

## Present Conditions and Future Duties:

### An Open Letter (January 1, 1897)

*Terre Haute, Ind., Dec. 31 [1896].— Eugene V. Debs has come out for socialism and formally announces that he is no longer a member of the People's Party, for which he left the Democratic Party after the election of Cleveland in 1892.*

*It is his belief that if Bryan had not been the candidate of the Democrats and Populists this year the socialists would have cast a million votes.*

*He says that Bryan at heart is a socialist, and that hundreds of thousands of voters who were ready to vote for an out-and-out socialist voted for Bryan because they looked upon him as one who would carry out their ideas so far as he could.*

“I know,” said Debs, “that I will be criticized and berated by the press and especially by those persons who do not understand the true and better meaning of the term ‘socialist.’ But there is coming to be a better understanding of what enlightened socialism means. Some of the ablest men, in the pulpit, too, are beginning to sound the alarm, and they will be heeded before there is a violent explosion.”

*Following is his letter:*

To Members of the American Railway Union and Other Toilers:—

Since the recent presidential election I have receive a large number of letters making urgent inquiries as to future efforts to emancipate wage-workers from their thralldoms, all couched in language which, properly interpreted, is the substance of the interrogatory, “What shall we do to be saved?”

As there is not time at my command to answer these numerous letters, I take this method of replying to my friends who have asked for my views upon present conditions and the outlook for the future. During the late campaign I supported Mr. William J. Bryan and the platform upon which he stood, not because I regard the free coinage of silver as a panacea for our national ills, for I neither affirmed nor advocated such a principle, but

because I believed that the triumph of Mr. Bryan and free silver would blunt the fangs of the money power; that it would extract the teeth of syndicate sharks; that it would banish from the highways of human endeavor, on the sea and on the land, many a black flag under which more piracies have been perpetrated during the last 25 years than the sum total of all the robberies by buccaneers on the high seas since the first corsair keel cleaved a wave. The free silver issue gave us not only a rallying cry, but afforded common ground upon which the common people could unite against the trusts, syndicates, corporations, monopolies — in a word, the money power — under whose sway the country has been well-nigh ruined, labor reduced to famine, and personal liberty banished; and, once united, could press forward in a solid phalanx in the crusade against social and industrial slavery, nor halt the advancing columns until the whole capitalistic system is abolished and the cooperative commonwealth has become an established fact.

That in this conclusion I was correct it is only required to point to the consternation everywhere manifested in the ranks of the shylocks and robbers which enabled Mark Hanna<sup>1</sup> to collect from them a fund of more than \$16 million to prevent the election of Bryan and the success of his supporters. In this election, as in no other, the oppressors and plunderers of the people were united. This, in itself, caused a mighty mustering of the intelligent and progressive industrial forces of the country. It is safe to assume that 80 percent of the organized wage-workers supported Bryan and free silver. That the result of the election was not different was due largely, if not wholly, to the fact that unorganized workers overwhelmingly outnumbered those who were organized and who had been educated and drilled in the tactics of the enemy and could not be coerced, intimidated, or stampeded from voting their own convictions.

But the election is over, and, after mature deliberation, I am persuaded that it may be regarded as both a defeat and a victory. This affirmation may appear paradoxical, but it is true nevertheless. The result of the November election has convinced every intelligent wage-worker that in politics, per se, there is no hope of emancipation from the degrading curse of wage-slavery.

In the late election they may read their doom as vividly outlined as if written in fire across the blue dome of the skies above them. The storm cloud of the campaign disappeared, bearing upon its frowning breast no bow of promise of better things. Cowering before the despotism of the

money power — its injunctions, prisons, and standing armies — they were driven to the polls to vote for a system of wage piracy that they might hold their jobs, while sitting on the ragged edge of starvation, fearful that at any moment their famine wages might be withheld and they and their wives and children forced into an abyss of despair or death. It is, therefore, not surprising that they should ask: “What shall we do to be saved?”

And it is just here that the defeat which more than 6 million men sought to avert rises like “truth crushed to earth,”<sup>2</sup> and proclaims that what is called a defeat is like Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace,<sup>3</sup> made to stand by the genius of Justice, a flaming symbol of victory, because all over the broad land it served to arouse the mind forces of millions of men to hew out new departures to the goal of emancipation. The ballot, however much it has been eulogized, has been beaten to the earth by “boodle” wrung from unrequited toil, and as a weapon cannot be relied upon to execute the will of the people while they are in industrial bondage. An industrial slave cannot be expected to cast an independent ballot.

One John D. Rockefeller with his \$200 million; one Cornelius Vanderbilt<sup>4</sup> with his \$150 million; one Andrew Carnegie<sup>5</sup> with his \$100 million; one C.P. Huntington<sup>6</sup> with his \$75 million; one J. Pierpont Morgan<sup>7</sup> with his \$60 million; one George M. Pullman<sup>8</sup> with his \$50 million; and one Mark Hanna with his \$40 million, alone or in alliance, can debauch the nation. Nine percent of our population having obtained possession of 71 percent, or \$50 billion, of the nation’s wealth, can and do poison every stream of knowledge, of truth, of justice, of love, of mercy, and make it run bank full of every vile contamination that human greed can devise and inflict upon suffering people.

