

You Have One Prerogative — To Think:
Speech in Davenport, Iowa
[excerpt]
(March 2, 1906)

A well-filled house greeted Eugene V. Debs last night at his lecture at the Turner Grand Theatre... Mr. Debs's voice was in poor condition at the beginning of his speech, but it steadily improved in quality till toward the last the slight hoarseness that was still apparent was unnoticed in the musical flow of his sonorous words....

This is a wonderful age in which we live — an age of scientific miracle, wonderful advancement in everything that goes to make civilization, and yet an age of widespread unrest. The material achievements of this age far outstrip those of any other but pave the way to the nobler triumphs of the spirit.

To know today, we must know the past. History is the record of class struggles. Through all time we find that the many have lived in poverty and died in despair. Primitive man was a brute, satisfying his brute instincts by brute force. But he had in himself the possibilities of advancement, and he has developed these through thousands of years, until today he is civilized man.

But he is not quite civilized yet, nor yet quite free. He finds his last and greatest problem, which must be solved before he shall become really civilized and free in modern industry. In the inequalities and injustices of our industrial system he finds his greatest obstacle to further progress.

Labor creates and conserves all civilization, and yet the working class bears upon its bow the mark of inferiority and subjection. This problem must be solved before man is really civilized and free.

Problems Omnipresent

During the history of the world the working class has always been in subjection. In the ancient world, there were two classes, the masters and their slaves. In the Middle Ages, the feudal system superseded the early

slavery and, while the worker was not owned by the master, the latter possessed the land and practically controlled the lives of those who did the work of which he reaped the benefits. For a thousand years Europe was a great feudal despotism.

Then in the eighteenth century came shock after shock of wonderful inventions, marvelous discoveries, the rise of the trading class, and with the dawning of this wonderful century the problem shifts again. The death knell of feudalism has sounded and capitalism reigned supreme. And now today, after a century and a quarter of wage slavery, we again see upon every hand the unerring signs of change. Let us look closely at today and its possibilities.

The economic dependence of man began with the taking away of the tool with which he labored. Before the modern industrial system had developed, industry was upon a small scale. Each man manufactured mainly for his own family, and exchanged with like small producers for what he needed and could not himself produce.

He owned the tool with which he worked. There is the key to the situation. He owned the tool with which he worked, and was free. But with invention and discovery, the tool came gradually to be large and complex, more and more so every year. And so the tool became inaccessible to every producer, but remained in the hands of one man. It was necessary for the others to work, in order to live, and to do so they must get permission from the owner of the tool. They got this permission on condition of giving up the greater part of the product created by their labor and his machine, and so drifted into economic bondage.

Since man is a tool-using animal, the working class became as completely subject to the will of the capitalistic class as though they were in actual slavery. Without the tools, the workers began to compete against each other, beating down wages, and as the machine became more perfect, the struggle became more intense and wages went down. The larger and more complex the machine, the more intense the struggle and the lower the wage.

The machine has brought about an increase in the productive power of man and in the wealth produced. But the worker did not reap the benefit. The capitalist became richer and, with his increased riches, more powerful. The question that now confronts us is how to bring about a just distribution of that wealth.

And so today, with 26 million workers in the United States, man stands forth toolless and helpless. With increasing wealth on the one hand and increasing poverty on the other, the great problem of today becomes plain. We must find some way to distribute wealth justly among those who produce it. And in the light of economic progress, the answer is also plain. The tool, used collectively, has remained in private hands. Ownership must keep pace with production, and the tool become collective property of those who use it.

Use the Tool Collectively

Why should the capitalist own the tool that he does not use? Why should not the workers own the tool they do use? There is but one thing that keeps them from solving the problem, one thing that stands between them and freedom, and that is ignorance. [The worker] has not used his mind but has worked with his hand for the benefit of another, who took away from him all he produced except just so much as was necessary to keep him in running order, the same as any other machine.

The hour the working class become united it becomes the greatest power between the earth and sky. To make the workers conscious of their power is the work of socialism.

Socialism is a political as well as an industrial question since without a change in government there can be no change in system. He who owns the wealth will control the government. The Supreme Court in this country is composed of trained corporation lawyers.

The same evolutionary forces are now at work to bring about socialism that caused the growth of the present capitalistic system out of the feudal system. The small producer and little capitalist are being forced into the ranks of the socialists and, while the capitalists are centralizing, we are organizing. Finally they will have the money but we will have the people. Then we will transfer the possession of the means of production by legal means from the capitalists to the people.

There is nothing to the argument that human nature will not warrant socialism. The industrial system does not depend upon human nature but human nature depends upon the system. Change the economic conditions and human nature will change.

If the workers have intelligence enough to make the machine, and intelligence enough to use it, they have intelligence enough to own it. They

must be the masters of the tools with which they live, and that is just what socialism proposes to make them.

The tool your great-grandfather used is today a curiosity. The modern tool is not individually used, it is a great social instrument. It is so great that the owner of it becomes the absolute master of those who use it. Evolution is not yet complete. As collective ownership of the individual tool was once an absurdity, today the individual ownership of the collective tool is not only an absurdity, but a crime.

The lesson will be learned by the workers in the next few years, and then the machine will be, not a means of oppression, but an instrument of industrial emancipation and social exaltation.

The slave driver of yesterday is gone. The feudal lord is gone. And the capitalist must soon follow. He has written an important chapter in economic progress, but he has done his work, and he lingers, an anachronism. Social ownership takes the place of individual ownership, as social production took the place of individual production, and the cooperative commonwealth rises upon the ruins of the competitive system.

On Child Slavery

The first thing socialists will do when they get in power is abolish child labor. If there is a crime that should bring to the cheek of society the tinge of shame, it is child slavery. I never see a child-slave but my heart stands still; and I determine to work with renewed energy for the abolition of the system that makes child slavery possible and necessary.

There is only one period in the life of man that is entirely free and that is childhood. It should be made as long as possible. When girls are sent into the factories in early life, they are unfit for motherhood when they arrive at the age of maturity. Child labor is a great evil which must be stamped out.

Socialism will not destroy the home but found it stronger than ever. We will make women economically free and then marriage will be founded on love and love alone.

It is all well enough to say that if the working man would stop drinking he would be all right. Or save his money, or go to Sunday school, or something else. But we know that the great mass of working people are deformed, physically, mentally, and morally. All this is the inevitable result of the economic system under which we live. The economic basis of life

must be right before those parts of human nature that lead to nobility and altruism can have full play and encouragement.

It is not necessary to root out selfishness to found socialism. Altruism is enlightened selfishness. We will reward the able according to their ability and they will gain more through service of the people than in a struggle for dirty dollars.

Finally there will be no war. War is murder in uniform and the production of instruments of death is the prostitution of genius. War is caused by international competition and is carried on for monetary profits.

An economic system founded upon injustice must produce the effects that we see about us every day — degradation, misery, and despair. and in the face of these facts it is blindness and foolishness to try to find the remedy in the reform of some effect. We must go to the root of the matter. Once all men stand in a just relation to each other economically, the other things will follow. The other problems must be worked out for themselves, it is true, but the economic problem must be solved first.

You have the opportunity in the coming municipal election to vote for these conquering principles, and hasten the dawn of that brighter day of socialism. You have one prerogative — to think. I only ask you to do that.

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