

The Growth of Socialism

(October 11, 1905)¹

Not many of those schooled in old-party politics have any adequate conception of the true import of the labor movement. They read of it in the papers, discuss it at their clubs, criticize labor unions, condemn walking delegates, and finally conclude that organized labor is a thing to be tolerated so long as it keeps within "proper bounds," but to be put down summarily the moment its members, like the remnants of Indian tribes on the western plains, venture beyond the limits of their reservations. They utterly fail or refuse to see the connection between labor and politics, and are, therefore, woefully ignorant of the political significance of the labor movement of the present day.

It is true that in all the centuries of the past labor has been "put down" when it has sought some modicum of its own, or when it has even yearned for some slight amelioration of its wretched condition, as witness the merciless massacre of the half-famished and despairing subjects of the Russian tsar a few months ago, for daring to hope that their humble petition for a few paltry concessions might be received and considered by his mailed and heartless majesty.

It is likewise true that, in the present day and in the United States, all the powers of government stand ready to "put down" the working class whenever it may be deemed necessary in the interest of its industrial masters.

All the great strikes prove that the government is under the control of corporate capital and that the army of office-holders is as subservient to the capitalist masters as is the army of wage-workers that depends upon them for employment.

But, true as these things are, it is not true that labor is ignorant of them, nor is it true that such conditions will continue forever.

The labor movement has advanced with rapid strides during the last few years and is today the most formidable factor in quickening the social conscience and in regenerating the human race. It is not the millions that are enrolled as members of labor unions that give power and promise to this world movement, but the thousands, rather, that are not trade unionists merely, but working class unionists as well; that is to say, workingmen and

women who recognize the identity of the industrial and political interests of the whole working class; or, in other words, are conscious of their class interests and are bending all the powers of their minds and bodies, spurred by the zeal that springs from comradeship in a common cause, to effect the economic and political solidarity of the whole mass of labor, irrespective of race, creed, or sex.

These class-conscious workers — these socialists — realize the fact that the labor question, in its full and vital sense, is a political question, and that the working class must be taught to extend the principle of unionism to the political field, and there organized on the basis of their economic interests; and, although they are engaged in a herculean task, the forces of industrial evolution and social progress are back of them, and all the powers of reaction cannot prevail against them.

The labor movement has had to fight its way, inch by inch, from its inception to its present position, and to this very fact is due the revolutionary spirit, indomitable will, and unconquerable fiber it has developed, and which alone fits it for its mighty historic mission.

In the beginning the workers organized in their respective trades simply to improve working conditions. They had no thought of united political action. The employing class at once combined to defeat every attempt at organization on the part of its employees; but, notwithstanding this opposition, the trade union, which had become an economic necessity, grew steadily until at last the employers were compelled to recognize and deal with it. Being unable to destroy it, they next proceeded to control its operations by confining it to its narrowest possible limitations, thus reducing it to inefficiency — from a menace to a convenience.

The late Marcus A. Hanna crushed the trade union with an iron boot in the beginning of his career as a capitalist. In his maturer years he became its patron saint. He did not change in spirit, but in wisdom. What is true of Mr. Hanna is true of the principle members of the Civic Federation, that economic peace congress conceived by farsighted capitalists, sanctified by plutocratic prelates, and presided over by a gentleman who, but a few months ago, engaged James Farley and his army of 5,000 professional strikebreakers to defeat the demands and destroy the unions of his New York subway employees.

A new unionism has struggled into existence, and the coming year will witness some tremendous changes. The old forms cramp and fetter the new

forces. As these new forces develop, the old forms must yield and finally give way to transformation.

The old unionism, under the inspiration of a Civic Federation banquet, exclaims jubilantly: "The interests of labor and capital are identical. Hallelujah!"

To this stimulating sentiment the whole body of exploiting capitalists gives hearty assent; all its politicians, parsons, and writers join in enthusiastic approval; and woe be to the few clear, calm, and candid protestants who deny it. Their very loyalty becomes treason, and the working class they seek to serve is warned against them, while the false leaders are loaded with fulsome adulation.

But, nevertheless, the clear voice of the awakened and dauntless few can not be silenced. The new unionism is being heard. In trumpet tones it rings out its revolutionary shibboleth to all the workers of the earth: "Our interests are identical — let us combine, industrially and politically, assert our united power, achieve our freedom, enjoy the fruit of ur labor, rid society of parasitism, abolish poverty, and civilize the world."

The old unionism, living in the dead past, still affirms that the interests of labor and capital are identical.

The new unionism, vitalized and clarified by the living present, exclaims: "We know better; capitalists and wage-workers have antagonistic economic interests — capitalists buy and workers sell labor-power, the one as cheaply and the other as dearly as possible; they are locked in a life-and-death class struggle; there can be no identity of interests between masters and slaves — between exploiters and exploited — and there can be no peace until the working class is triumphant in this struggle and the wage system is forever wiped from the earth."