It has passed into a proverb that the school of experience is a dear one, and it is as true as the aphorism that the wage-workers of America have an abundance of tuition in this school. They have worked and toiled down the declivities of poverty until they have reached the bottom, to find huts, rags, crusts, darkness, and despair. The palaces of those who have driven them downhill are on the highlands, ablaze with light. There is music and dancing, purple robes and fine linen; there is luxury beyond compare, and the robber barons, filled to the throat with wine, have their auction blocks where their daughters are offered in the market for titles, creating scenes as offensive and shocking as were the vices of Sodom.

Is there a way out of this labyrinth, this tortuous, blinding, and confusing maze? I believe there is. All that is required is a will on the part of

wage-workers to find a place where they may extricate themselves from bondage and bask in the sunshine of prosperity. There are even now in the wilderness thousands of John the Baptists crying, "We will hew out a way for the oppressed toilers of the world, a highway of deliverance to new regions beyond the reach of Moloch maws and boodle beasts of prey."

These leaders of the socialistic army have thrown wide open the door of hope to the toiling masses and are inviting them to enter, and with a faith that is even now the substance of things hoped for, they can see a victory achieved for the producing masses in the late election, the full fruitions of which are now budding and are soon to bloom on the "thorny stem of time."<sup>9</sup>

Speaking for myself, I am a Socialist. I have long since given expression to my socialistic convictions; they have grown with my growth and I am more strongly impressed with them at this hour than ever before since first I began the painful study of the progress and poverty of the race. Our competitive system is utterly cannibalistic. Human beings are set against one another, the strong devour the weak, and the heartless proceeding has to be done in self-defense. Crush and devour your neighbor, or he will you! Under this system the few cunning and unscrupulous have been enabled to monopolize the earth and the fullness thereof, and they have used their ill-gotten possessions to enslave and degrade mankind. Private greed has been the controlling force and it has been and is accounted as of vastly more importance than the public welfare. Under the regime of private capital, property has become sacred and human life has been reduced to a valueless commodity. A few men own and control the country. The producing many have been subjugated by degrees until millions work by permission and millions of others are tramping and starving to paupers' graves. And all of this amidst fabulous abundance! The theme invites to elaboration, but time and space forbid. I survey these frightful conditions, the ripened and rotting fruit of the capitalistic system, and I declare, with all the emphasis of which my words are capable, my implacable hostility to this system, and my determination to battle with all my power for its overthrow.

It is axiomatic that men have a right to work, the same inherent right to work that they have to breathe. And they have a right to all they produce, and if any part is taken from them without their express consent, it is robbery. The present system is founded, essentially, in the robbery of labor. No other word in the language properly describes the crime.

Every machine that is invented reduces labor to more desperate conditions. The whole system perverts and subverts and is fruitful of crimes beyond the power of language to catalog.

The issue is socialism vs. capitalism. I am for socialism because I am for humanity. We have been cursed by the reign of gold long enough. Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization. The time has come to regenerate society — we are on the eve of a universal change.

I am aware that socialism is a term little understood by the world at large, and that it is everywhere a target for denunciation by the plutocratic press. When analyzed it means a more perfect and equitable distributions of the products of labor; cooperation instead of competition; collective ownership of land, capital, and all the means of production and distribution. It proclaims the coming of the cooperative commonwealth to take the place of wage slavery. Under socialism there would be work and plenty for all, reasonable hours, and life would be something more and better than a prolonged agony or a continuous curse. Another panic would never curse the land. Crime would disappear and suicide would cease to shock the public conscience.

The present industrial system is not only a failure, but a colossal aggregation of crime. It robs, it degrades, it starves; it is a foul blot upon the face of our civilization, indicative of poisoned blood flowing through the veins and arteries of the body social, industrial, and politic; it promises only an increase of the horrors which the world deplors, and which is leading nations, as well as individuals, into a decline and fall from which, as history teaches, there is no resurrection.

I confess no hope for the toiling masses of my countrymen except by the pathway mapped out by socialists, the advocates of the cooperative commonwealth.

I indulge in no illusions. As I contemplate conditions, productive of dismay and steadily growing worse, I am convinced that to continue in the old ruts and grooves is but to reach profounder depths of poverty and degradation, until, tagged, numbered, and branded, plutocrats, the managers of trusts, syndicates, and combines, will at no distant day call the roll of their white slaves, under the stars and stripes, in front of old Independence Hall, on Bunker Hill, and a thousand other places made sacred by patriotic blood shed in the cause of liberty and independence.

Such being my convictions and conclusions after a careful survey of the field, I do not hesitate, with fealty born of hope in the ultimate triumph

of the right, to enlist in the grand army of socialism, to do battle for the emancipation of those who toil from conditions and environments which shock humanity and tend inevitably to the degeneracy of the race.

***Eugene V. Debs.***

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Hanna (1837-1904) was a prominent businessman and political boss of the Republican Party. He was elected to the US Senate as a representative of Ohio in 1896.

<sup>2</sup> From “The Battle-Field” (1839), by William Cullen Bryant (1794-1828).

<sup>3</sup> Nebuchadnezzar II (634-562 BC) was the king of Babylonia. *Daniel* 3:1-7 tells a tale of Nebuchadnezzar decreeing that those subjects who failed to worship a golden statue of him would be immediately killed by being thrown into a blazing furnace.

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Vanderbilt INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Carnegie INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE

<sup>6</sup> Collis Potter Huntington (1821-1900) was a railway magnate associated with the formation of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

<sup>7</sup> J. Pierpont Morgan INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE.

<sup>8</sup> George M. Pullman INSERT FOOTNOTE HERE.

<sup>9</sup> From “The Present Crisis” (1845), by James Russell Lowell (1819-1891).