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“We Cannot Hope to Succeed by Violence” :  
Speech at the Meeting of Branch 1 SDA, Chicago  
[excerpt]  
(September 19, 1897)

You have political liberty now, and if you have not intelligence enough to enforce your demands by peaceful methods, can you do so by force?

This is not a contest between individuals. It is a clash of principles, a struggle between classes. If you want to make sympathy for the millionaires and strengthen their cause go out and shoot one down or burn a block of buildings. That is the easiest way to destroy the Social Democracy.

The crime of Hazleton was not an unmixed evil.<sup>1</sup> It has opened the eyes of tens of thousands, and a New York paper’s defense of the Sheriff of Luzerne County will do us infinite good.

We must organize. We cannot be enjoined from organizing, but if speeches and resolutions like those of last Sunday [Sept. 12, 1897] are repeated, the police will stop your meetings.

*(Voice: “They’ve got the right to stop them, too, mister.”)*

Well, we will not discuss the right. They will stop them. They have done it before. It isn’t necessary to give our enemies this advantage. We cannot hope to succeed by violence. The powers against us are entrenched and it will take time and organization and education to dislodge them.

**Danger of Revolution.**

Some of you do not wish to wait. You want a revolution. I want to say that there is no man living that can bring on a revolution. Revolutions come in the fullness of time, and those who try to incite them get themselves killed.

If people have not intelligence enough to make use of the ballot to remedy their evils they are dangerous materials to make revolutions with. In 1894 200,000 workingmen in Illinois volunteered to shoot us down. We must reach these men.

One thing as to Hazleton. The deputies are nearly all former miners, whose places were taken by the imported laborers. They used to get living wages. They resisted a cut and were displaced. They have been waiting for revenge. They did not wait for a second order to fire. We want to abolish these hellish conditions where labor is pitted against labor.

*A man in the rear row asked in broken English what Mr. Debs proposed to do in case the demands of the Social Democracy should be refused.*

We will make no demands until we have the power to enforce them.

*(A voice: "You mean until you can take what you want?")*

Yes, but no Corporal's guard can take anything, and when you are able to take by force what you want you will not need to take anything. If you should undertake to carry out last Sunday's program you would be hanged.

*(Voices: "No" and "Yes.")*

### **All Must Make Sacrifices.**

No man has a right in this organization who is unwilling to make sacrifices. We must be prepared to yield our lives if necessary. But I do not want senseless sacrifices. We need our men in the ranks, not in the grave. I am opposed to violence, bloodshed, and retaliation on principle. I do not believe in the eye for an eye policy. I say it is barbarous. I do not want to take any man's life, because I object personally to being killed. I hold every man's life as sacred as my own. No man can say I ever sanctioned anything that savored of assassination. If revolution comes, of course blood will flow, but let the capitalists make it, not us. They are hastening it very fast now.

The program of violence is not only wrong, it is disruptive. It would destroy this entire movement. Do not think I am here to dictate. I believe our movement is the only one that promises anything. We shall gain in numbers and respect and influence, day by day and month by month and year by year, until we have the majority on our side, not so much by reason of what we do as by virtue of what we forbear to do. Every trust formed

hastens the end of the competitive system. The big fish swallows the little one until there is left only the shark. I sympathize with the suffering this process entails, but all progress seems to be through suffering.

Without organization nothing can be accomplished. Capital is organized. Touch it at one point and see how the entire mass responds. In 1894 we did not attack the newspapers, but they attacked us. See how the newspapers have denounced the United States Supreme Court for its ruling against railway pools.<sup>2</sup> They say that no roads can live in murderous competition. No, and neither can labor thrive in the competitive environment. We must educate.

Published as part of “Debs Not for Bloodshed” in *Chicago Tribune*, vol. 56, no. 263 (Sept. 20, 1897), pg. 2. The afternoon meeting of the branch was held at the assembly hall at 160 Washington Street, Chicago.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference is to the Lattimer Massacre of Sept. 10, 1897, in which 19 unarmed immigrant coalminers in a crowd of strikes were shot down by a Luzerne County sheriff’s posse. In response, SDA Branch 2 issued inflammatory resolutions calling for armed struggle, which moved Debs and the Board of the SDA to revoke the branch’s charter for violating the constitution of the national organization.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier in 1897 the United States Supreme Court ruled that pooling — agreements between railroads systematically dividing traffic on competitive routes to thereby maintain high prices — was a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act.