
Interview with James Creelman¹
of the *New York Journal*
[June 18, 1897]

Chicago, June 18 [1897]. — Not long after daybreak this morning I sat with Mr. Debs and talked with him about his great plan for organizing the unemployed masses of America into a cooperative commonwealth, and after getting political control of one state in the Union gradually extending the socialist system until the whole nation is reorganized on a cooperative basis.

The American Railway Union has gone out of existence [he said] and its members are now to be known as the Social Democracy of America. I have already assurances of at least ten thousand persons that they will join us in establishing the new commonwealth in one of the thinly populated and fertile states. The Governor of Washington state [J.R. Rogers] has written to invite us to go to that state, where there is a beautiful rich valley something like a hundred and fifty miles long awaiting us. The Governor is in hearty sympathy with us, and assures us that we shall have general support and encouragement in that community.

Of course, we have not yet decided upon the territory we intend to settle in. Ex-Governor Waite, of Colorado, is now in Texas examining lands for us there.

The Social Democracy is now an assured fact, for there are not less than a million and a half men out of employment in this country, and not less than five millions of men, women, and children wholly or partly idle. Thousands of letters of congratulations are pouring in on us. The work is overwhelming, stupendous. I have not been in bed for more than eight hours since Monday [June 14].

Mr. Debs's countenance shone with enthusiasm. He is a tall, slender man. His head is now high and somewhat bald. His eyes are blue and the eyelids red-rimmed. His ears are small and stand out from his head. He has a strong, well-curved nose. His mouth is small, and the lips full, but not sensual. His upper teeth are big and flat. His under teeth are small and

sharp. The chin is long and square. There is a mole between the eyebrows and another one on the nose, where the gold bow of his spectacles rests. Altogether a gentle, sweet face, reminding one strongly of the late Eugene Fields or Bill Nye.

His voice is soft and clear. He has long hands with delicate, bony fingers, spatulate at the ends, and when he talks he uses his hands continually in slow, curving gestures. But he has an odd trick of seldom bending his fingers. He was dressed in a well-cut suit of gray with a turn-down collar and gray necktie, a flat gold stud glinting on the bosom of his shirt. He wore low tan-colored shoes. His ankles are short projecting angles. It was hard to look at this man and believe that for five years he fired a locomotive engine, then graduated into the control of a great wholesale grocers' establishment in Indiana, and finally headed one of the greatest railway strikes of modern times, serving six months in prison for refusing to obey a court order which forbade him to continue the struggle against the railway.

"The trouble about your scheme of cooperative socialism, Mr. Debs," I said, "is that you propose to destroy the competitive principles for which Thomas Jefferson contended, and to put all men and women on a common level, when you attempt to reduce everything to a dull plane of board, lodging, and clothes."

Mr. Debs sprawled back in his chair and stretched out his bony fingers toward me.

Thomas Jefferson lived in other times [he said]. There was a chance for individual competition in his day, but the invention of labor-saving machinery and the organization of trusts have filled the country with hundreds and thousands of idle and homeless men. Labor strikes are useless. I have had experience enough to say that. They are simply force against <illeg.> and the trusts and cooperation <illeg.> to beat the men in the end. The <illeg.> of the people is intolerable. Unless something is done at once to restore the social, economic, and industrial balance there will be widespread disorder and armed resistance. Men and women will not starve in a land of plenty. Go where you will in the United States and you can hear the muttering of the great storm. The Social Democracy of America is trying to find a peaceful solution. We are not making war on millionaires. We are simply trying to build up the people.

Lord Macaulay's Prophecy.

"You remember Lord Macaulay's prophecy about the American government, Mr. Debs?" I said. "he declared in his letter to Mr. Randall that the time would come in America when demagogues would inflame the people by the argument that it is a shame that one man should drink champagne and ride in a carriage while another man's children cry for bread. Lord Macaulay foretold a desperate struggle of the poor against the rich, and prophesied that our republic would be overthrown as the republics of the world were, with this difference, that the enemies of our government would arise within our borders, engendered and fostered by our own institutions. Do you remember that, Mr. Debs?"

