

The Socialist Party's Appeal for 1908 ¹ (October 15, 1908)

At a public meeting in New York City some months ago the present presidential candidate of the Republic Party was asked this question: "What is a man to do who is out of work in a financial panic and is starving?"

This is an intensely human as well as a very practical question. It epitomizes the problem of the unemployed and places it in bold relief. It is not too much to say that the future welfare and progress of our country — aye, the fate of civilization itself — depends upon a correct solution of this problem. In view of the supreme importance of the question it might naturally be expected that the Republican Party would offer some practical and well-defined method of dealing with it, and one might suppose that the party's standard-bearer would be in a position clearly to expound that method in making reply to his interrogator. But how pitifully inadequate was the answer! It is at least creditable to Mr. Taft's honesty that he frankly replied, "God knows!"

When Mr. Kern,² the vice-presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, was asked recently what his party proposed to do for the relief of the unemployed, he is reported to have answered, "Nothing directly, nothing socialistic. We hope that carrying out the general ideas in our platform will so restore confidence that industry will start up again. But that's about all. In fact, that's enough."

These answers are not cited for any partisan purpose, but because they serve admirably to illustrate the really essential difference between the Socialist Party and its most formidable political rivals. The Socialist Party does not refer this important problem to the Deity for solution. It recognizes the fact that it is of human creation and must be solved by human effort. It proposes to do something "directly," something "socialistic," for the relief of the unemployed. The Socialist Party recognizes the serious nature of the unemployed problem and aims to solve it in the only way it can be solved, namely, by removing its cause. As means of temporary relief, applicable during the period of transition to a collective system of industry, the party proposes "immediate government relief for the unemployed workers by building schools, by reforesting of cut-over and waste

lands, by reclamation of arid tracts and the building of canals, and by extending all other useful public works.” Both from the stand point of effectiveness and that of practicability this program may be offered without comment in lieu of Mr. Taft’s “God knows!” and Mr. Kern’s “hope” of restored confidence.

As a matter of fact, it is an entire impossibility for either the Republican or the Democratic party to offer any practicable solution for our industrial ills, because those ills are the inevitable and perfectly natural outgrowth of the wage system of industry, which system both parties are alike pledged to support and defend. That the economic policy of the Republican Party is impotent to stay the periodic recurrence of industrial and financial crises is proved by the existing depression, and as the party’s platform utterance in relation to labor pledges it to a continuance of what is denominated “the same wise policy,” there is certainly no hope of relief from that quarter. With regard to the Democratic Party, the country already has had sufficient experience with its methods of dealing with important economic problems to justify the suspicion that Mr. Kern’s “hope” may prove somewhat elusive.

The Socialist Party of the United States is part of a great international movement which far overshadows any other movement recorded in history. Its basic idea is the complete and permanent emancipation of labor all over the world. To quote from a recent article by George Allan England³:

First of all, the fact should be made quite clear that the Socialist Party is far and away the largest political unit not only of today but of any time. To the uninformed who conceive of socialists as a rather obscure and fantastic sect of utopians — of “dreamers” — the discovery must come as something of a shock that the world’s socialist vote not stands between 8 million and 9 million, representing about 30 million adult socialists. This latter number includes, of course, women and disfranchised persons, who in the socialist concept of government, in the “state within a state” which socialism is building up, enjoy equal rights with present voters. There is something peculiarly disconcerting to the present governments of, by, and for plutocracy in those 30 million “dreamers,” all so active in propaganda, all so terribly in earnest — in that ever widening acceptance of the visionary axiom that “without rights there shall be no duties; without duties, no rights.”

