
“We Must Gain Possession of the Tools of Trade”:

Speech at Butte Auditorium, Butte, Montana — June 16, 1902

by Eugene V. Debs

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Eugene V. Debs was given a rousing reception at the Auditorium Monday evening [June 16, 1902]. It was an enthusiastic audience that heard him speak, and as he stood upon the platform for two solid hours and hurled rugged truths at them he was greeted with applause which at times was in the nature of an ovation.

Few public speakers of today could have filled the spacious Auditorium upon so short notice. Stopping off for a day in Butte, it had not been Mr. Debs’ purpose to speak at that time, but he was prevailed upon by a number of the most earnest workers for the cause of Socialism, and he consented. Hardly three hours was given in which the spread the news, but somehow it went the rounds and the Auditorium was filled from gallery to rostrum. Many who had come late were compelled to stand.

A Keen, Forceful Talker.

Upon the platform, as well as off, Eugene V. Debs is a wonderfully magnetic man. His flashes of humor, his clear, strong way of putting the questions before the minds of his auditors, and his cutting sarcasm directed at things and conditions he believes to be wrong, are such as to hold his audience spellbound.

“We Must Gain Possession of the Tools of Trade,” was the tenor of his remarks. “Human life will then be sacred. The badge of labor will be the badge of nobility.”

Mr. Whitely referred to him as the “ablest labor leader the United States has ever produced,” and the audience cheered loudly. Mr. Debs appeared to be pleased with the cordial and earnest feeling with which he was received. It inspired him to extra effort, and the effect was truly notable.

Debs’ Speech.

It seems but a little while — yet four years have passed and many chances have taken place since I had the pleasure of speaking to you.

Never was there a greater demand for intelligent, thorough, and progressive action on the part of the laboring class than now. That such a large attendance could be secured upon so short notice proves that the workers of Butte are alive and determined to wage a struggle with increasing vigor until the working class is free. Not until the capitalist system of exploitation is overthrown and the wage system is abolished and the workers control the means of production and receive the full product of their toil. Not until then will the struggle cease and they will stand as the rulers of the world.

Class Struggle is On.

The delegates to the Denver conventions saw and recognized this and laid plans for carrying on the work with renewed energy.¹ This new departure of the two great conventions should be hailed with joy by every worker in the land. We are engaged in a class struggle that is convulsing all human society.

I stand before you tonight a Socialist because I believe that all this earth is the true heritage of men and that the working class shall be the ruling class of the world.

I am charged with arraying class against class — that I am doing what I can to produce discontent and discord, setting the worker against his employer. I would have the workers recognized these classes and they ought to organize not only in the industrial field but in the political field as well. They could then seize the reins of government and take possession of the tools with which they work, and they then would in truth be freemen.

I admit that I am arraying class against class, consciously, and I would have the workers recognize their exploiting masters.

¹ Reference is to conventions of the Western Federation of Miners and the Western Labor Union (which changed its name to the American Labor Union), held late the previous month and to whom Debs spoke on May 26, 1902.

What matters it to the worker whether an injunction is issued by a Democratic or Republican government? It is always issued in behalf of the capitalist class. We have government by class today and the class governing is not the working class. According to the theory of our government the majority rules. The working class is the great majority, yet they do not rule. The working class is dependent upon the capitalist class for employment. If I am a capitalist you know that you are dependent upon me for work, and you are likely to be influenced by me when casting your ballot. Many a union man wears the union badge and advances its principles, yet he protests against political action. Why, my friends, if you find it to your advantage to unite upon the industrial field, why not upon the political field. You strike because you do not like the system, yet when you vote you vote to perpetuate that system.

The time has come when no union man can be true to his principles until he puts the union label on his ballot. (*Cheers.*)

As to the Old Parties.

You cannot expect any help from either of the two old parties. They are simply the two wings to the same foul bird of prey. We are told that industry is at high tide; that there is no ground for complaint, and if there is any trouble it is because of agitators — among whom I am which. (*Laughter and applause.*)

There never was a time in the history of the world when wages were as small as they are today when measured by their purchasing power — the only true standard. When you produce a dollar, 87 percent of it goes to your employer and the other 13 percent goes to you. He gets 87 cents on every dollar you produce, and you must produce his share first or you are not allowed to produce anything. (*Applause.*)

Cruel Wars Abroad.

Every little while we have what is called “overproduction.” We accumulate so much of everything and pile it up until we suffer for want of everything. Then the capitalist must look out for new markets. This unceasing struggle to find markets is going on continually. that is the one great reason why our soldiers are now in the Philippines and why the British soldiers pressed their work of conquering South Africa.

There never was a time when it was so easy to produce wealth as today, yet there are thousands and thousands on strike or locked out. We have all the painful hideousness of extremes. A

few have millions and millions because we are living under a system where private profit is of vastly more importance than human life. The cheapest commodity on earth today is human flesh and blood. To make a profit at the expense of human life is the central controlling motive of the capitalist system.

How the System Started.

