

NATIONALISM: ***Working-Class Nemesis***

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Introduction

July 4, 1994, American Independence Day, is a fitting occasion to offer a few introductory comments to this necessarily brief Socialist Studies on nationalism.

It was 219 years ago that rebellious elements of King George III's colonial subjects declared their independence from the feudal subjugation to the English crown and launched a bourgeois republic. With their successful separation from "perfidious Albion," the revolutionary founders and their successors went on to build the necessary framework of the new state to sustain the allegiance of the disparate interests that are invariably a part of every society based upon class divisions. The focus of that allegiance is of course the nation, the political entity and its state institutions that are ostensibly the neutral arbiters of all disputes and antagonisms that seek to meld all divisive interests into one unified mass.

As the material and economic development of the United States advanced into the 19th century, taking the country from an agricultural economy into a manufacturing and industrial one, the population became dominantly proletarian, propertyless wage laborers. The antagonisms between the propertied minority and the propertyless majority, between rulers and oppressed, became increasingly acute with that transformation. This was the gestation period of the nationalist credo; the time nationalism acquired the status of a secular religion and received its greatest impetus.

This was the period U.S. capitalism entered the world imperialist fray in earnest. The opening of Japan by Commodore Perry was the initial probe; the subsequent incursions in China leading to the Boxer Rebellion found the U.S. state as a full participant in the imperialist division of China, and the century ended with the biggest prize, seizure of the Spanish colonial possessions of Cuba and the Philippines and conversion of the Pacific into an American ocean.

Convincing American workers that their fortunes were intimately tied to the successes of U.S. imperialist adventures throughout the world required the whole litany of nationalist rhetoric, for it was working-class lives that were to be sacrificed or maimed in the interest of imperialist profits. Since then, blatant nationalistic rhetoric has been iterated before, during and after every event requiring armed intervention or the threat of armed conflict. But there is more to nationalism than

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this rhetorical justification for imperialist armed conflict.

Karl Marx's observation, "The ideas of every age are ever the ideas of its ruling class," finds no better expression than nationalism. Covert, subliminal and seemingly innocuous activities, commentary and assumptions emanating from innumerable capitalist sources form the hard core of nationalistic attitudes. Its terms, suffused in common parlance, seem harmless. Sports, secular and religious holidays, and beauty pageants have become ritualistically embellished with the trappings of the nationalist theology. We hear workers speak of national and world events in terms of "we" and "our" when referring to the actions of the U.S. government. The ruling-class prerogatives that such actions represent are promoted as democratically arrived at and debated referendums embraced by the entire working class!

Another subtle form is constant and incessant media reports designed to instill that this is "the greatest nation on earth" in workers' minds by deriding conditions in other nations and countries. That abject poverty abounds in America, and that misery, hunger, homelessness, unemployment, pollution and environmental destruction are enormous and growing within capitalist America, is insensately ignored on such occasions.

Decades of such propaganda are the accretions that have built the nationalist edifice. But the process of erosion is also abundantly evident. This' is a world of high technology, advanced communications, instantaneous imaging, satellite discs and telecommunications internets. The "Information Superhighway" is undermining all national, parochial and fanatical theologies; it is promoting an irresistible bouleversement and a crippling of all insular ruling-class regimes with the threat of oblivion.

The cause of working-class unity can only benefit from this process. It remains the task of our revolutionary organization to agitate and educate and urge receptive workers to organize their power to overturn those deadly relationships of capitalism that prevent a unified international world of socialism.

BERNARD BORTNICK

July 4, 1994

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An address delivered at the annual National Executive Committee Session Banquet of the Socialist Labor Party, Santa Clara, Calif., April 23, 1994, by NEC Member Bernard Bortnick

“Marxism rejects the theory that a man is a clam wedded to the rock of his nativity.”
—Daniel De Leon

In one of his last Sunday morning homilies before his retirement, CBS commentator Charles Kuralt speculated on whether or not there existed a universal law governing evil, similar to that which governs energy. You are probably all familiar with the law of the conservation of matter and of energy, which states that these are neither created nor destroyed but merely converted to another form. Is there a law, Mr. Kuralt asked, wherein evil is never destroyed, but only conserved and transformed?

