
“The Dollar Counts for Everything” :
Speech in Springfield, Massachusetts¹
(October 23, 1898)

Nothing is more certain than that the social and economic system under which we live is undergoing a process of evolution. A new social order is to be evolved out of the present chaos.

Any system under which a man is deprived of the fruit of his labor is unjust. The present system divides men into two classes, the capitalist and the laboring man. If there is to be a class struggle it is the trouble of the system.

Men are endowed by the Creator with certain natural rights, among which is the right to live. If men have a right to live they have a right to work, and any system that deprives them of the right to work deprives them of the right to live. Does the present system do this? I answer that in all your cities you can hear the tramp of thousands of the unemployed.

We are told that prosperity has returned to the country. I deny it. I do not deny that in some parts of the country conditions are better, but I do deny any general prosperity.

Examine the official report of the mine inspector of the state of Illinois and you will find that the average wage of the average miner during 1897 was \$16 per month. While men labor for this amount there is no general prosperity.

My friends, I am not here to appeal to your passions. I am here to appeal to your reason. I propose to tell you the exact truth and to open up to you my opinions and views.

We live under the capitalist system. It is founded upon the principle that money is of more value than men. Abraham Lincoln once said, “The man before the dollar.” We see this literally today, but it is the man on bended knee before the dollar. The dollar counts for everything, men for nothing.

I do not attack individuals. I oppose the system. A few men collect together property which they can never use, while the many suffer. No workingman can obtain employment unless he is willing to part with nearly all he produces.

In the final analysis the competitive system ruins all, including the capitalist. The socialist system is complained of as attacking property. It is not so. It is the capitalist system that attacks property. A hardware dealer said to me after attending one of my meetings: "You might be a useful man but your work is in the wrong direction." At that time his business was prosperous. Within two years a competitors came into town and he was gradually driven into bankruptcy. I held another meeting there and at the close the same man came to me and said, "I am with you." He had seen the result of the working of this system.

Under such a plan you must either be a millionaire or a mendicant, and the chances are ten to one that you will be the mendicant. Under it the brotherhood of man on earth can never be attained. You know all the time that your neighbor is doing all he can to injure you.

There are many things of importance in the world, but at present the whole thought is to get money. The parent says to his son, "Get money. Get it honestly if you can — if not, dishonestly. Tell me how much money any of your citizens has and I will tell you how he stands on the social thermometer of Springfield.

There are many workmen who envy businessmen. They have no cause for envy. Take the ordinary businessman with no large capital. He fights against men with ten times as much. Gradually his expenses exceed his profits. He goes home at night with his brain filled with problems. He wakes in the morning tired and careworn, the specter of bankruptcy in his eyes. At fifty, when he ought to be in possession of his best powers, he is in decay. What is such a life worth to him? Business is war and a man engaged in it is engaged for life. As Burns says, until death, who is sometimes man's best friend, comes to his rescue.

You tell me you propose to destroy monopoly, and I tell you that it is absolutely impossible. It is the direct result of the system and you can no more destroy it than you can stop the water from flowing.

It is possible for persons with resources to dictate opinions to judges. I do not say that judges are dishonest, but that the judiciary is a little partial to capitalist interests. I speak not only from observation, but also from experience.

Mr. [George M.] Pullman was cited to appear before the same court as my colleagues and myself. Mr. Pullman took his private car to New York. When he returned he had a whispered conversation with the judge [Peter S. Grosscup] and that ended it. I also tried to explain to the judge

and I got six months. What was the difference between Mr. Pullman and myself? Only \$20 million.

Human life is not taken into account by capitalism. Wages have been reduced because of the economic revolution that has followed the introduction of machinery. A workingman can produce five times as much as he could 40 years ago, and he ought to have five times as much. The machine was designed to be a blessing to labor, to give better homes, but it actually enslaves men. Forty years ago we had no millionaire and no mendicant. The millionaire and the tramp came together. The latter is the corollary of the former.

In the old days the employer and employee worked side by side. There was a reasonable degree of economic equality. Today the same forces have produced 4,000 millionaires and 4 million tramps. Society is being split in twain. A few have become millionaires, and the rest have been reduced to poverty. Formerly employers and employed were friends and visited one another. They do not do so now.

We had little shops in our communities. Then the machine appeared and the subdivision of labor began. One man makes the 72nd part of a shoe, and the machine begins to push the men out in the street. The tramp army is recruited.

Gradually the machine pushed the laborer out. Meanwhile competition came in between employers and began to force wages down. Finally the women were summoned to take the place of men at lower wages. There came a Saturday evening when the foreman said to some of the men, "You need not come back, but we can give your wife work, she will work cheaper than you."

The manufacturers began to import the cheapest labor in the world. They used to pay good American labor \$5 in the mines, now they pay 42 cents. The necessity of selling lower and lower to beat their neighbors embitters the struggle, and soon the child is brought into the factory, so that it now takes the whole family to support the family. The result is men are thrown out of employment, the demand for the products of labor is restricted, the store of merchandise are full of goods which the laboring people cannot buy because they have no work and no money.