The tall leader rose to his feet and paced the floor with his thin, gaunt hands locked behind him and his lips close set. His face was grave. There was silence for a moment.

I remember it [he said slowly]. The time Lord Macaulay was thinking about has almost arrived. Thoughtful men, patriotic men, men who love men better than money, must recognize now that our present system is a complete failure. We are piling up vast and hitherto undreamed of wealth and power in the hands of a few private individuals, and we are starving millions of men who are able and eager to work. The Social Democracy of America proposes to lead the unemployed away from the unequal, squalid, and crime-inciting surroundings of the cities and establish them in a commonwealth where no man will be rich enough to oppress his fellows and no man or woman or child need go hungry, houseless, or naked.

We promise to avert a struggle by force by taking the helpless and desperate victims of a cruel system away from all temptation to commit acts of violence. We propose to give up labor strikes and use only the ballot. We propose to extend our colonies into the state we go into until we get control of the government. Then we will adopt a new constitution, organizing the people into a cooperative commonwealth. We ask the American people who sympathize with us to send regular contributions. Already we have many promises of help. Merchants, doctors, lawyers, small store-keepers have offered to join us with what little they have.

Large Sums to Help the Plan.

We expect to get at least \$25,000 a month. Within two or three months we will send an advance guard of pioneers into our new territory to prepare the way. Our idea is to work systematically and not to place a confused multitude suddenly in an undeveloped country. We shall send picked men to prepare the soil for cultivation. Carpenters and builders will be sent to provide them, not with sheds or rough barracks, but with decent comfortable houses. Then we shall send experienced men to organize herds of cattle. After that an army of timber men, sawmill hands, and carpenters will be sent to put up good houses. Remember that we do not intend to make the mistake of making life too rough and uncomfortable for our people.

We shall build houses, real houses, to live in, not lairs or kennels. We shall have first class architects, plumbers, and builders. When we have provided comfortable and attractive homes our colonists will move out to them. We shall build factories, creameries, and flour mills. All these things will be done under the supervision of experts. By next summer we will have a great community well established. The unit of political organization will be a local branch of 500 men. We will fix a limit on the number in order to prevent the growth of enough power in any one place to create trouble. These branches will elect a state organization to be known as the State Union. The national organization will be called the Central Body, consisting of one member elected by each of the State Unions. The Central Body will elect a Board of Directors and the functions of the chairman of that board will be simply to preside, as the Vice President of the United States presides over the Senate. The Central Body will enact the laws and the Board of Directors will enforce them.

“I agree with you, Mr. Debs,” I said, “that trusts are becoming too powerful, and I would rather have the backing of Mr. Havemeyer,² Mr. Rockefeller, and Mr. Carnegie than the backing of the President of the United States in any proposition before Congress. I believe that with the support of those three men I could in time force a bill through Congress against the will of the President and that afterward I could force him to make it a law by signing it. But Mr. Havemeyer and Mr. Rockefeller and Mr. Carnegie are men of power and genius. How are you going to dispose of them? What are you going to do with the wealth they have gathered? What are you going to do with a man like Cornelius Vanderbilt?”

Mr. Debs threw himself in his chair and cocked one long leg over the other. He locked his hands about his knees. Queer little lines crinkled and puckered about his eyes.

Fortunes of Certain Men.

Their wealth will be gradually absorbed into the common ownership of products. We offer them a glorious field for their energy and genius. A man like Mr. Rockefeller could organize and direct the oil industries of the country for the benefit of the people. He would live comfortably, and, I believe, happily, and would not have to lie awake at night racked with the responsibilities of too great wealth.