This rhetorical question could have readily been answered by any member of the Socialist Labor Party: “Yes, there is such a law, if one believes that capitalism and class rule are eternal verities. It is these systems that never eliminate an evil but transform it to another form. But there is here one difference from the law of conservation of energy: capitalism compounds evil at a constantly increasing rate, thus creating new evils.”

The fact, of course, is that the laws of physics cannot be applied to economic, social, political and judicial institutions. Mr. Kuralt’s question, stemming from popular notions that are little different from the belief in “original sin,” reflects the conditions under capitalism. If one evil is eliminated, more evils take its place; if a few new jobs are created in one city, thousands more are lost in another; if government money is spent to relieve one kind of suffering, another useful institution suffers; if the natural environment is protected, the economy suffers and jobs are lost, and so on and so forth. The anachronistic and outmoded capitalist system has imposed upon humanity a veritable “vale of tears” — a bewildering array of seemingly insoluble problems, a morass of evils and a swamp of death.

A RAGING VIRUS

Among the epidemics of evils sweeping the world is one which pales all other

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human maladies and has claimed millions upon millions of victims. It is caused by a raging virus that has apparently become immune to the common treatments. It affects young and old, male and female, the poor and impoverished as well as the well-heeled. Once lodged in the brain, this evil parasite is difficult to purge. This disease is not AIDS. I am talking about a social disease endemic to class-ruled societies—a disease called nationalism, whose pathological symptoms are revealed daily in news reports from around the world. The virus renders its working-class victims blind to the source of their misery and to their own class interests. It causes them to engage in irrational acts that spread the disease to other groups of workers and to wage wars of mutual slaughter at the behest of their ruling classes. We can illustrate the outrageous manifestations of this disease with the following examples:

During the abortive coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991, the electronic mailing list set up by an Ohio researcher named John B. Harlan through the Internet computer network became one of the few channels of communication that linked the world to events transpiring in the Kremlin. However, after that event and in the course of time, the use of that electronic mailing list gradually soured as Ukrainian and Russian users became embroiled in a series of insults, slurs, racist epithets, mudslinging and sexist remarks against each other that spun completely out of control. Eventually, about 600 Russians and 300 Ukrainians were engaged in a kind of electronic nationalist civil war. After terminating the mailing list, Mr. Harlan closed this communication network and castigated these nationalistic abusers of E-mail as “litter on the global information superhighway.”

Then there is the outrageous case of the two Macedonias:

In early March of this year, 200,000 Greeks in the northern Greek city of Salonika marched in protest against the former Yugoslavian breakaway republic of Macedonia. These Greeks felt the name and the flag of “Macedonia,” the star-burst symbol of Alexander the Great, was their own exclusive legacy, now being stolen from them by the new republic to their north. One dumbfounded observer asked why a name or a 2,300-year-old symbol on a flag could make a difference now, and what threat a rundown, landlocked country with three rusty tanks could pose to Greece, a member of NATO and the European Union?

One journalist answered: “When they steal our name, it is a clear sign that they

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want to steal our land.”

During the abortive communist uprising in Greece after World War II, the Greek government had confiscated land and property from procommunist Greeks and Slavs that fled to Yugoslavia. Because now the Greek government has offered to compensate or restore the property of returning Greeks, those who own these properties now fear that they could lose them should their former owners return and claim them.

NATIONALISM ONCE PROGRESSIVE

We Socialists must be careful to differentiate between this outrageous, reactionary nationalism of today and the nationalism that emerged in earlier centuries as a progressive social force and a necessary component for the capitalist overthrow of feudalism.

We might benefit, momentarily, from reviewing the formative development of capitalism:

The political framework of feudalism was far too constraining to capitalism. Innumerable petty principalities, the demands of each baron and lord for unfettered rule within their domains, their tithes, customs, rights, imposts and arbitrary interferences, posed continuous harassment to the growth of trade. The crazy-quilt estates of the nobility posed impossible constraints on the mercantile capitalists who required a large, uninterrupted territory and free movement between cities. Feudalism was inherently warlike, disruptive and antagonistic whereas capitalism could best develop with stability and peace. Feudalism had a virtual monopoly on the use of the population, whereas capitalism had a need for free wage workers. The serfs held by feudal estates were considered an inalienable part of the lords' domains. Capitalist development was impeded until this population could be released to be exploited by capitalist industry and agriculture.

