

The Chautauqua Platform and Its Opportunities (August 26, 1905)

The rapid development of the Chautauqua¹ as a means of popular education and entertainment in the summer season suggests the increasing possibilities thus afforded of reaching the masses with the propaganda of socialism.²

Until recently the line has been drawn on socialism and no advocate of socialist doctrine has been allowed a place on a Chautauqua platform — but it is different now, as the pressure has become too great and the bars have been lowered, and now the voice of the socialist is heard from the Chautauqua rostrum.

The Chautauqua, according to my experience, is usually under the management of liberal-minded men, who, while perhaps opposing socialism, are yet willing that it shall have a full and fair hearing, and this, coupled with the fact that there is always a large and increasing demand among all sorts and conditions of people for light upon this vital subject, makes it possible, with a little effort, to get more and more socialist speakers upon the programs of the Chautauqua assemblies, which are increasing rapidly in number and spreading to all the states of the Union.

Some of the advantages of getting our comrades on the Chautauqua platform may be stated as follows:

First — The Chautauqua is a great popular outdoor school, usually in a fine grove, where a day's or a week's outing and entertainment may be enjoyed at very small expense.

Second — The people of the surrounding country camp on the grounds and are there until the close of the season, so that, rain or shine, a great crowd, running into thousands, is almost invariably assured.

Third — The Chautauqua furnishes a perfectly free and untrammelled platform and the speaker on its program is given the fullest opportunity to deliver his message in all its integrity and without the least restraint.

Fourth — Thousands of persons attend the Chautauqua gatherings who do not go to socialist meetings.

Fifth — Exceptional opportunities are afforded for reaching the farm workers, who take advantage of the Chautauqua to give themselves and

families the benefit of the outing and its program of education and recreation.

Sixth — No better place could be found for the distribution of socialist papers and pamphlets, and our literature could thus be sent to thousands of homes that are ready for it and would eagerly receive and read it.

Seventh — There is a high average intelligence at Chautauqua gatherings, those attending being reading and thinking people, and nowhere is the message of socialism given a more attentive hearing or hearty reception.

Eighth — At the close of the lecture the people always gather about the speaker, ask about literature, papers, party matters, etc., and the very best chance is given to start these people on the right road.

It is interesting to note that while thousands of those who attend the Chautauqua meetings were once Populists they are no longer so; they want no populist discussion, but they do want to know about socialism, and are ready at almost every point to join in the demand to put a socialist speaker on the program.

We have scores of comrades who are in every way qualified to speak for socialism on the Chautauqua platform, and they can and should be put there. The program for the season is usually made up in the fall preceding, and wherever a Chautauqua is located — and there are now hundreds scattered over the country — our comrades, however few they may be, should united in requesting the committee to place a socialist speaker on the list, and it surely will be done in many cases.

Although we have had but a limited hearing thus far, Socialist Day at the Chautauqua has already proved to be one of the biggest days and often the most largely attended day of the session.

Here is a great and growing opportunity if we but take advantage of it, and, I hope soon to see every available comrade on the Chautauqua platform.

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¹ The Chautauqua was an adult educational school movement akin to the church revival camp movement, in which prominent public speakers and musicians were brought to well-prepared and comfortable semi-rural surroundings to entertain large audiences seeking to escape the summer heat. The movement was begun in 1874 by a Methodist clergyman and took its name from the original encampment, located near Chautauqua Lake, New

York. Speakers such as Debs were routed from one Chautauqua assembly to the next so that several events could be promoted simultaneously, with standardized, high-quality content and travel expenses kept to a minimum. The ventures were commercial and participants were compensated.

² This article, written for the *Appeal to Reason*, was accompanied by a cover letter from Debs in which he noted: "Have just returned from the West. I addressed some tremendous crowds under Chautauqua and the thought occurred to me that we out to get as many of our comrades on the Chautauqua platform as possible, and so I prepared the enclosed which I will thank you to print at your earliest convenience. At ever Chautauqua I addressed in Missouri, Kansas, and Illinois there were scores of *Appeal* readers and workers in attendance."