The months immediately before us will witness a mighty mustering of the working class on the basis of the class struggle, and the day is not far distant when they will be united in one vast economic organization in which all the trades will be represented, "separate as the waves, yet one as the sea," and one great political party that stands uncompromisingly for the working class and its program of human emancipation.

In the late national election, for the first time, the hand of the working class was clearly seen. The Socialist Party is distinctively the party, and its vote is distinctively the vote, of the working class. More than 400,000 of these votes were counted; probably twice as many were cast. This was but the beginning. From now on there is "a new Richmond in the field."

There is but one issue from the standpoint of labor, and that is: "Labor versus Capital." Upon that basis the political alignment of the future will have to be made. There is no escape from it.

For the present the ignorance of the workers stands in the way of their political solidarity, but this can and will be overcome. In the meantime, the small capitalists and the middle class are being ground to atoms in the mill of competition. Thousands are being driven from the field entirely, beaten in the struggle, bankrupt and hopeless, to be swallowed up in the surging sea of wage-slavery; while thousands of others cling to the outer edge, straining every nerve to stem the torrent that threatens to sweep them into the abyss, their condition so precarious that they anticipate the inevitable and make common issue with the wage-workers in the struggle to overthrow the capitalist system and reconstruct society upon a new foundation of cooperative industry and the social ownership of the means of life.

Of all the silly sayings of the self-satisfied of the present day, the oft-repeated falsehood that there are "no classes" in this country takes the lead and is often made to serve as the prelude to the preposterous warning that periodically peals from rich and sumptuous club banquet, at which the president and other patriots are guests, that "it is treason to array class against class in the United States."

If there are no classes, how can they be arrayed against each other?

The fact is that precisely the same classes and conditions that exist in the monarchies of the old world have also developed in our capitalist republic. The working class sections, including the tenements and slums, of New York and London are strikingly similar; and the wealth-owning class of the United States represents as distinct an aristocracy as England can boast, while the laboring elements of both countries are as distinctively in the "lower class" by themselves and practically on the same degraded level.

Deny it as may the retainers of the rich, the classes already exist; they are here, and no amount of sophistication can remove them, nor the chasm that divides them. The rare and exceptional wage-worker who escapes from wage-slavery simply provides the rule and emphasizes the doom of his class in capitalist society.

The existing classes and the struggle going on between them are not due to the mischievous influence of labor agitators, as certain politicians

and priests, the emissaries of the “rich and respectable,” would have it appear.

The long swell of the wave but expresses the agitation of the deep.

The agitator is the product of unrest — his is the voice of the social deep; and, though he may be reviled as a demagogue who preys upon the ignorance of his fellows, the unrest continues and the agitation increases until the cause of it is removed and justice is done.

Classes and class rule and their attendant progress and poverty, money and misery, turmoil and strife, are inherent in the capitalist system. Why? Simply because one set of men owns the tools with which wealth is produced, while another set uses them, and there is an irrepressible conflict over the division of the product.

The capitalist owns the tools he does not use; the worker uses the tools he does not own.

The principal tools of production and distribution in the United States — mammoth machines, complex social instruments, made and used cooperatively by millions of workingmen, their very lives, their wives and babes dependent upon them — are the private property of a few hundred capitalists, and are operated purely to make profits for these capitalists, regardless of the poverty and wretchedness that ensues to the masses.

In virtue of the individual ownership of the social instruments of production, one capitalist may exploit the labor of a million workingmen and become a billionaire, while the million workers struggle through life in penury and want, to a bleak and barren old age, to find rest at last in the pauper asylum, the morgue, and the potter’s field.

This vast and resourceful country should be free from the scourge of poverty and the blight of ignorance; but it never will be until the private ownership of the means of sustaining life is abolished and society is organized on the basis of social ownership of the means of wealth production and the inalienable right of all to work and to produce freely to satisfy their physical needs and material wants. It is for this great organic change, this worldwide social revolution, that the socialists of all countries are organizing, that it may be intelligently guided and come, if possible, in peace and order when the people and conditions have been prepared for it.

The present order of society is developing all the symptoms of degeneracy and dissolution. Only the individualist self-seekers and their mercenaries — they who believe in making the animal struggle for existence perpetual, and in climbing to the top over the corpses of their fellows —

only they are satisfied, or would appear to be, and expatiate upon our marvellous prosperity, and the incomparable glory of our free institutions.

The man who can look upon New York or Chicago today and utter such sentiments should blush for his perverted sense of justice, to say nothing of his total lack of humanity.