Centralized authority and the political nation, a relatively large territory unconstrained by the limitations of innumerable petty estates, were the requirements of developing capitalism, aspirations that happened to coincide with the ambitions of rising absolute monarchs. Their alliances with mercantile capitalists to raise armies, create courts of law and uniform laws throughout the

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kingdom independent of the feudal lords, created the basis of the current political entities and the basis for the modern nations.

Since trade could only be developed on the basis of a common written language, local dialects fell as those of the towns became prevalent and eventually solidified into a national language.

Eventually, the monarchical edifice became entirely dependent upon the financial support of the mercantile capitalists and it was just a matter of time until the rising bourgeoisie demanded a voice in the affairs of state. Ultimately, the monarchy and its institutions were perceived as being largely redundant and they were either overthrown or totally subordinated to the rule of the capitalist class.

The revolutionary overthrow of feudalism was accompanied by a literature and propaganda steeped in the nationalistic imagery of “La Marseillaise,” “Britannia Rules the Waves,” “God Bless America” and “Deutschland Über Alles.” The appropriate nationalist litany of philosophical, literary, cultural and artistic paraphernalia was draped over the armature of the political state. By extolling the nation, the unity of the people, the flag and unattainable ideals such as “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity,” the mass propaganda sought to make all, regardless of real class interests, participants in the struggles of the bourgeoisie.

As long as the capitalist class was locked in struggle with feudalism, nationalism had a socially useful role. No sooner had the capitalist class conquered political power from the church and nobility and fashioned the state power in its own image, nationalism assumed a reactionary role. Thus, after the French Revolution, the lore of Bonapartism, the seminal form of French nationalism, was used to feed the French imperialist war machine with a century of conscripted soldiers. Similarly, English armies and navies were enlarged as the necessary coercive forces to build, enlarge and, when necessary, wrest colonial territories from competing capitalist nations and subject hundreds of millions of colonial peoples, all to the tune of nationalist imagery and themes that successfully convinced most workers that it was a privilege to be exploited as Englishmen. Though it was essential that each capitalist nation establish peace and tranquility within its own domain, conflict and warfare was and has been the rule internationally. In fact, warfare under capitalism acquired a new and greatly expanded dimension, dwarfing the puny,

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crude brawls that characterized medieval warfare. Not only was the technology of mass destruction enormously enlarged, but the very size of the fighting forces leaped a hundredfold.

Where did the bourgeoisie find these large drafts of men to fight their wars? From dispossessed peasants, the agricultural hinterlands and the accumulating urban proletariat. And how would the capitalist class persuade the working class to support their wars of plunder and expansion of trade? By extolling the virtues of the nation, the superiority of their national institutions, culture, religion and so on. The press, the schools, the pulpit, were all recruited to sing paeans of praise and spin webs of delusion, self-glorification, deceit and racism. When this did not work, brute coercion by the state — in other words, oppression and military conscription — became the rule.

It is clear, then, that the nation-state is the political form of capitalism. It was fashioned and adapted to promote capitalist interests in opposition to the interests of the vast majority of the working class. It is a capitalist tool, and it is anathema to the working class.

As capitalism has developed and expanded globally — indeed, as capitalism has itself become international, as the markets of the world have shrunk in relation to the productivity of labor, as competition has grown in intensity with the influx of innumerable new competitors, as the productive capacity of all capitalist states has far exceeded the diminishing capacity of the world's workers to buy back their products, so too has the shrill pitch of nationalist rhetoric and jingoism grown in intensity — though solely for working-class consumption.

EUROPE'S MALAISE

Witness the current state of Europe:

The European Economic Community was supposed to be the “miracle” of 300-plus million souls that would provide an insatiable market for capitalists and constitute a formidable trading block. However, as Karl Marx noted:

“...the tendency of capitalist production is to develop the productive forces in such a way that only the absolute power of consumption of the entire

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society would be their limit.”¹

In fact, the glut of capitalist markets has hit Europe hard. Unemployment is rampant in Spain, Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Holland and Belgium. The guest workers from Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Algeria and many other “third world” countries have apparently worn out their welcome as the nationalist virus mixed with deadly strains of racism have fueled resurgent fascism. Suddenly the “guests” which had facilitated the “European miracle” are now persona non grata.

Various European politicians from fascists and ultranationalists to social democrats — a narrowing difference as time goes on — have expressed degrees of opposition to the influx of foreign workers. These people are of the same governments that once encouraged foreign workers to live and work in Europe and to participate in the “European Renaissance,” “the economic miracle” and other high-sounding phrases that mark an ever more intensive exploitation of the working class. They are also the same politicians and governments that have acquiesced in the outrages by Nazi thugs against Turks, Kurds and other minorities in Germany.

The xenophobic utterances of La Pen in France, and the recent election of neo-fascists to a parliamentary majority in Italy led by media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, who recently accepted fascist salutes from skinhead supporters in Rome, are all indicative of the rising tide of reactionary nationalism.

We must not lose sight of the fact that nationalism is a tool of capitalist reaction used to thwart the social unrest within the working class away from tendencies aimed at their emancipation from wage slavery. It is sand in the eyes of the working class to blind them from the conditions of their exploitation and misery under capitalism.

SOCIALISM AND NATIONALISM

But what of the insensate nationalism which has engulfed Eastern Europe, that caused the breakup of what had been Czechoslovakia and threatens further fragmentation of Slovakia? What of the demise of the Soviet Union that had long functioned as an integrated economic unity but has since been shattered into

¹ *Capital*, III, Chapter XXX, “Money Capital and Actual Capital, 1.”

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antagonistic petty states? To those who claim that this would be proof of nationalism co-existing with socialism, we say: Quite the contrary, this is proof that socialism never existed in these countries. Socialism and nationalism are incompatible concepts since socialism can only exist when the political state has disappeared, and its shell, the nation, has disappeared along with it. In the words of Arnold Petersen, former National Secretary of the SLP:

“Since nations under capitalism are, in fact, nothing more than the shells of the political state, it follows that nations as such will in the course of time disappear . . .”²

As is well known, the political state in all of its anachronistic manifestations has lived on with a vengeance in all of the so-called socialist and communist countries. There is no place on earth where narrow nationalistic rivalries have produced more misery, death and destruction than in what was once Yugoslavia, a polyglot “nation” amalgamated from the political remnants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I. The current murderous campaigns and incursions of Bosnian-Serb “militiamen” against the Bosnian-Muslim population, “ethnic cleansing,” atrocities against civilians, women and children, old and sick, are all being committed under the flag of nationalism.

Those who attribute the current nationalist anarchy in the Balkans to the collapse of socialism have no understanding of either socialism or capitalism. Yugoslavia under communist rule was, like its counterparts in Russia and Eastern Europe, an economic system that could best be characterized as “bureaucratic state despotism,” which is nothing more than a different form of class rule than that of capitalism, and as such has many of the same attributes. Industry and agriculture were state-owned and managed by appointed bureaucratic directors who answered to a centralized executive committee which was ultimately dominated by the Communist League, the Yugoslav Communist Party organization. Despite attempts in the 1950s, during the Tito era, to imbue the working class with the beguiling notion that it was running industry by democratically elected factory committees, the state-run enterprises were in firm control of top-down bureaucratic appointees. Nationalistic fervor was kept alive as communist politicians from the six states comprising the Yugoslavian Federation sparred with one another and jockeyed for

² Arnold Petersen, *Daniel De Leon, Internationalist*.