Here stands the working man of 50 years ago, just as he was created. He could grasp the few tools needed and apply them without the permission of anyone. The small employer worked side by side with his men. They lived in the same community. Their wives visited back and forth. If the working man received any less than his earning capacity he could quit, and with a few tools set up for himself.

Now all the little shops have disappeared. Where once a worker would finish a pair of shoes a hundred are now employed to make a hundred different parts. There is no longer any use for the skill that was in those fingers of the worker. Great machines that are so finely adjusted that a child could operate them have taken the place of the old handwork. Yet with all this we are not nearly so well provided with shoes as we were.

The capitalist who owns the machinery of production wants profit and the worker who operates them wants wages. When capitalists combine to lower wages they succeed. Strikes, lock-outs follow. We are told that we ought to harmonize. As well seek to harmonize fire and water. They are economic opposites. One of these two classes must go before this question is settled, and it will be the capitalist class.

Not a Reformer.

I like the term "revolutionist." I do not like the term "reform." You have had a great deal of reform in Montana. The more reform you get, the worse you are off. What we want is not mending but the ending of the system. It is not a question of wages. I would not be satisfied with \$1,000 a day. I would rather be a free man walking the highways than a thousand-dollar a day slave.

The most favored wage-worker in the country is in Butte. If you imagine you are free men — as you are often told upon the eve of election — if you imagine you are, it is no credit to your intelligence. I know better. Don't take my word for it — use your brain and represent yourself. Have intelligence enough to know that your interests are identical with the interests of every other

wage worker, and that the day to prove that you are a union man is election day.

World is Changing.

The world is verging upon a great organic change. The competitive system has reached its climax and will soon disappear. The merging of employers' interests has resulted in the latest phase of economics, the trusts. Controlled by a few capitalists, they are enabled to extract from the laborer extra profit and thereby become multi-millionaires. The capitalists have you absolutely at their mercy. They do not consider you at all. I am not finding fault with them. I am finding fault with you, because the system cannot continue a day longer than you wish it.

It is only a question of time when the last vestige of competition will have disappeared and there will be only two classes — the very rich and the very poor, a class of exploiters and a class of exploited. The middle class will have gone. If there is one of this class in the house tonight I want to assure him that he need not fear Socialism, but to look the other way. If you have \$15,000 the time will come when you will be stripped, and it will not be the Socialist that will do it, either. It will be the inevitable result of the system.

Brotherhood of Man.

It is amusing to see two capitalists who belong to the same church approach each other in a business transaction. They eye each other suspiciously. It is not because they do not know each other, it is because they do. Each knows that the other fellow would beat him if he could. This is business, and business is business. A businessman cannot be honest. It is an ethical impossibility. You may think this is an indictment of the businessman, but it is not. It is simply an indictment of a system that makes it necessary for one man to get ahead of another. If you and I are compelled to fight each other for a living we cannot love each other. We can't trust each other and we can't love each other. We can never have the brotherhood of man when we must exploit our neighbor in order that we might live. I must take advantage of my weaker fellow man or I shall myself be devoured. John Ruskin said that it was just as wrong to steal with a long head as it is to steal with a long arm.

We have got to strike at the very root of this evil. We must regain possession of the tools of trade. Human life will then be sacred and the badge of labor will be the badge of nobility.

Pneumo-Gastric Nerves.

The speaker then told that the system of exploitation reacted on the exploiter, and gave John D. Rockefeller as an example. From long hours of tedious work, planning to accumulate millions, he has suffered physically to such an extent that it is improbable that he will again have good health. His physicians state that the pneumo-gastric nerve, which controls the organs of digestion, was paralyzed.

“There are good, well-developed pneumo-gastric nerves in Butte,” said the speaker, continuing. “There is no trouble about your appetites. The trouble is that one class has the appetites and another has the food.”

He recounted the history of the great leaders of thought, all of whom he insisted had been ostracized by the men of their own day and idealized by posterity. As he told of the murder of Elijah Lovejoy and the hanging of John Brown many in the audience were visibly effected. “And now the legislature of New York tells us that the most sacred soil in the commonwealth is that which covers the dust of the man executed at Harper’s Ferry,” exclaimed the orator.

Scores Hanna.

“Only recently,” continued the speaker,

Mark Hanna announced that he was a strong union man, and Charles Schwab, president of the steel trust, has just discovered that he always has been a union man. They propose to have the lion and the lamb eat strawberry shortcake together. An organization called the National Civic Federation is to arbitrate all differences between employer and employee. Every man in the Civic Federation is either a capitalist or immediately connected with them.

Now Hanna is made a silent partner in a combination which has for its object the betterment of the masses. If I were a dove I would as soon think of subjecting myself to the care of a ravenous hawk. (*Applause.*)

How Can It Be Done.

This is the question urged most insistently in the West. Here no one needs to be convinced that something — everything — is wrong. The orators of the West have for years denounced well nigh every phase of existing wrongs; practical experience has been more powerful than oratory.

Everyone wants a way out, but they want to be sure it is a practical way. A workable program is demanded. Socialists have this to a degree that is hard to believe until one gets well hold of the subject.