According to Carroll D. Wright's statistics of a recent year, there are 2.8 million people who have not worked at all during the year. There are 3 million more who work for 60 or 75 cents a day. In the cotton fields of the South, they are picking cotton for 15 cents a day. There has been a

reduction of every department of industry. One-fourth of the workingmen are out of work, and a half are reduced to the bare necessities of life. The cheapest commodity in the world is flesh and blood.

The most favored wage-earner of today does not know but that he will be a tramp tomorrow. If he loses his job he probably cannot get another. The working man is no better than the slave, who at least was sure of his job. He was placed on the auction block and sold to the highest bidder. You are placed in the labor market and sold to the lowest bidder. Labor is the only commodity the price of which is fixed by the buyer. Many a man submits to the most glaring injustice because of his wife and his children.

The competitive system is steadily destroying the consuming capacity of the people. They have not the money to buy from the businessman, he cancels his orders to the factory, the shops close, a panic comes, and they call it overproduction.

What do we propose to do about it? I stand before your presence a socialist. I believe in socialism as the only salvation. Socialism is coming as certain as the stars shine above you, whether you will it or not. The capitalistic system teaches men to regard each other as scoundrels, the socialistic system teaches men to regard each other as brothers. The capitalistic system is called survival of the fittest. It is not; it is survival of the slickest, the shrewdest.

If you rob a man and are sent to jail you are at last given a chance to work. If the state can give you a chance to work after you commit crime, it can give you a chance before. Capitalism makes criminals of citizens, socialism makes citizens of criminals. When the means of production are owned by the people, industry will be carried on for the good of all, and the production of tramps and paupers and criminals will cease.

Men will work because it will be disreputable not to work. Now there is no incentive to work. The politicians talk about the dignity of labor. That disappears on election night. When the inauguration ball comes off there is no place for the horny-handed son of toil. Under socialism a man can be a workingman and be a gentleman; he cannot be a gentleman unless he is a workingman.

They say all men are equal, that any boy may be President. I am sure there are 5 million people who would swap their chance of the Presidency for a square meal.

Many people oppose socialism, but it is generally because they know nothing about it. Socialism is industrial democracy. Socialism contemplates economic as well as political equality. If people are fit to be political equals, are they not fit to be economic equals? What good does it do a man to have political freedom and be a slave under the economic system? As long as one babe is born the possessor of untold wealth, and one on the next street to an inheritance of rags and misery and agony, as long as one is born master and other servant, there can be no peace on earth and goodwill to men. They say you must change human nature. I say change the conditions and you will change human nature.

A change is coming. We are on the eve of the greatest change the world has ever seen. We are about to solve the problems. The great capitalists are unconsciously paving the way to socialism by centralizing industry. They are combining all industry in the hands of a few men. It is either combination or destruction. They combine, organize, fix the price of products and the price of wages. They are socialists for revenue only.

We do not object to the trust, because it is but the means for the accomplishment of our end. We propose to let the capitalists go on and form their combinations. Soon they will absorb all the capital. When they have reared this splendid fabric of centralization we will take possession of it and direct it for the good of the people.

The capitalists says, "You attack my property and take away my business." It is not the socialist, but your own coworker that destroys you. The large fish swallow the small fish, and ultimately in the capitalistic waters there will be only a few devilfish left.

The working classes are beginning to ask why they who build the houses are in the cold, why they must walk weary and shelterless in the shadow of palaces they have built but cannot enter. It is labor that rolls and beats out the red hot iron for the use of man; that grows all the fleeces and makes therefrom a thousand fabrics; that feeds and drive the black cavalry of commerce. Shall not labor come into its own? Who shall doubt it? As the mariner in southern seas looks at the southern cross bending to the South, and knows that the midnight has passed, as the Almighty marks the hour on the stars, so let labor take heart, for the cross is bending, and joy cometh in the morning.

The man who is engaged in this competitive struggle becomes mentally diseased. He sets out that he wants a moderate fortune; if he is successful, he wants more, he is never satisfied, his ambition becomes

perverted. Money is not worth all this struggle, which deadens one's desire for the better things in life. It is better to help humanity than to hinder it in its struggles. With this faith we are organizing this movement in every village and city in the Union, organizing men who shall without compromise vote out the last remnant of capitalism and vote in the cooperative commonwealth.

At the close of the address all those who were interested in the organization of a branch of the Social Democratic Party were invited to remain. About 60 complied with the invitation. Mr. Debs spoke briefly, explaining the nature of the movement, and asked all who would like to join the branch to rise. No one did so, but after the meeting eight people came forward and signed their names as members.

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There have been formed in this state 17 branches of the party. One reason why many of those present did not join the branch seemed to be that they thought it unwise to form a new organization, while the Socialist Labor Party is in existence here. Mr. Debs said in conversation that his objections to the Socialist Labor Party were two. That party is disposed to tear down trade unionism, while he believed in cultivating trade unionism as the best means for educational work, and that they lacked confidence in the honesty of some of the Socialist Labor leaders. However, he said his differences with them were on questions of tactics rather than principle....

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¹ This speech, part of a Massachusetts tour in advance of the November 1898 general election, was delivered at Springfield Turn Hall under the auspices of the local branch of the Social Democratic Party.