In the second place, it should be definitely understood that the movement is already breaking into legislative bodies all over the civilized world, to an extent hardly realized by the casual critic. The United States is practically the

only large country of modern type in which the party has no national representatives — a state of affairs, be it said in passing, which will soon be remedied. * * *

Prophecy is dangerous, but 1908 should for many reasons hold in store a great surprise for the old party politicians. From now on there is “a new Richmond in the field.”⁴

The Socialist Party is the political expression of what is known as the “class struggle.” this struggle is an economic fact as old as history itself, but it is only within the past generation that it has become a thoroughly conscious and well organized political fact. As long as this struggle was confined to its economic aspect the ruling classes had nothing to fear, as, being in control of all the means and agencies of government, they were always able to use their power effectively to suppress uprisings either of chattel slaves, feudal serfs, or free-born and politically equal capitalist wage workers. But now that the struggle has definitely entered the political field it assumes for the present ruling class a new and sinister aspect. With the whole power of the state — the army, the navy, the courts, the police — in possession of the working class by virtue of its victory at the polls, the death knell of capitalist private property and wage slavery is sounded.

This does not mean, however, that the workers will wrest control of government from the capitalist class simply for the purpose of continuing the class struggle on a new plane, as has been the case in all previous political revolutions when one class has superseded another in the control of government. It does not mean that the workers and capitalists will merely change places, as many poorly informed persons undoubtedly still believe. It means the inauguration of an entirely new system of industry, in which the exploitation of man by man will have no place. It means the establishment of a new economic motive for production and distribution. Instead of profit being the ruling motive of industry, as at present, all production and distribution will be for use. As a consequence, the class struggle and economic class antagonisms as we now know them will entirely disappear.

Did the Socialist Party have no higher political ideal than the victory of one class over another it would not be worthy of a moment's support from any right-thinking individual. It would, indeed, be impossible for the party to gain any considerable strength or prestige. It is the great moral worth of its ideals that attracts adherents to the socialist movement even from the ranks of the capitalist class, and holds them to their allegiance

with an enthusiasm that suggests a close parallel with the early days of Christianity; and it is the mathematical certainty with which its conclusions are stated that enables the Socialist Party to expand and advance with irresistible force to the goal it has in view, in spite of the appalling opposition it has had to encounter. It is this certainty, and the moral worth of its ideals, which moved Mommsen,⁵ the venerable German historian, to say that “this is the only great party which has a claim to political respect.”

The capitalist was originally a socially useful individual, but the evolution of our industrial system has rendered him a parasite, an entirely useless functionary that must be eliminated if civilization is to endure. It is a leading thought in modern philosophy that in its process of development each institution tends to cancel itself. Born out of social necessity, its progress is determined by repulsions and attractions arising in society, which produce effects tending to negate its original function. Now, that is what has happened to the capitalist. He is no longer useful. He is merely a clog to social progress and must be abolished, just as the feudal lord and chattel slaveholder have been abolished.

The capitalist was originally a manager who worked hard at his business and received what economists call the “wages of superintendence.” So long as he occupied that position the capitalist might be restrained and controlled in various ways, but he could not be got rid of. He performed real functions, and as society was not yet prepared to take those functions upon itself, it could not afford to discharge him. But now the capitalist proper has become absolutely useless. Finding it easier to combine with others of his class in a large undertaking, he has abdicated his position of overseer and has put in a salaried manager to act for him. This salaried manager now performs the only social function of the capitalist, while the capitalist himself has become a mere rent or interest receiver. The rent or interest he receives is paid for the use of a monopoly which not he, but a vast multitude of people created by their joint efforts.

This differentiation between manager and capitalist is a necessary part of the process of capitalistic evolution due to machine industry. As competition led to waste in production, so it also led to the cutting of profits among capitalists. To prevent this the concentration of capital was necessary, by which the large capitalist could undersell his small rivals in the marketing of good produced by machinery and distributed by agencies initially too costly for any individual competitor to purchase or set on foot. For such massive capitals the contributions of several capitalists are

necessary. Hence the joint stock company, the corporation, and finally the trust. Through the medium of such agencies a person in the United States can own stock in an enterprise in Africa or South America which he has never visited and never intends to visit, and which, therefore, he cannot “superintend” in any way. He and the other stockholders put in a manager with injunctions to be economical. The manager’s business is to earn the largest possible dividends for his employers. If he does not do so he is dismissed. To secure high dividends the manager will lower wages. If that is resisted there will probably be either a strike or a lockout. Cheap labor will be imported by the manager, and if the workers resist by intimidation or organizing boycotting the forces of the state will be used against them, and in the end they must submit. The old personal relation between the workers and the employer is gone.

