

How Long Will You Stand It?
Speech at Chicago Coliseum
[excerpt]
(December 6, 1903)

A few days ago the editor of a Chicago paper, discussing the returns of the recent state elections in the editorial column of his paper, concluded that the socialist movement had received its death blow, that in fact socialism was dead in America. Well then, this must be the resurrection.¹

I stand in your presence this afternoon a socialist — class-conscious, revolutionary, uncompromising. I have little time and no use for what is commonly called reform. you cannot reform rottenness. The only reform of the capitalist system which is possible is overthrow and destruction. Capitalist politics are essentially corrupt and demoralizing. Pick up your daily newspaper — it is a chronicle of crime. What is the status of the workingman in the present government? Has he a voice loud enough to be heard? As a matter of fact he is completely ignored for the reason that he is not yet conscious of his conquering power.

The Republican Party is in absolute power in the interest, we are told, mainly of the working class, the producers of wealth. The Democratic Party is not only dead, but in an advanced state of decomposition. But it will not be permitted to disintegrate entirely. It still has a mission. The time has come to shove in a Democratic administration because a panic is due, and the panic must of course fall upon the Democratic jackass, and then we will hear the old stereotyped cry, “That is what you get for turning out the Republican Party. Give us eight more years of Republican rule.”

But there is an ever-increasing number of workingmen in this country who can no longer be deceived.

The workingmen are beginning to realize that if they would emancipate themselves from the degrading thralldom of the ages they must unite upon the economic field and upon the political field, but above all things they must unite. The solidarity of the working class is the supreme demand of the hour.

There are some so-called leaders of labor who favor solidarity upon the economic field, but who are opposed to it on the political field. They

are not in fact union men. They lack the vital, essential principle of true unionism. They lead the working class backward, not forward. They are in alliance, active or passive, with the capitalist class.

Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, said the other day that he had read socialism in two languages. He had better have understood it in one. he is opposed to politics in the union. He knows very well that when politics comes into the union he will go out of the union. He and Mark Hanna will solve the labor question if you workingmen will let them alone, but when it is solved in their way it will not be solved in your way.

• • • • •

Your grandfather made a pair of shoes, and they were his own. You make a thousand pairs of shoes where he made one. You do not own a single one of them. You can produce wealth in fabulous abundance, but you have not got it. Why not? Because you work with tools that belong to your master, and what you produce belongs to him. Ownership of the tools implies ownership of the product. Your grandfather owned and enjoyed the fruit of his labor because he worked with tools that belonged to himself. Your employer goes to Europe or goes around the world in his private yacht, or enjoys what is called exclusive society, because he is the proprietor of the tools with which you work.

The politician on the eve of any election tells you that you are a sovereign citizen. You are nothing of the kind. In the present system you are simply labor-power, merchandise, bought in what they call the labor market as if you were hair, hide, bone, or any other commodity subject to the law of demand and supply. The more labor-power and the less demand, the lower your wages. The lower your wages, the less you can consume. You are always in competition with each other — men, women, and children — to sell your labor-power to the owners of the machinery. You cannot compete against them with your bare hands. You have got to sell them your labor-power.

At this point it is pertinent to ask, what is labor-power? Labor-power is human energy. Labor-power is life, or as sacred as life itself. Looking backward over the past 40 years we read of the auction block and the slave pen. We see a human being with a throbbing heart and an immortal soul; we see him placed upon the auction block in public, his teeth inspected

and his body examined to see if he is sound. He is then torn from his wife and children and sold to the highest bidder.

We stand aghast as we contemplate the fact that this auction block existed for 200 years upon American soil. The time will come when the world will again take a backward look and stand horrified as it contemplates the harder spectacle of the entire working class flung between what is called the labor market, where the labor-power of human beings is sold every day and every hour, year in and year out, by the lowest bidder.