Mr. Havemeyer could preside over the sugar-making industries and see that they were managed properly. Mr. Carnegie would be a great power in the building of a cooperative commonwealth. We have no word of abuse for rich men. A man who has many millions is the unhappy slave of his money. Mr. Vanderbilt could not, if he would, suddenly give up his wealth without wrecking the fortunes of thousands of men and women, widows and orphans, whose interest are linked with his. Men like these would lay down the awful burden fastened upon them by their wealth, and with free hearts and brains win the esteem of the whole human race and perpetuate their names in human history by deeds of love and kindness. They could go about everywhere without fearing the knife or the bullet of the assassin.

Surely there will be opportunity enough for the development of each man's individuality and genius, however great they may be, in a field where the only competition will be a competition of benevolence. What does great wealth do for a man? Look at the fate of Barney Barnato.³ He fell a victim to a system which was crushing thousands of poor men out of existence. It is a system of gorging one and famishing the other, with the dreadful penalty for both, one driven to insanity and suicide, and the other to starvation and crime. Our rich men are living abnormal and unhappy lives, and so are our poor men. The burden of the present system is great for both.

Will Benefit Millionaires.

No, we are not making war on the rich. Our cooperative commonwealth will relieve the millionaire as well as the involuntary tramp. Here I

sit with you on the Lakefront of Chicago, where wealth and plenty insure order and peace, and yet only six streets away you can hardly go through the public highway at night without being followed by thieves, if not actually assaulted and robbed. The extremes are coming very close together. Times are getting harder and harder. There is no sign of a relief anywhere for the starving and desperate multitudes.

Go to Sheboygan and Kalamazoo and you will find in the great furniture factories there people working ten hours for 50 cents every day they can get work. There you will see little girls with fingers missing, feeding machinery. Go to Cottdale, in Alabama. I sent a woman in disguise to enter the great walled factory where young girls are working for 75 cents a week under regulations such as are force in a penitentiary, with a right of retiring to the toilet rooms not more than once a day, and then only for a specified time. It is horrible, unspeakable almost. Men who formerly could put their intelligence and individuality into their work now feed machinery.

Formerly a shoemaker did not need more than \$5 worth of tools to set himself up in business and be independent. Today he cannot compete with costly machines that turn out shoes as fast as the snow flies. The improvement in machinery makes individual competition almost impossible, and what little chance might be left is destroyed by the formation of trusts. We have got through with discussion. It is time for us to act. We must go to the very root of the trouble. The wealth fo the country and the machinery for turning it into useful forms must be owned by the people in common. With cooperative railways the people can ride where they will and when they will without cost.

“But,” I said, “you surely would not favor the abolition of labor saving machinery?”

For Labor Saving Machinery.

No, [answered Mr. Debs], we want to encourage the sciences all we can. We want to use them to make life longer, easier, and more worth the living. With labor saving machinery producing enough for the wants of the people and a slight surplus to provide for unfavorable seasons, people would not have to work so long. If every person able to work did his or her share, the average amount of daily labor would not be more than three

or four hours. That would be sufficient to provide everybody with homes and clothing and food and schools and colleges and theaters and books and newspapers and everything that makes life tolerable. Men and women would have time enough to read and improve themselves. Their whole lives would not be given to manual labor. That is the theory of our new commonwealth, and we will succeed before many months in making it a reality.

The long thin face was glorified for a moment. I never saw a more ecstatic look upon a human countenance.

“Yet,” I remarked, “you certainly know that all men will seek in such a commonwealth to work in the professions and lighter employment? I myself, for instance, would not like to be a miner. It is dirty work and is carried on in the gloom and in a half suffocating atmosphere. I suppose other men would feel as I do about it. I should not like to have to clean the streets. Neither would you like it. Now how will it be possible in a socialistic community, such as you are about to establish, to get men to do such work when there’s no extra pay? How can you get a man in an orchestra to play the bass fiddle when his natural taste and ambition impels him to choose the violin, which is a more interesting instrument? How will you persuade a man who wants to be a newspaper editor to run an elevator in a factory?”