From the point of view of the corporation owners the workers are simply an extension of the machine of profit production. The workers are not regarded as having human attributes. their labor is trafficked in as a commodity, like iron and steel, and the only interest the capitalist retains in production is in his interest as an idle dividend receiver. Society can get along without the capitalist; it refuses longer to support him in idleness and luxury.

The process of industrial evolution that has rendered the capitalist a useless functionary has at the same time evolved an organization, cooperative in character, whereby industry may be carried on without friction for the benefit of the whole people instead of for the profit of the individual capitalist. The conduct of industry will be entrusted to men who are technically familiar with its processes, precisely as it is now entrusted to managers by the stockholders of a corporation; in short, the whole of industry will represent a giant corporation in which all citizens are stockholders, and the state will represent a board of directors acting for the whole people. Details of organization and performance many well be left to the experts to whose direction the matter will be given when the time comes. It is not the mission of the Socialist Party to speculate concerning the manner in which the workers will conduct their affairs when they have come into possession of their inheritance which the ages have prepared for them. Standards of right and justice under the new regime, however, may well be indicated.

“Without rights there shall be no duties; without duties no rights.”
What will be the practical interpretation of this socialist axiom?

Obviously, social parasitism must cease; every man must be a producer, or perform some socially useful function, in order to procure title to any share in the product of the collective industry. The only citizenship held honorable will be economic citizenship, or comradeship in production and in the sharing of product.

The spectacle of strong men walking the streets idle and hungry, vainly begging for a chance to work for the pittance that will suffice to ward off starvation from themselves and their loved ones, will be no more. The cruelty of children of tender years being forced hungry to school in a great city like New York will disappear. No longer will there be a problem of the unemployed, and the capitalist will be elevated from his present condition of parasitism to that of a worker and producer of wealth. The class struggle must necessarily cease, for there will be no classes. Each individual will be his own economic master, and all will be servants of the collectivity. Human brotherhood, as taught by Christ nineteen centuries ago, will for the first time begin to be realized.

The struggle for working class emancipation, which finds its expression through the Socialist Party, must continue, and will increase in intensity until either the ruling class completely subjugates the working class, or until the working class entirely absorbs the capitalist class. There is no middle ground possible, and it is this fact that makes ludicrous those sporadic reform movement typified by the Populist [People's] and Independence parties.

But the subjugation of the working class is out of the question. Intelligence has gone too far for that; it is the capitalist class that is doomed. Hence the only possible outcome of the present struggle is victory for the working class and the absorption by that class of all other classes.

When the present Socialist Party has accomplished its mission of uniting the workers of the world into a solid political phalanx the end of capitalist domination is at hand, and the era of industrial peace so long wished for by philanthropists and seers will down upon the world.

¹ Part of a quadrennial series in which the presidential nominees of major and minor parties were allowed free access to the pages of the national public affairs weekly, *The Independent*, to state their official party "appeal" to the voters.

² John Worth Kern (1849-1917) was a lawyer from Kokomo, Indiana elected to the Indiana state senate in 1893. Kern was tapped as the running mate for William Jennings Bryan in his third run for the presidency in 1908. In 1910 Kern was elected to the US senate, in which he would serve a single term, retiring in 1917 due to poor health and dying shortly thereafter.

³ George Allan England (1877-1936) was a Harvard-educated author who would run for governor of Maine on the Socialist Party ticket in 1912. In addition to prominence as a writer for popular magazines, England gained a degree of fame for his socialist-tinged fiction, authoring more than a dozen novels between 1910 and 1926.

⁴ George Allan England, "International Socialism as a Political Force," *American Review of Reviews*, vol. 37, no. 5 (May 1908), pp. 580-581.

⁵ Christian Matthias Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903) was a professor of Roman history at the University of Berlin from 1861 to 1887. He was awarded the 1902 Nobel Prize for literature for his magnum opus, the three volume *Römische Geschichte* (1854-1856), the landmark of an extensive career as a historical writer. He is one of the only individuals to have won the Nobel for literature for a work of non-fiction.