

Wayland and the *Appeal to Reason*:
From Obscurity to Fame
(September 5, 1903)

In 1893 when the first number of *The Coming Nation* was issued at Greensburg, Indiana, by J. A. Wayland, I had just resigned as grand secretary and treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen — an office I had held since 1880 — with a view to organizing the American Railway Union so that the employees in every branch of the service, especially the unskilled and poorly paid, might get the benefits of organization. I was still editing the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, the official journal of the brotherhood, and its files will attest my blissful ignorance at the time of the socialist philosophy and the class struggle, and my utter failure to grasp the significance, scope, and character of the socialist movement. From crown to foot soles I was a “pure and simple” trade unionist and so completely was I absorbed in the vain task of getting all the workers organized and then securing “fair wages” and “decent treatment” by the power of numbers that I had no time to observe the trend of the industrial development or to note that new conditions were arising which necessitated corresponding changes in the forms and functions of the trade union movement.

As for socialism, I had a hazy conception that it was akin to anarchy and that it was not of sufficient importance to merit serious attention.

In the same year the “panic” broke out and from the heights of “prosperity” the country was plunged headlong into the abyss of ruin and despair. The railroads were among the first to break for cover. The “association” scythe of the general managers at once cut great swaths in the wages of the employees, just as they will again in another year or two when the brotherhoods begin to think their work is done and “the fodder’s in the shock.”

The slaughter of slaves was fearful to contemplate. Thousands had their wages shockingly reduced, many were put upon half time, and still others in large numbers were thrown entirely out of employment. It was a great time for discontent, for agitation and organization. The old brotherhoods accepted the reductions. The ARU resisted them. The strikes

followed in rapid succession, culminating in the Pullman contest in the summer of 1894; and when the smoke of battle cleared away, the scales had fallen from my eyes and with many others I realized that socialism had been thrust upon me at the point of a capitalist bayonet and that the only alternative was to enlist in the socialist movement for the overthrow of the capitalist system and the abolition of wage slavery.

I do not remember seeing *The Coming Nation* in 1893, the year of its birth, and I have but a dim recollection of seeing it in 1894. But in 1895 I became a reader of it and I have a clear recollection of its rapid increase in circulation and of the stir it was creating in the conservative circles of capitalist thought.

What a profound change has taken place in this country and throughout the world in the ten years since *The Coming Nation* entered upon its wonderful crusade!

I doubt if Wayland himself, clear-sighted as he is, had any conception of the magnitude of the propaganda he was organizing — of the vast waste of capitalist combustibles to which he was applying the torch of social progress.

The Coming Nation was the first popular propaganda paper published in the interest of socialism in the United States. It may have been unscientific but it was well adapted to that nebulous period. The short, sharp, pointed paragraphs of the editor pierced like darts. Wayland soon became known, his paper was in demand, and the people began to talk about socialism and *The Coming Nation*.

Wayland had a faculty of saying things in a way to arrest attention, stimulate thought, and provoke controversy. This is mainly why *The Coming Nation* “caught on,” and why its successor, the *Appeal to Reason*, has developed such a phenomenal circulation.

With its present staff the *Appeal*, while retaining its popular features, is thoroughly scientific and up-to-date, and is destined to be one of the few world publications to achieve the enviable distinction of commanding an international army of a million subscribers.

With a past of such historic interest and a future so luminous with glorious achievement, it is eminently fitting that this tenth anniversary year to be celebrated with a jubilee edition in honor of the triumphant march of Wayland and the *Appeal* from obscurity to fame.

Ten years ago the socialist movement in the United States was small, weak, and but an insignificant factor in the politics of the country. Today

we have an American party worthy in all regards of its place in the international socialist movement.

The Socialist Party is now organized from sea to sea, from the lakes to the gulf, its hundreds of local branches^a spreading out over all the states and territories of the union.

Thousands of speakers and propagandists — men, women, and children — are in the field proclaiming the glad tidings of social redemption through the impending revolution and the triumph of the socialist movement.

Scores of papers, magazines, reviews, and other periodicals, constituting the socialist press, are doing yeoman service in arousing the working class and educating the people, and their number and influence is steadily increasing.

Socialist writers, authors, and teachers are springing up and the American literature of socialism is now being written and taught to develop the class struggle and hasten the day of universal emancipation.

To our comrades in Europe and all other countries we send hearty greeting. We admire the intrepid socialist leaders abroad and applaud the rank and file in their brave struggle in our common cause, which in good time shall be crowned with victory for us all.

In conclusion: A million subscribers for the *Appeal* and more than a million votes for the Socialist Party in 1904!

Published as “From Obscurity to Fame” in *Appeal to Reason*, whole no. 405 (Sept. 5, 1903), p. 3.

^a The primary party unit of the Socialist Party of America was the “local,” geographic units which were sometimes divided into subdivisions called “branches” based on common language or finer geographical distribution. Debs’s use of the phrase “local branch” dates back to the party’s predecessor, the Social Democratic Party.