You expect to reform such a system. I ask you: How? You punish crime, but you produce it a hundredfold. We socialists do not propose to mend this system; we propose to put an end to it, and that is the reason we are appealing to you this afternoon, not to accept our philosophy unthinkingly, not to subscribe to our principles without investigation.

We are appealing to you to preserve your mental integrity, your moral rectitude; we are appealing to you to think for yourselves. You have been satisfied to do your thinking by proxy. It is a thousand times better for you workingmen and workingwomen to spend your time in cultivating self-reliance. Stop crawling in the dust. Stand erect. See how tall you are in the sunlight. Brush the dust of servitude from your knees. Hold high communion with yourself.

You are a worker. The first thing necessary for you to understand is that you are bound irrevocably to every other worker in the country. As individual workingmen you are ground to atoms, you are reduced to slavery, and you are at the mercy of the masters. When you unite, however, there will be twelve of you for every capitalist. You are fighting them with your stomachs. We socialists want you to fight them with your brains.

• • • • •

The average workingman is an abject slave. I would rather be a dog and bay at the moon than to be that kind of a sovereign citizen. I love to think of a sovereign citizen. The term appeals to me strongly. But in the present system it is a hollow mockery. Think of a sovereign citizen looking for a boss, going to the factory, quivering at the knees, taking off his hat in the presence of a 2x4 boss and announcing himself for sale.

Chattel slavery would be impossible in the present development of the capitalist system. Free competitive labor is cheaper than slave labor. The capitalist's responsibility ceases when the wages are paid.

It is said that socialism is impracticable. Socialism is the only system that is practical. It is the present system that has shown itself impracticable.

I am a socialist. I am one of several hundred thousand in the United States who absolutely refuse to shoulder at gun at the command of Roosevelt or any other man and shoot down workingmen. If he wants any killing of human beings done he will do it himself, so far as I am concerned.

You outnumber your oppressors 12 to 1. You can not only relieve yourselves from the consequences of this accursed system, you can absolutely abolish it. You can put yourselves in control of the government, take possession of your own, and emancipate yourself from slavery.

The average workingman is satisfied with so little. Give him a steady job, enough wages to keep his passive soul within his half-dressed body, and he wants to thank somebody. He is looking about for the benefactor. He wants to pass resolutions thanking some politician, some priest, some parasite of some description. I am doing what little I can to augment the discontent of the working class, to direct that discontent properly and give it intelligence, give it solidarity to press forward, and in due time the working class will reach the heights of economic emancipation. I may not live to see it. The socialist does not stop to consider whether the change is coming next week or next month or next century. He knows that it is coming, that it is inevitable. He has taken his place as a class-conscious socialist, and he never can become anything else.

You hear a man who voted the Socialist ticket last month. If he is not going to vote it next month it is because he never was a socialist. So we wait and watch and work because our movement is in alliance with the revolutionary forces, and as certain to triumph as that the rivers roll to the sea. It is but a question of time, and we can afford to bide that time.

.

Can you tell the difference between the quality and effect of an injunction issued by a Republican judge and one issued by a Democratic judge? [A voice: "*The brass molders know it.*"] When the labor movement goes into politics the injunction will cease, the system under which the workingman is simply a piece of labor-power will be abolished.

Is it by chance that every member of the United States Supreme Court is a trained and successful trust and corporation attorney? Don't you workingmen know that when you do succeed in pushing some law through the

state legislature or even the national Congress which is designed to inconvenience the capitalist class, they have state and national supreme courts to declare the laws unconstitutional? And what are you going to do about it? Submit until the next election, and then vote the Republican or Democratic ticket and have a repetition of it.

As Abraham Lincoln once said, "If you want that sort of thing, why, that's the sort of thing you want." It is simply a question as to how long you can, or rather how long you will, stand it. Organize as thoroughly as you choose, they will have a mortgage on your leaders. If the rank and file in Chicago would do a little excavating they would find wires between City Hall and the Federation of Labor. And because there are wires underground there are overhead policemen's club for your heads.