Many thousands of men, women, and children suffer for food and shiver in the cold in these typical capitalist cities, while the beef trust is crammed to bursting and the cotton kings of the South burn cotton to keep up prices.

Has the world every heard of such monstrous iniquity, such unspeakable crime? In the name of all that has heart in it not yet turned to adamant,² has human life any value, even that of the lowest grade of merchandise? And is it not high time to call a halt to the ravages of capitalism and give a little thought and consideration to humanity?

Let us briefly note some of the crying evils which infest the class-ruled society of the present day. First of all, millions are poverty stricken, the result, mainly, of no work or low wages. The great book of Robert Hunter³ on poverty, recently published, abounds in facts, supported by incontrovertible proofs, which silence all doubt upon this point.

In New York City alone, fifty thousand children, when they go to school at all, go without sufficient and proper food, and one corpse in every ten is dumped into the potter's field.

New York and Chicago are filled with unemployed and suffering, and in the country at large 10 million are in want. In the shoemaking industry, 51 percent of the laborers receive less than \$300 per year. In cotton spinning, the wages of thousands average from \$220 to \$460 per year. During the last year tens of thousands of coal miners were allowed to work but from one to three days per week. Fall River capitalists reduce wages three times in rapid succession, and lock out and starve their employees for six months, declaring that they can not afford to pay the high prices for cotton, while the planters of the South burn up the cotton to keep up prices rather than clothe the naked whose labor produced it.

The state of Colorado seethes with military brutality and reeks with political corruption because the mine owners are practically proprietors of the state and propose to do as they please with their own; and they who have the temerity to protest are branded outlaws and bull-penned, deported, or shot dead in their tracks.

The United States senate is dominated by the special representatives of the trusts and corporations, and several of its members are under indictment for playing the game of their masters in their own personal interest. Think of Senator Chauncey M. Depew⁴ reforming the abuses of the railroads, or Thomas C. Platt⁵ stopping the extortion of the express companies, in the interest of the people!

The Pennsylvania Railroad Company dictated the recent election of the United States senator from Pennsylvania, and the most flagitious political debauchery attended the election of many others, such proceedings being regarded as so entirely in consonance with our capitalist-owned republic as to excite little more than passing notice.

Only a short time ago the late John H. Reagan,⁶ the venerable ex-senator of Texas, in discussing the federal courts, said that he expected no improvement in them "as long as railroad lawyers are allowed to go on the bench to interpret legislation affected the management of the railroads." As long as railroads are privately owned they will have their judges on the bench, and the government, that is to say, the capitalist politicians, will do their bidding.

Judge Reagan closed his sweeping arraignment of the courts as follows: "I have seen such gross perversions of the law by the courts that I have lost confidence in them and regret that I cannot feel the respect for them that I once felt."

These are ominous words and from a source that gives them the weight of high authority.

Census figures recently published show that "every fifth child between the ages of 10 and 15 in the United States is a breadwinner. One out of every three of these children is a girl. There are 1,750,178 children employed, an increase of 33-1/3 percent in ten years."

The land frauds, postal steals, and Indian graft all cry out in condemnation of private ownership of capital, the course and inspiration of all the political corruption that, like a pestilence, blights the land.

Charles F. Kelly,⁷ speaker of the house of delegates, at St. Louis, the convicted boodler, in making his confession described in a few graphic words the methods and motives of officeholders and politicians in the grab-all regime of profitocracy. Said he: "Our combine was not along party lines. Both Democrats and Republicans belonged to it. My experience has been that boodlers line up according to their own interests, and not under party standards. In the majority of wards of St. Louis, both the

Democratic Party and the Republicans usually nominate men to go to the house of delegates for the money they can get out of it. Each party man votes for his own fellows, and either one that gets in serves those who rob the city of franchises.”

Be it noted that the corrupters of courts, the bribers of legislators, and the debauchers of public morals are all capitalists in high standing, the gentry whose subservient and hypocritical underlings are forever preaching about “law and order” to the working class.

In the face of these frightful eruptions on the body politic, President Roosevelt coolly informs us that we are passing through a period of “noteworthy prosperity,” and that “we must raise still higher our standard of commercial ethics, and we must insist more and more upon those fundamental principles of our country — equality before the law and obedience to the law. *In no other way can the advance of socialism, whether evolutionary or revolutionary be checked.*”

The words “still higher” seem like sarcasm when applied to our so-called “standard of commercial ethics” that is mired in profit-mongering and can never rise above the sordid level of brutal self-interest in the declining states of the competitive system.

The commercial pirates who rob the nation of its franchises and organize monopolies to exploit the people are not in the business of raising the standards of ethics, commercial or otherwise. The only ethics they know is to “get there”; the end always justifying the means.