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position, privilege and power, all of which was encouraged and orchestrated by the Machiavellian Tito. The whole Yugoslav state apparatus and especially the powerful security police, maintained a keen eye for dissidents. You may recall the case of journalist Milovan Djilas who was jailed for seven years for having published a book on the rise of a new ruling class in Yugoslavia. Socialist education was certainly “dead as a doornail,” and for good reason! Had the workers been exposed to real socialism they would have made short shrift of Tito and the Communist “Apparatchiks.” Class rule is alive and well in all six states of the former Yugoslav Federation, each of which has its dominant political figure. The most ambitious and devious among them is Slobodan Milosevic, the former CP figure who runs affairs in Serbia, a political opportunist who perceives himself as the “fuehrer” of a greater Serbia destined to fill the shoes vacated by Marshal Tito. He has conjured up xenophobic threats of an anti-Serbian international conspiracy consisting of Croatia, Slovenia, the Muslim Bosnians, the Vatican and Europe led by Germany and the United States.

The story of Milosevic’s manipulation of factions and nationalism is too tedious to iterate within this review, but suffice it to say he used ultra-nationalism and Serbian irredentism to his and the Serbian ruling class’ advantage.

Throughout the entire period of Milosevic’s Byzantine intrigue and manipulation not a word has escaped from any source indicating an iota of socialist internationalism on the part of the Yugoslavian working class. Is it possible that five decades of Stalinist bureaucratic despotism could have totally subdued even a tiny spark of proletarian class unity? Is it possible that class-consciousness has been completely smothered by ethnocentric myopia? It certainly would seem so. In order to maintain their class rule after the collapse of bureaucratic state despotism, the Serbian inheritors of Stalinism have used the nationalist virus to divert the social unrest of the working classes into anti-working-class channels including blood-thirsty ethnic warfare.

The same phenomena have erupted in other parts of what had been the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and especially Russia.

Russia’s current apostle of xenophobic nationalism is Vladimir Volfovich Zhirinovskiy. When he’s not taking pokes at his opponents in the state Duma,

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Zhirinovsky is busy attending conferences and dropping outrageous comments which he knows the capitalist media loves and, as he has discovered, will even pay well for.

His so-called “Liberal Democratic Party” which, of course, is neither liberal nor democratic and is more a cult than a party, recently held its fifth national convention. It drew neo-Nazi observers from Germany and a delegation from Iraq.

Reporting on the event, *The New York Times* noted:

“The crowning moment came when 343 delegates, with not a single dissenting voice, not even a whimper of debate, raised their pink party cards in unison and voted to make Mr. Zhirinovsky their dictator, with full power to control all party affairs from finances to appointments, until April 2, 2004.”

Zhirinovsky is the personification of the perennial “man-on-the-horseback” phenomenon that often appears when class-ruled societies reach a point of social collapse. This is one horseman, however, that rides his horse backwards and presents an aspect that is indistinguishable from his steed’s rear end! Zhirinovsky has been hard at work cultivating resentment and hatred against minorities, suspicion against Western capitalism — and particularly the United States. His specialty is arousing animosity against the former republics of the Soviet Union by manufacturing exaggerated accounts of the abuse of ethnic Russians and the rape of Russian women. The xenophobic themes on which he harps have been picked up by the Yeltsin regime and the opposition to the point that ultranationalist sentiment rising in Russia is now known as the Zhirinovsky factor.

As was recently noted in *The People*, ultra-nationalism is not a new phenomenon in Russia. It existed under the czars, and in the Soviet Union, with the exception of a very brief period after the Bolshevik Revolution. Indeed, it had been institutionalized under the brutal, anti-working-class Stalinist regime. The Second World War, known in the former Soviet Union and now in Russia as “The Great Patriotic War,” clearly reveals the Stalinist emphasis on defense of the fatherland, not of the international working-class movement.

The Russian workers, therefore, emerged from the dark era of Stalinist rule devoid

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of the most fundamental lessons in socialism. They are as distant from the concept of working-class internationalism as their counterparts in Western capitalist countries, if not more so. This reminds us of Arnold Petersen's indictment of the German Social Democratic Party prior to and after the takeover by the Nazis. In *Daniel De Leon, Internationalist*, he wrote:

“ . . . Here is exposed the crime of the Social Democrats: the miseducation of the German proletariat. Instead of teaching the workers Marxian socialism, instead of organizing them for the revolution, they were taught bourgeois claptrap . . . they were seduced with promises that could not be fulfilled and corrupted with reforms that in the end proved worse than worthless. ‘Leave it to our leaders’ was the watchword They did, and ‘the leaders’ left them to perish in the swamps of bourgeois nationalism and reformism as ‘leaders’ have always done, and always will do.”