The first great question to be answered is, how do Socialists expect to get the system they want, even granting they are right? There are many things the majority want now, but that is all the good it does. The direct election of Senators, public ownership of the railroads, the arrest of capitalistic highwaymen — the great majority of American citizens want these things and many more now, but they might as well cry for the moon. It is childish, men feel, to talk as if because a thing is sensible and just that therefore we can get it when the majority want it.

All this is granted according to methods heretofore used.

The Class Struggle.

So far men have tried to get what they wanted simply as individuals dividing an accidental opinion. Political parties have stood for various theories, but the only real force in them was the power of the capitalists who used all parties equally for their own ends.

The only force which can possibly meet and defeat this tremendous power of capital in its struggle for its own advantage is the union of all laborers in the struggle for their interests. We know what the struggle of capital is — how it is found everywhere — managing primaries, holding the pursestrings in campaigns, and wielding the whip over elected officers, thronging lobbies, subtly influencing where it cannot bribe, besieging the courts with the hired brains of the brightest men, turning all the civic machinery to its own ends. Is it strange that nothing has counted in opposition to such overwhelming pressure? The struggle of labor for its own interests will be of the same strength and more irresistible when it is conscious of its own interests. That is why we urge class consciousness.

There can be no progress and no freedom for the race until we find some force capable of meeting this giant capital. Labor

cannot do it, but labor is unconscious of itself — of its unity, its strength, its enormous opportunities, its unlimited inheritance.

Without this consciousness of its right and its might, labor will ever be a mere puppet before the skill and power of capital — a skill and power possessed by capital because it is conscious of itself, conscious both of its interests and its opportunities. Labor will soon become conscious of itself and of the struggle it must enter upon. The struggle has been on for a long, long time, but labor has not realized the fact and so has been divided and blinded in its methods.

The pressure of event has been arousing this class consciousness in labor; when this is more fully grown enlightened labor will act together in all things, especially as a political party.

The moment a person becomes awake to the meaning of the class struggle, all hope for anything except by a solid class conscious party is seen to be impossible.

The hope in such a party, however, is tremendous. The victory of labor in a political contest with capital would make any policy possible. That is what a Socialist majority would mean — freedom for the first time to carry out the will of the majority.

First Steps.

Now what would a Socialist majority do after it had won the first and all important battle?

The object it would always have in view would be the cutting off of private profits on the overthrow of the capitalistic system. This would come rapidly but not by a wholesale, immediate transfer. Public ownership would be undertaken as fast as practicable. But public ownership would differ from that we know today in this way. All profits, even profits to the city or state or nation, would disappear in added wage and reduced price.

Suppose a state smelter were started and wages increased three-fold. Other smelters would soon go out of business. Their workmen would not be content at the old wage. They would clamor for state employment more loudly than the present office seeker.

The Socialist administrations would be kept busy indeed organizing public enterprises fast enough to supply the demand for government employment.

So soon as capitalists became convinced that they could not resist the tide they would turn over their plants to the government and the employees remain the same only with wages increased to consume the profits.

As the small plants have to give way under the present system to the big ones and then to the trust, so the trust and all other private capitalists would have to give way under the competition of the most powerful trust of all — the united people.

Status of Private Wealth.

The changes would be less than one might fancy. The wealthy could remain wealthy — private yachts, palaces, and good clothes. It would not let private business enterprises make any profits, however. Even that would not be prohibited — only made impossible by a competition such as no private production could stand.

Wealth would lose some rather convenient elements of its luxury, however. Not only could it no longer talk of its wage list as the “greatest charity,” but yachts would lose some of their charm if there was no servant crew to those accustomed to accept service rendering none. Palaces would be somewhat inconvenient if the army of servants had found a way to employ their time more pleasantly and profitably under a socialist regime.

Elegant clothes would be as enjoyable as ever, perhaps, and could be replaced at the public clothiers [assuming] the wealthy had anything of real value to exchange for such services. For some time ordinary money would probably serve for exchange.

In the course of time the unfortunate victims of too much money, if not too old (and the old would be pensioned so that Mr. Rockefeller and Mr Morgan, Mr. Harriman, and the rest need not worry!) would find it more fun to just get in the procession and be one of the folks.

Easy With Labor United.

The only thing which can delay the new day is the divided force of labor.

Two great powers are struggling for mastery — capital and labor. Capital knows its strength, is alive at every point with a consciousness of its own interests. Labor, upon whose side of the conflict the hopes of all the race rests, is only partly awake to the fact that there is a struggle and that its interests may be maintained by united action.

Thus, half asleep, labor has not only failed to gain ground in the struggle but has been decoyed into fighting for its enemy.

At each election labor has divided and fought valiantly in two wings of the army, but arrayed against the cause of labor. At the

ballot box alone can it win its own cause, and here it has always fought under the other banner.

We live and learn, however, and the workers are getting several ideas firmly planted. Let us watch the result!

Edited by Tim Davenport

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