That will all be solved very easily in our commonwealth, [said Mr. Debs, nodding his head at each word and drumming the table with his fingers]. The choice of labor will settle itself almost automatically at first. If a man works in the mines he will work only three or four hours a day. If a man prefers to be a clerk and measure out ribbons he will work seven or eight hours a day. A man who has no ability for newspaper work will not try that occupation very long, because he will not succeed. For every disagreeable feature in a man’s work there will be a corresponding compensation.

The Poets and Painters.

“And the poets and painters?” I suggested. “What will become of them? will they have to toil or will they be set apart with leisure enough to work out their fancies?”

With shorter hours of manual toil there will be leisure enough for all poets and painters to express what is in them. the arts and sciences will not be debased to the plane of money-getting [said Mr. Debs].

“Still,” I insisted, “I don’t see how you can make people satisfied under such a system. I like canvasback duck and stewed terrapin. I am perfectly serious about this. It is an innocent and proper taste, the concomitant of a healthy palate. I could not gratify my taste for these luxuries in your commonwealth because there are not enough canvasback duck and terrapin to supply all who like them. There, you see, would be an inequality. Some would eat terrapin and some would not.

With all the people working for each other there would be luxuries enough in every home [said Mr. Debs].

“How would you gratify, without injustice, the innocent love of a refined woman for fashionable gowns and ornaments? You see, the causes of dissatisfaction would be endless.”

In our commonwealth all women will wear fashionable gowns if they choose to. The making of clothing will be organized on the highest plane. Women’s apparel will be designed by artists. We propose to wipe out the great gulf that today separates the railway president’s daughter from the section hand’s daughter. We propose that both shall have equal opportunities for education and adornment. No woman will be ashamed to receive another woman in her parlor because she is coarsely dressed and ignorant. And while we are talking about this I want to say that I am inspired, I am thrilled, by the response which wealthy, refined, and fashionable women have made to our appeal.

The Wealthy Giving Aid.

Some of the most fashionable women in Chicago have visited me and assured me that they will do all in their power to help forward our work. I tell you that when you get the women of the country interested on the side of justice, justice will be done. They are unselfish, they are high-minded, they are eloquent, they see that we are trying to relieve hundreds of

thousands of people from an intolerable situation. You would be surprised if I told you the names of these women. And then we have poor women with us, too. Let me read you this letter, which I received not an hour ago:

East St. Louis, Ill., June 17 [1897].

Mr. Eugene V. Debs.

Dear Sir:—

Hoping this letter will be received in the spirit of love and loyalty in which it is written, I venture to address you. I am a poor widow, who was left twelve years ago with four little boys to raise and educate. My capital was my faith in the God of the widow, my two hands, and \$15 in cash, after my good husband's funeral expenses were paid. That I succeeded in my struggle a score of the best people here will testify, but today, when my feet are on the downward path of life, my health broken and courage gone, our circumstances are worse, through no fault of our own, but owing to the state of labor depression existing all over our land. Here in East St. Louis there are hundreds walking the streets every day in search of work. Those who are fortunate enough to have a situation do the work of two or three men for starvation salaries, and dare not to complain, as there are ten men waiting for every place.

I am willing to do anything an honorable woman would do to help care for my family. My two older boys are capable of filling almost any clerical position. My baby boy, who is past 14, has tried everywhere since school examinations was over to get a place as messenger boy, but the railroad agents prefer giving such places to Polanders, who are willing to work for almost nothing and board themselves. What the future holds for the poor of this country only God knows, but unless there is a radical change for the better soon there will be a war for bread, in which the women and children will take part.

I think your scheme of colonization is a good one. There are millions of acres of fertile lands in the West, if there was only a way to get them, where, by faithful toil, we could have at least enough to eat. I have lived in Dakota and have travelled over a great portion of the West and I know its grand resources. May God prosper your wonderful work and put it into the hearts of the people to expend the required capital to get the scheme underway.

