
The Social Democratic Party: Revolutionary Not Reform (March 6, 1900)

Indianapolis, March 6 [1900].

The Social Democratic Party is not a reform party, but a revolutionary party.¹ It does not propose to modify the competitive system, but abolish it. An examination of its platform shows that it stands unequivocally for the collective ownership and control of all the means of wealth production and distribution — in a word, socialism.

The modern tendency is towards centralization and cooperation. This has given us the trust, and there has been a great hue and cry about this latest phase of economic development. The Republican and Democratic parties, yielding to the popular outcry, will declare in favor of destroying or restraining the trust, but just how puerile and dishonest such declarations are every member of the Social Democratic Party knows too well to be deceived into voting for either of said parties. As a matter of fact the trust is the inevitable outgrowth of the competitive system, and to declare against the private ownership of the trust is to declare against the system itself. That neither the large capitalists, who own the trusts, nor the small capitalists, who are opposed to them because they do not own them, favor the overthrow of the capitalist system of production and distribution is a foregone conclusion.

The Republican Party represents the former class and the Democratic Party the latter class. Both stand for essentially the same system of exploitation, and the socialist wage worker realizes that it makes precious little difference to him and his class whether they are exploited by a few great capitalists or an innumerable brood of small ones. They propose to put an end to exploitation entirely by abolishing the system and transferring the means of production from private hands to the collectivity and having them operated in the interest of all alike. To carry out this program the first step necessary is political organization, and this step has been taken by the Social Democratic Party. It is now organized in 25 different states and is spreading rapidly over the entire country. Its progress has been greatest in

the states of Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Washington. These three states are marked for early conquest. California has also proved hospitable soil, and it is confidently expected that the Golden Gate State will develop a phenomenal increase of strength in the near future.

Just what the party declarations will be is, of course, a matter of conjecture, but so far as the essential principles of socialism are concerned they will be avowed in clear and commanding terms. The party will stand squarely upon the principles of international, revolutionary socialism. There will be not so much as a hint or a squint at compromise. It is safe to predict that the agents of fusion will not venture into that class-conscious convocation.

So far as I know there is as yet not a single candidate for either President or Vice President. There will be no lobbying for office. The convention will be entirely free to choose its most available representatives, and they will accept from considerations not of greed or glory, but of duty to the cause.

The Social Democratic Party is necessarily an international party. It is as wide as the domain of capitalism. It is everywhere and always the same. It takes no backward step. The reins of government is its goal. It refuses to be flattered, bribed, stampeded, or otherwise deflected from the straight course mapped out for it by Marx and Engels, its founders, and pursued with unflinching fidelity by their millions of followers. Before its conquering march every throne in Europe is beginning to tremble. The last one of them will fall to the earth while the century is still in its swaddling clothes. The socialist hosts of Germany give confident assurance that the day of deliverance for the people will soon dawn. In France, Belgium, England, Austria, Italy, Russia, and other countries the same principles animating the proletarian class are finding expression in great parties, all linked together in the indissoluble bonds of international socialism. The battle cry of Marx is heard around the world: "Workingmen of all countries, unite; you have a world to gain! You have nothing to lose but your chains!"²

Among the last countries to organize, for reasons so generally understood that they need not be discussed here, is the United States,³ but the conditions which develop socialism have come upon us so rapidly during the past few years that it now seems certain that the American movement will soon become the most formidable of them all, and that here, where political democracy was first achieved, industrial democracy will gain its first triumph.

The Social Democratic Party has no interest in any of the so-called issues over which capitalist politicians fight sham battles. They care nothing about the currency question, the tariff, or imperialism.⁴ They stand first, last, and always for the collective ownership of all the means of production and distribution, and they will press forward unceasingly until they secure them, thereby liberating the race and resolving the problem of the centuries.

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¹ This piece was written specifically for the *New York Journal* from the location of the 1st National Convention of the Social Democratic Party of America, which was held in Reichwein's Hall in Indianapolis from March 6-9, 1900.

² A slight variation of the last three lines of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Marx and Engels: "*The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. **Workers of all countries unite!***"

³ This neatly ignores a quarter century of history of the Socialist Labor Party of America and its Lassallean forerunners of the middle 1870s.

⁴ Debs's reduction of the question of imperialism to a mundane controversy of contemporary bourgeois politics rather than placing emphasis upon it as a fundamental structural feature of modern capitalist development is worthy of notice. Marxist thinking on the question of imperialism was only in its infancy at this juncture and Debs was not a theoretician, but a popularizer and publicist. See: Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido (eds.), *Discovering Imperialism: Social Democracy to World War I*. [2011] Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012.