• • • • •

You had a great strike recently on the Chicago City Railway. The press announced that the union had achieved something of a victory. I would like to have a photograph. [*A voice: "Get one of the buttons that they daren't wear."*]

The Chicago City Railway employees were organized as thoroughly as they can be if they wait a century. But they lost. Why? Because there is a vast body of men always out of work under the capitalist system. It is called the reserve army of capitalism, and can be drawn on at will. If a hundred thousand or two hundred thousand men lay down their tools and give up their places of employment there are the same number always ready to take their places.

I want all trade unionists of Chicago to take the affairs of their unions into their own hands and make it impossible for the fakir and fraud labor leader to flourish in the labor movement. The reason a labor leader is popular today and has office and salary is because he is not true to the working class. I do not want Mark Hanna to bear testimony to my efficiency as a labor leader.

• • • • •

The capitalist press united in pronouncing the coal strike the greatest victory ever achieved by the working class. It is true that their wages were increased 10 percent. It is also true that their living expense increased from

15 to 20 percent. The board created by the commission made Carroll D. Wright, the national labor commissioner, umpire. Every single solitary question submitted to that tribunal was decided against the striking miners with but one exception, and that but a nominal exception.

The corporations are in absolute control in those coal fields — bleak, barren, desolate beyond the power of language to describe. There is an army of 150,000 human beings miners of coal, in a state of abject slavery, from which there is no escape under the capitalist system. I have been in those mines again and again and I know whereof I speak. I have heard the echo of the pit that sounded like muffled drums beating funeral marches.

• • • • •

They say the socialists are trying to destroy the labor unions. I like to use plain words: They lie. I would enjoy the opportunity of meeting president Gompers or President Mitchell on this platform before this audience, in the presence not of socialists, but of their own trade unionists, in discussing this question.

They tell you that we propose to destroy the movement. We propose nothing of the kind. We propose to vitalize the movement and make it fulfill its historic mission. We do not propose that Mark Hanna, Archbishop Ireland, or Bishop Potter shall run the trade union movement in the interest of the capitalist class. We propose that the trade union movement shall run itself in the right channel and in the right direction. We do not propose to make a socialist party of the trade union movement. We simply propose that the trade unions shall recognize the class struggle. We want the trade unions to say, “Yes, our eyes are open. We recognize the fact that there is a mighty struggle in progress between capital on the one hand and the working class on the other hand. We realize that we must organize, unite, and act together; that we must strike when there is no other recourse, levy the boycott, and do what we can on the economic field.”

Every time you engage in a battle of that kind I will guarantee that you can rely upon the support of every socialist. Two years ago, after they had been telling the trade unions that we socialists were trying to wipe out the trade union, a street care strike came and a boycott was declared. It was not a great while afterward until the leaders of the Central Labor Union began to dicker with the capitalists to sell out that strike. In spite of our opposition it was not long until they arranged a settlement, declared the

strike off, and left the entire body of union men out of jobs. We, the socialists, are still walking in the city of Terre Haute, and we are the only ones who are.

Published as “Ten Thousand at the Coliseum; Stupendous Socialist Success,” *Chicago Socialist*, vol. 5, whole no. 249 (Dec. 12, 1903), pg. 1. Same stenographic report used but sequence changed, presumably with Debs’s input, and republished in two parts as “The Great Game of Politics” in *Social Democratic Herald*, vol. 6, no. 35, whole no. 282 (Dec. 26, 1903), p. 1 and “It Appeals to the Intelligence,” whole no. 283 (Jan. 2, 1904), p. 1. Sequence edited again here for clarity.

¹ This speech was delivered to a crowd of 10,000 at Chicago Coliseum, a mass meeting called by the Socialist Party. One commentator noted of Debs that “although his voice was far-reaching and his endurance marvelous, the speaker could not make himself heard by all of the people who were so eager to listen...”