I do not know whether you can read this letter. I cannot see for bitter tears. I would be glad and thankful to go anywhere in the wide world

where we could have an independent living and our health. After reading the accounts in the newspapers of you and your work it has seemed to me as though you belonged to the working man and woman. Hence my presumption in writing this letter, which I hope you will accept as a message of goodwill and respect from a broken-hearted, worn-out mother.

Most respectfully yours,

Mrs. L. Mosley,
313-1/2 Broadway.

There is one out of thousands and thousands of letters that are pouring in from all parts of the country. With 5 million people suffering and seeking some way of escape from their growing misery, is it not time for the American people to do something? Our ways are ways of peace. We will act in strict conformity with the Constitution of the United States until we can change it. Our hands are against no man. We welcome Mr. Rockefeller as heartily as we welcome the poor fellows who have been crushed by the system which has given him wealth and appalling power.

Refuge for the Homeless.

As the matter stands today, there is nothing ahead of us but disorder and violence, unless we can provide a safety valve by colonization for those who have grown hopeless and desperate in the losing struggle for life. Look at the great insurance companies; they represent hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars paid by men and women who seek to provide for the future of their families. The men who organize these companies make a profit out of their business. But why should not society guarantee the future of the family of any man who falls on the highway of life? The vastness of this insurance system and the immensity of its wealth and profits are [enabled by the members of] society⁴...not doing their duty to each other, for if the fear and anxiety of some drive them to pay heavily in advance for the protection of their hapless ones in the event of death, what must be the terror and despair of those who have no money with which to purchase insurance policies?

We propose, too, in time, to abolish money. No man will need money when he can get all he needs in return by honest labor.

“And what will you do with those who are lazy and will not work in your commonwealth?”

Those who cannot work will be taken care of by the community. Those who can work and will not work, will not be allowed to eat until they do work. But there will be few of this class, because labor will be dignified. Shame of itself will be sufficient to drive all men to the common task. Education and kind conditions will wipe our hereditary tendencies to sloth and vice. Crime is a social disease. In one man it is created by his desperate and unhappy surroundings. It comes to another man through the blood of parents who have been desperate and unhappy. Remember that we do not propose to imitate the socialistic experiments of Europe. The American people have a genius of their own. Our new commonwealth will be fitted to the physical, mental, and temperamental qualities of Americans.

“What you propose, Mr. Debs,” I said, “is simply the creation of a gigantic trust.”

Yes [he replied], but if we are to have a trust, let it be a trust of the whole people.

Presently I went out into the street with Mr. Debs and his brother. As we passed through Van Buren Street the leader suddenly halted me and pointed to a blind woman sitting on the sidewalk, her pale jaws tied up with a black handkerchief and a tin cup in her lap.

Look at that sight [he said softly]. Look at it! Is it right? Now, let me give you an object lesson.

Following Mr. Debs’s example, I approached the white-faced beggar and threw a coin into her cup. Up to that time the busy crowd in the street had hurried by indifferently.

But the moment our money rattled into the little battered vessel four of the pedestrians stopped and contributed also.

There, you see [said Mr. Debs as we passed away], the human heart is all right. It only needs an example to set the stream moving in the right direction.

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¹ James Creelman (1859-1915) was a prominent journalist of the late 19th and early 20th century, known for his interviews.

² Henry Osborne Havemeyer (1847-1907) was founder of the Sugar Refineries Company, a trust of the sugar industry, in 1887.

³ Barney Barnato (born Bernet Issacs, 1851-1897) was a British capitalist that amassed great wealth constructing a South African diamond trust. He died at sea in mysterious circumstances in June 1897; suicide was suspected.

⁴ It appears that a line of type is missing here, best guess attempted to decode the garbled paragraph.