be in their interest to use you and break you.

The one big union may or not be the thing for the man on shore. Let somebody else consider that at this time. It can bring nothing but disaster to the seamen. Please look at the East and at Europe and see what will happen to you here.

One Big Union an Absurdity

Of course it may be that there are men among us, who are either unwilling or unable to do harbor work on the vessels; but then you should quit the sea, because something like 60 to 70 per cent. of the world's seaports have no harbor workers and there you must do your best, whatever that best may be.

It matters not from what seamen's point of view you look at the one big union, it is an absurdity—an evil. It shackles you. It has no hope, no possible chance of improvement. If you will think it over you will find that the seamen when attending to

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their own business as seamen were fairly successful. But it needs work, fortitude and patience. And that is the only road to restoring to you your true place among men.

Please think this over and you may be saved from dragging through the mire for years and years to come. Friendship to all, especially to those who recognize our equality with them. Servitude to none, unless we must. Such must be the seamen's policy now and for a long time in the future.