How familiar this is to us Socialists. The workers of Western capitalism, as well as those of Russia and Eastern Europe, have been subjected to essentially the same indoctrination, the same miseducation!

ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

Commenting on the nationalist virus would not be complete without at least a brief reference to the seemingly endless conflict between Palestinian and Jewish nationalism in the Middle East. Zionism and Palestinian nationalism have deluded Jewish and Arab workers for almost a century. The questions of whose land or whose resources, whose history and whose legacy, are moot since everything is owned by the capitalists or the political state. It makes little difference if the capitalists or the state are Israeli or Palestinian, Muslim or Jewish. The conditions of these two working-class peoples remains tenuous, insecure, vulnerable to the same laws of ruination facing every worker throughout the world. For those who argue “Israel is a safe haven for the Jews,” consider that a good part of the world's Jews have been assembled in a concentrated area that, in the light of nuclear proliferation, makes them more vulnerable than ever. Moreover, Israel's puny resources make it totally dependent upon regional and international connections which Israeli capitalism assiduously cultivates. What if the Israeli working class exhibited similar internationalist class characteristics in which Jewish workers extended the band of fraternal friendship to the Palestinian working class? What if, in opposition to the extreme chauvinism of the Histadruth, the official Zionist trade union federation, Israeli unionists attempted to build a multinational union

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organization?

As a matter of fact, such an organization was set on foot in Palestine in 1930, remarkably one year after anti-Jewish pogroms had broken out in 1929! Under the co-sponsorship of the left-wing Poalei-Zion (Workers of Zion) and Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace) organizations, there was launched the “Activat Hapooalim” or “Workers’ Brotherhood.” It had as its slogan, “From national separation to international unity! From estrangement of nations to fraternity of workers!” Hundreds of Jewish and Arab workers joined this organization before the British imperialists put an end to it. It threatened to become a mass organization conforming to working-class internationalist guidelines.

As was noted by Marx and Engels: “The proletarian is without property . . . modern industrial labor, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character.”³

Indeed, the products of modern industry are devoid of any national identity. BMWs are built by Kurds, Turks and Greeks and, incidentally, Germans. Sony electronic products are made by Chinese, Filipinos, and perhaps Japanese. Who knows? Who cares?

The modern working class is unique in history. It is the first revolutionary class to be totally devoid of the ownership of productive property, and the special discipline that a form of ownership inherently imposes upon a class. Unlike the lords and princes of feudal estates whose ownership of land and exploitation of serfs gave them a special unifying orientation and “world view”; unlike the capitalist class whose ownership of shops, factories, industry, and command over wage labor has imparted the capitalist “world view,” focus and ideology; the modern working class must derive its resolve, its unity, its discipline, purely from its special relationship to production.

It is upon this realization that the Socialist Labor Party has formulated the only effective antidote to the nationalist virus; the only solution to ending the evils that are engulfing the human race.

³ *Communist Manifesto.*

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We call it Marxism-De Leonism. Marxism, because we have built upon his original analyses and critique of the capitalist system. Marx and Engels pointed the way to the future with their recognition that the emancipation of the working class is possible only through the classconscious act of the workers themselves. It is De Leonism because a powerful thinker named Daniel De Leon turned Marxism into an organizational reality and formulated the program of the Socialist Labor Party.

That program is inherently international; it is founded upon the proposition that, as De Leon noted, “there are only two nations—the exploiting and the exploited toilers.” It calls upon the workers to organize at the point of production—at the workplace—into unified industrial unions, not in order to strike, but in order to take over, take permanent possession of that which labor and labor alone built: the variegated industrial complex of America. It calls upon the working class to operate industry and to produce for need, not profit. It calls upon the working class to set on foot a government based upon industry, not politics. With this vital message, this cogent program, we call upon the American workers to heed the voice of the Socialist Labor Party and join forces with us to bring about international brotherhood, freedom and peace.