Just at present President Roosevelt, typical capitalist executive that he is, is after the railroads — so we are told. His organs assure us that he proposes to bring these great corporations to their knees, and make them obey the law and stop robbing the people. And yet, President Roosevelt has had one of these criminal offenders in his own cabinet. It is known of all men that Paul Morton,⁸ late secretary of the navy, is a self-confessed lawbreaker who would now be serving a prison sentence if the law in his case had been enforced.

Then again, can President Roosevelt consistently crack the whip above the heads of these corporations after sharing in the special privileges they enjoy at the expense of the people? In making his political campaigns, and on other occasions since he has become a commanding figure in national politics, the railroad corporations have provided Mr. Roosevelt with the most luxurious special trains, sumptuously furnished and abundantly stocked, *free of charge*. The thousands of dollars of expense thus incurred

by the railroad corporations could not have been without some consideration, and whatever that may be, it is not calculated to inspire self-respecting and candid men who think for themselves with faith in the sincerity of the president when he vaults into the arena to do battle against the railroads as the champion of the people.

It is not to reform the evils of the day, but to abolish the social system that produces them, that the Socialist Party is organized. It is the party, not of reform, but of revolution, knowing that the capitalist system has had its day and that a new social order, based upon a new system of industry, must soon supplant the fast decaying one we now have.

Every social system changes ceaselessly, and ultimately, having fulfilled its mission, passes away.

Capitalism is the connecting link between feudalism and socialism.

The industrial forces are now making for socialism, preparing the way for it, and sooner or later it is sure to come.

On the one hand the capitalist class are combining their resources, centralizing their capital, cooperating instead of competing, organizing industry, and eliminating competition. This is the new and better way. It is good as far as it goes. It is the limited application of the economic principles of socialism.

On the other hand, the working class are organizing. They are beginning to spell solidarity and to pronounce socialism. They are yearning for emancipation from the galling yoke of wage-slavery, and with all the power of their minds, all the strength of their bodies, and all the passion of their souls they are crusading against the ignorance of their fellow workers and the prejudice of the people.

Steadily the number of class-conscious toilers is increasing, and higher and higher rises the tide that is to sweep away the barriers to progress and civilization.

Let others talk about the tariff and finance — the enlightened workers demand the ownership of the tools of industry and they are building up the Socialist Party as a means of getting them.

The working class alone made the tools; the working class alone can use them, and the working class must, therefore, own them.

This is the revolutionary demand of the socialist movement. The propaganda is one of education and is perfectly orderly and peaceable. The workers must be taught to unite and vote together as a class in support of the Socialist Party, the party that represents them as a class, and when they

do this the government will pass into their hands and capitalism will fall to rise no more; private ownership will give way to social ownership, and production for profit to production for use; the wage system will disappear, and with it the ignorance and poverty, misery and crime that wage-slavery breeds; the working class will stand forth triumphant and free, and a new era will dawn in human progress and in the civilization of mankind.

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¹ According to a press account, Debs was holed up in his room at the National Hotel in Leavenworth, Kansas on October 11, 1905, where he spent the day “writing an article for an Eastern magazine and answering correspondence which had piled up on him.” This is presumably the piece written there, published in the November issue of *Success Magazine*.

² Archaic term for impenetrable stone.

³ Robert Hunter (1874-1942) was a native of Terre Haute, Indiana and graduate of Indiana University who was a participant in the university settlement movement in Chicago and New York City, personal experience which illuminated his 1904 book published by Macmillan, *Poverty*. Hunter joined the Socialist Party in 1905 and subsequently wrote several other books on socialism and the labor movement. He quit the SPA in 1917 over the party's staunch antimilitarist stance towards the war in Europe. By the time of his death he had fully flipped politically, supporting the Republican Party against the progressive administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

⁴ Chauncey M. Depew (1834-1928) was an arch-nemesis of Debs during his railroad union years, the anti-union president of the New York Central Railroad. The Republican Depew was tapped by the New York legislature for the first of two terms in the US senate in 1898.

⁵ Thomas C. Platt (1833-1910) was a New York Republican who served two consecutive terms in the US senate, with the New York legislature sending him to Washington for the first time in 1896.

⁶ John H. Reagan (1818-1905) was a member of Congress from Texas who resigned at the time of the American Civil War to take a place in the cabinet of Jefferson Davis as the postmaster general of the Confederate States of America. The conservative Democrat Reagan was returned to Congress in 1875 and served there through the election of 1886. He was tapped to serve in the US senate in 1887, resigning the seat in June 1891 to become chair of the Texas railroad commission, remaining at that post as an advocate of state regulation until 1903.

⁷ Charles F. Kelly (XXXX-XXXX) INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE

⁸ Paul Morton (XXXX-XXXX) INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE